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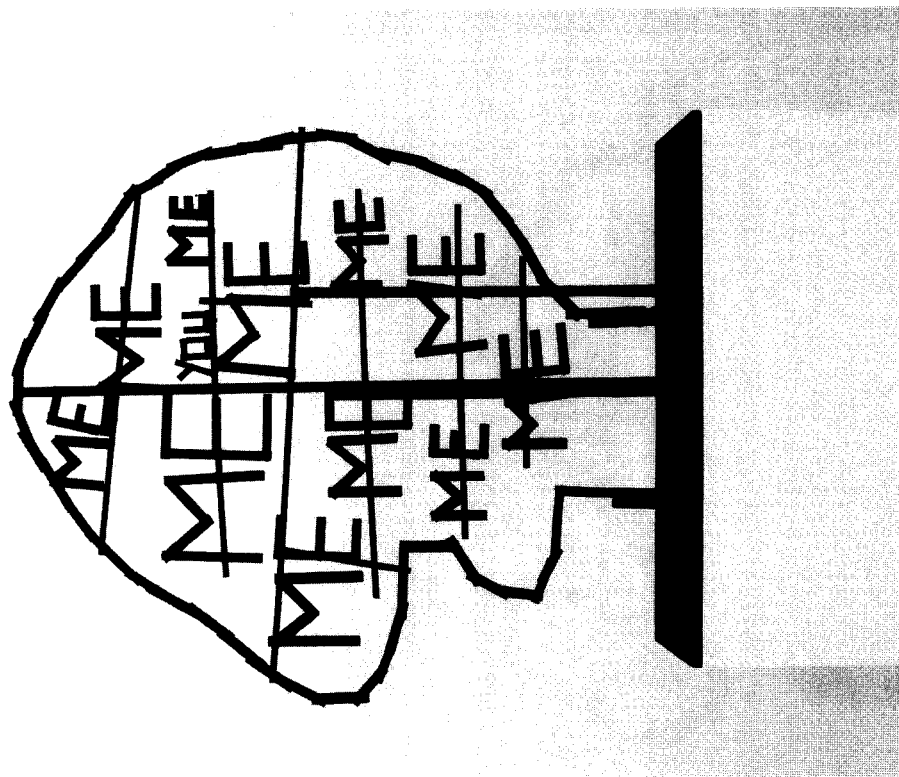
## A Brief Introduction

ALAIN BADIOU

translated by SUSAN SPITZER

Chapter I of my “hypertranslation” of *The Republic* corresponds to a very specific passage in Plato’s text that is focused on a larger-than-life dramatic character: the sophist Thrasymachus.

It is as if, for Plato (or rather his textual stand-in, Socrates), it were impossible to begin to think affirmatively without having first refuted the sophist. The word “refute,” moreover, is not really accurate. Rather, it is a question of defeating him, which means: reducing him to silence. The violence of that moment, which also involves a dark comedy of sorts, derives from the fact that all means are fair, once it’s not so much a matter of being right as it is of winning. What is involved here, in a way, is a sort of struggle to the death in the sense it takes on in Hegel, when the Master and the Slave confront one another in order to determine how thinking will continue. Here, too, the issue is one of determining how philosophy can become established, and in order for that to happen, the sophist—the man who places language in the service of personal interest and the established powers—must leave the public stage.



The fact that this moment is a negative one is also owing to one key point: rhetoric, of which the sophist is the master, accompanies a thinking in which negation holds sway. Why should this be so? Because the sophist defends a thesis (an opinion) only insofar as he knows that he could also defend the opposite thesis. This is the inevitable consequence of a “mode of thought” — actually an intellectual and verbal dexterity — that is made to serve not the invariance of a principle but rather the variability of opinions, which reflect power relations, localized desires and interests.

The battle between Socrates and Thrasymachus is ultimately a battle between philosophy, the handmaiden of the eternity of truths, and rhetoric, the handmaiden of the opportunism of interests. Ontologically, it affords a potent version of the battle between two orientations in thought. One of them gives credit to Being for being thinkable as being what it is. The paradigm is therefore mathematics. The other makes Being no more than the momentary display of language’s ability to orchestrate the cutting up of Being and, as the need arises, to induce its negation. Therefore, what counts is linguistic flexibility, which also exploits non-sense or contradiction. Poetry, we sense, is not far off.

As far as Socrates is concerned, Thrasymachus is diabolical, albeit with no grandeur other than his sheer brutality. He is diabolical in Goethe’s sense: the Spirit that always negates.

Mathematics against poetry? Plato, at any rate, accepts this consequence.

We can also say that, in this entire opening section of *The Republic*, what is at issue is the conflict between a communism of a new sort, which is eager to set out on its way of thinking, and an exhausted consensual “democracy” that refuses to end.

Publishing this fierce dispute in *lacanian ink* is appropriate, considering Lacan’s ambiguous attitude about the conflict between Plato and the sophists. Considering that the unconscious is structured “like a language,” considering that the psychoanalytic cure is to a great extent a rhetoric of silence and words, we

can tack psychoanalysis—as Lacan often does, and of course as Barbara Cassin, the great contemporary sophist, reminds us—if not onto Thrasymachus, who is a bit crude, at least onto Gorgias or Protagoras, thinkers whom Plato himself respects at the very moment when he silences them. But considering what is at stake in psychoanalysis, when all is said and done, namely, the real as the quilting point of a Subject’s truth, it is from Socrates and Plato that psychoanalysis derives. Especially since, as the Doctor says, at the end of the cure one may well have to address “the fundamental dialogues on Justice and Courage, in the great dialectical tradition.”

I am offering here the translation of the first round of this long fight, which, since it is in the final analysis the fight between philosophy and anti-philosophy, is forever intrinsic to any thinking worthy of the name.

## REDUCING THE SOPHIST TO SILENCE (336b—341a)

Reducing the Sophist... from Plato's *Republic* 89

—What pathetic hogwash Socrates has been subjecting us to for hours now! Why do the two of you kowtow to each other all the while bombarding us by turns with your stupid nonsense? If you really want to know what justice is, Socrates, stop asking pointless questions and rubbing your hands in glee when you've refuted something one of your sidekicks has managed to stammer out. Questions are easy, answers less so. So tell us once and for all how you define justice. And don't come saying that justice is anything but justice, that it's duty, the useful, advantage, profit, interest, and so on. Tell us precisely and clearly what you have to say. Because I won't do what all the other bit players in your three-ring circus do, I won't put up with all your hot air.

At these words, Socrates, who feigned—or did he really feel?—astonishment mixed with fear, averted his gaze, the way you do when on a snowy evening you encounter a wolf who locks his cruel eyes on you, lest you be struck dumb, as the old country women say. Then he replied in a slightly tremulous voice:

—Fortunately I saw you first tonight, you ferocious rhetorician! Otherwise I really might have lost my voice! But I think I'll still try to win over the wolf who pounced on our conversation as on a lamb gasping with terror... Dear Thrasymachus! Don't be angry with us! If Polemarchus and I were completely mistaken in the way we went about investigating the problem, you know very well that it was unintentional. Suppose we were searching for gold, like in a Western, with big hats on our heads and all that stuff. Can you really think that, if we had our feet in the water and our pans in our hands, we'd bother to defer to each other idiotically and say "you go first, dear partner," and run the risk of not finding anything at all? Yet here we are searching for justice, which is a lot more important than a pile of gold nuggets, and you'd think us capable of wasting time playing nice with each other instead of devoting ourselves with the utmost seriousness to making the Idea of justice appear? No! That could never be. The best hypothesis, quite simply, is that we're incapable of finding what we're looking for. In which case,

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—Let's begin at the beginning. If it's clear that justice is not what the poets and tyrants claim it is, whatever can it be?

A heavy silence greeted Socrates' question. Thrasymachus then sensed that his moment had come. Many times over the course of the debate he had been consumed by a burning desire to take part in it. But the people sitting near him had prevented him from doing so because they wanted to hear the arguments to the end. This time, however, taking advantage of the confusion that followed the—admittedly oddly abrupt—return to the initial form of the question, Thrasymachus finally broke out of the silence they had imposed on him. Flexing all his muscles and crouching like a wild animal about to bare its huge claws, he advanced on Socrates to tear him apart and eat him alive. Socrates and Polemarchus recoiled in terror. Once he'd reached the middle of the room, the monster glowered at the whole audience and began speaking in a voice to which the room's high ceiling, the French windows, the darkness that had fallen over the sailboats, indeed, the whole world seemed to impart a thunderous power:

I have to say, to you and all the other clever people of your sort: instead of giving us a hard time, show us some mercy.

After this speech Thrasymachus laughed a sardonic laugh that gave the whole audience the creeps.

—I was right, confound it! That's Socrates's famous irony for you! I predicted it, I told everyone: Socrates will never agree to answer. He'll be as ironic as can be and do whatever he can so as not to have to answer a precise question. By Heracles! I told you so!

—That's because you're a great sage, Socrates said. You prepare your predictions with the utmost care. Knowing you, if you ask someone how to arrive at the number twelve in a math problem, you'll add: "Whatever you do, my friend, don't come telling me it's six times two, or four times three, or twenty-four divided by two, let alone that it's eleven plus one, or eight plus four or, as poor Kant wrote, seven plus five. Spare me any such nonsense." You, at any rate, are very well aware that with those kinds of restrictions no one will be able to answer your question. But the other person can still ask you a few questions, too. For example, "What exactly is your intent, oh most subtle Thrasymachus? That I shouldn't give you any of the answers you've forbidden me to give? But what if one of them, or even several of them, happen to be true: what's your hidden agenda then? That I should say something other than the truth?" How would you respond to this supposed other person?

But Thrasymachus wasn't fazed.

—That's easy. I'd say: What's that got to do with the question of justice? As always, all you're doing is changing horses as soon as you see that your horse is going to lose the race.

—But there is a connection! My twelve and my justice are horses from the same stable. But, OK, let's assume there's no connection. Do you imagine that if the other person thinks there is one, he'll change the answer he thinks is right merely because you've forbidden it?

—Oh, for crying out loud! You want to do the very same thing! You want to define justice with one of the words I forbade you to use.

—No wonder if I did. I'd just have to think, after giving it serious dialectical consideration, that it's the appropriate word.

—All this stuff about duty, appropriateness, interest, advantage! That's the kind of junk you want to use to plug the leaky bucket of your argument? If I can show you, first of all, that there's another answer you haven't even thought of, and second of all, that this answer demolishes all the stupid things you've been kicking around, what sentence will you impose on yourself?

—The sentence that someone who doesn't know has to endure: to learn from someone who does know. I'll sentence myself to having to undergo that punishment.

—Well, you'll be getting off lightly, Thrasymachus said with a sneer. In addition to having to learn, you'll have to fork over a big stack of dollars to me.

—I will when I have any, if I have any some day...

But Glaucon, the wealthy young man, didn't want the confrontation that was brewing to be put off on account of money.

—You have all you need, Socrates. And you, Thrasymachus, if it's money you're after, fine! We'll all take up a collection for Socrates.

—Yeah, right! hissed Thrasymachus. So that Socrates can go into his usual routine at my expense: he never answers, someone else answers, he rips to shreds what that person says, he refutes him, and that's that!

—But my dear friend, said Socrates calmly, how can I answer, given that, in the first place, I don't know, and, in the second place, all I ever do is say that the only thing I know is that I don't know, and, in the third place, even assuming that I do know and that I say that I know, I would nevertheless keep quiet, since someone who's so superior, namely you, has forbidden me beforehand to give any of the answers I deem appropriate to the question? You're the one who should speak since, first of all, you say you know, and second of all, you know what you're talking about. Come on! Don't play hard to get! If you agree to speak you'll be doing me a favor, and you'll show that you don't look down on Glaucon's and his friends'

desire to learn from the great Thrasymachus.

Glaucon and the others all chimed in and begged Thrasymachus to give in. It was plain that he wanted to, certain as he was of the applause his devastating answer to the question of the day—"What is justice?"—would earn him. But for a moment longer he pretended to go on arguing that Socrates should be the one to answer. At last he gave up, remarking:

—This is the classic example of Socrates' "wisdom": He declares that he has nothing to teach anyone. But when it comes to stealing other people's knowledge, he's always game but never says thank you.

—When you say that I learn from others, Socrates shot back, you're perfectly right. But when you claim that I never say thanks, you're wrong. Naturally I don't pay for the lessons, because I don't have any dollars or euros or drachmas or yen. On the other hand, I'm very generous with praise. What's more, you'll soon see how fervently I admire someone who speaks well—in fact, just as soon as you've answered our question, an answer that I have a hunch will surprise us all.

Thrasymachus then came forward, stood up very straight and closed his eyes like the Pythian oracle meditating. On the shade-filled patio, the silence was deafening.

—Listen, listen carefully. I say that what is just is not and cannot be anything but the interest of the stronger.

He then fixed his withering gaze on Socrates. But the silence persisted, since Socrates, short and potbellied, with big round eyes, his arms dangling at his sides, began to look like a dog being offered a slice of pumpkin.

Thrasymachus was annoyed:

—So where's all your famous praise? You're as quiet as a mouse. You're such a poor sport, totally incapable of congratulating your opponent on his win. And you call yourself the wisest of men! Bravo!

—Forgive me, but first I have to be sure I understand you. Let's see.

You say "what is just is the interest of the stronger." What exactly does that statement mean? Take a bicycle racer, for example. Let's assume he's the stronger party when it comes to scaling mountains on his bike. Let's assume it's in his interest to dope himself by giving himself shots of EPO in the rear end in order to race even faster and shatter all the records. You can't really mean that what's just for us, since it's the interest of the stronger, is to inject ourselves relentlessly in the backside, can you?

—You're downright despicable, Socrates! You purposely misinterpret my words and plaster them onto some disgusting anecdote just to make me look ridiculous.

—Not at all. I just think you need to clarify your brilliant maxim. It's as hard and black as coal...

—Coal? What on earth are you talking about?

—...as the coal that diamonds are mined from. Let your maxim simmer a bit for us in the broth of its context, as our modern orators would say.

—All right, I see. You know that the constitutions of different countries can be either monarchistic, aristocratic or democratic. Furthermore, in every country the government has a monopoly on force, especially armed force. It can then be observed that every government makes laws favoring its own interest: democrats make democratic laws, aristocrats aristocratic laws, and so on. In short, governments, which have force at their disposal, declare whatever is in their own interest to be lawful and just. If a citizen disobeys, they punish him insofar as he has broken the law and committed an injustice. So that, my friend, is what I say is invariably justice in every country: the interest of the government in power. And since that government has a monopoly on force, the consequence that anyone who reasons correctly will draw from this is that justice is always and everywhere identical to the interest of the stronger.

And, so saying, Thrasymachus cast a triumphant glance over the audience.

Socrates' face lit up:

- Now I understand what you meant!  
 But just as quickly it darkened:
- Unfortunately, I'm not at all sure that it's true. Right off the bat, someone hearing you might say—and here Socrates impersonated a comic actor speaking with a nasal intonation—"Very odd! Very odd! And to be precise: Very odd! Thrasymachus strictly forbade Socrates to say that justice is interest. But a couple of minutes later, what does he himself loudly proclaim to all and sundry? That justice is interest." I'll obviously object to this guy with the stuffed nose: "Careful, sir, careful! He said interest, sure, but of the stronger."  
 —That's an insignificant detail, snorted Thrasymachus...  
 —Whether it's important or not is not yet clear. But what is absolutely clear is that we need to examine whether it's really the truth that's coming out of your mouth, as naked and pure as a cherub.  
 —Will you look at this Socrates! said a jubilant Thrasymachus, turning to the audience. He thinks I cough up angels!  
 —Let's put off examining your sputum till later. That it's in the interest of a Subject to be just I'll grant you. But whether we should add "of the stronger" I'm not so sure, and we need to take a closer look at that.  
 —Go ahead and look, Socrates, examine, consider, weigh and quibble to your heart's content. We all know what you're like!  
 —I thought I understood that, as far as you're concerned, it is just to obey the rulers of the State. Moreover, you'd agree, I suppose, that these rulers aren't infallible but that in fact they are fallible.  
 —Of course!  
 —Consequently, when they go about enacting laws, sometimes they get it right and sometimes they get it all wrong, don't they?  
 —You'd have to look long and hard to find a comment as banal and utterly uninteresting as that one.  
 —No doubt, no doubt... But if we follow you, we'll have to say that, for a ruler, to enact suitable laws is to serve his own interest and to enact unsuitable ones is to go against it. Right?  
 —That's self-evident.

- And to have to do what the rulers have decided, is that just, in your opinion?  
 —You sound like a broken record! Yes, yes, yes!  
 —So, if we adopt your definition of justice, we can conclude that it is just not only to do what's in the interest of the stronger, but also—and here's what's truly wonderful—the opposite: what goes against the interest of the stronger.  
 —What on earth are you talking about?! cried Thrasymachus.  
 —The unavoidable consequences of your definition. Let's slow down. We agreed on one point, which you even considered a trivial one: when the rulers order their subjects to do this or that, even though it sometimes happens that these rulers are mistaken about what their own real interest is, it is still always just for the subjects to do exactly what the rulers command them to do. Yes or no?  
 —How many times do I have to tell you? What a drag this is! Yes and yes.  
 —So you conceded that it is just to go against the interest of the rulers, hence of the stronger, when these rulers unintentionally order things to be done that are bad for them, since it is just—you said this over and over—to do everything decreed by said rulers. It follows inexorably from this that it is just to do the exact opposite of what you say, since, in the case that concerns us here, to do what goes against the interest of the stronger is what the stronger orders the weaker to do.  
 The excitement this speech stirred up in the audience was considerable. Polemarchus awoke with a start, the pale Cleitophon turned red, Glaucon hopped up and down, and Amantha pulled nervously at her left ear. It was Polemarchus who took the plunge:  
 —I think Thrasymachus might as well just close up shop and go home!  
 —Yeah, sure, grumbled Cleitophon, who had become as pale as a ghost again. Whatever Polemarchus says, Thrasymachus has got to do.  
 —Thrasymachus got tripped up on his own words! Polemarchus

retorted. He agreed that rulers sometimes order their subjects to do what's against the rulers' own interest and that it is just for the subjects to do so.

—Thrasymachus, hissed Cleitophon, his face white as plaster, only posited one principle: it is just to do what the rulers order.

—Thrasymachus, an irritated Polemarchus said, posited two principles, not just one. First, that justice is the interest of the stronger. And second, that it is just to obey the rulers. Once he had thus endorsed both a principle of interest and a principle of obedience, he had to admit that it sometimes happens that the stronger order the weaker and subordinate to do what goes against the stronger's own interest. Hence it follows that justice is no more the interest of the stronger than it is what goes against that interest.

—But, screeched Cleitophon, who had suddenly turned dark red again, when Thrasymachus speaks about the interest of the stronger, it's a matter of a subjective phenomenon: what the stronger considers his own interest to be. That's what the weaker is obliged to do, and that, for Thrasymachus, is what is just.

—He didn't say anything of the kind, muttered Polemarchus, upset.

—It doesn't matter! Socrates cut in. If Thrasymachus now thinks something he didn't say earlier, let him tell us what he thinks. Or what he thinks he thinks. Come on, noble Thrasymachus, was that really your definition of justice: what the stronger thinks the interest of the stronger is, irrespective of the fact that, in reality, it may or may not be his real interest? May we say that that was the true meaning of what you said?

—Absolutely not! Thrasymachus snapped back. Would you ascribe the ridiculous idea to me that someone who makes a mistake is the stronger, at the very moment when he's making a mistake?

—Well, yes, I really thought that that was what you were contending when you conceded that, since rulers aren't infallible, they're sometimes mistaken about what their own interest is.

—As far as rational argument is concerned, Socrates, you're nothing but a troublemaker. It's as though you were to call someone who

makes a mistake about the cause of a patient's suffering a "doctor" at the very moment when he's making the mistake. Or someone who makes a serious mistake in his calculations a "mathematician" at the very moment when he does so. In my opinion, when we say that the doctor makes a mistake, or the mathematician makes a mistake, or the grammarian makes a mistake, these are only meaningless words. In my opinion, none of them can make a mistake, insofar as his being, or rather his act, corresponds to the name we give him. So that, in my opinion again, and to be more precise—since Socrates is a stickler for precision—a craftsman, an artisan, a creator, or an artist never makes a mistake when he acts in accordance with the predicate that defines him. In fact, someone who makes a mistake does so only insofar as his knowledge has failed him, and therefore when he has stopped being the craftsman, artisan, creator, or artist that we assumed he was. I conclude from this that, in my opinion still, none of those we call craftsman, scientist, or head of State can make a mistake insofar as one of these names is appropriate for him, regardless of the fact that everyone stupidly says that the doctor "made a mistake" or the ruler "made a mistake." Please be so kind, Socrates, as to understand the answers I gave a moment ago in the light of these commonsensical remarks. And in order to be really perfectly precise, in my opinion absolutely perfectly precise, the pure, hard truth can be formulated in terms of four steps. First, the head of State, qua head, cannot make a mistake. Second, insofar as he cannot make a mistake he decides what's in his own best interest. Third, that's what the subject, the person whom the ruler commands, must do, and nothing else. And fourth, we come back to what I said at the outset, with respect to which Socrates pretended not to see that it smashed all his verbiage to bits: justice consists in the fact that every practice is dictated by the interest of the stronger.