

Infantilizing the Interlocutor: Thrasymachus in the Counseling Room

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Abstract

Socrates' maieutics targets interlocutors with various issues regarding the expression of truth in front of others. These interlocutors often belittle their partners in dialogue, and Socrates is no exception to this. Similarly, philosophical counselors face various situations in which clients do not understand the need for a Socratic line of questioning. Often, such clients become irritated and aggressive toward the Socratic figure when they witness the limits of their expectations and of their drive to impose their truth on the counselor. In this scenario, we ask whether the belittling of such interlocutors can betray a subhumanizing attitude. To pursue this question I introduce the discussion regarding the subhuman nature of children in Greek culture. More specifically, Aristotle's account is discussed. Then, we focus on the dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus from book 1 of the Republic, where Thrasimachus often infantilizes Socrates and others because of not having his views confirmed by the other. Then, the article formulates a set of ideas for the practice of philosophical counseling regarding the Socratic stance when dealing with interlocutors who aggressively infantilize under the guise of dialogue.

Keywords: maieutics, philosophical counseling, philosophical practice, Socrates, Thrasymachus.

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1. Introduction

Subhumanization is still a vague term in academic philosophy, being invoked in contexts ranging from broad social issues (Appel, 2003) to couples issues regarding objectification (Nussbaum, 1995). This is a concept that invites us to re-interpret it and use it for various conceptual purposes. This text profits from the fluid character of subhumanization and drags it towards the terrain of philosophical counseling. The sense of subhumanization is not so much connected to the racial violence of war or to belittling the other because of sex or gender. Instead, philosophical counseling captures a type of subhumanization that many clients bring with them in the counseling room, namely the reaction to infantilize others when one's views are threatened. Specifically in the counseling room, this tendency translates into the client's habit of trying to take control of the session and to show the counselor that himself or herself holds the truth in the topic being discussed. This type of client who is basically coming to the counseling room to hear oneself expressing inviolable truths is very telling in the context of subhumanizing the interlocutor to a passive, obedient, and agentless receiver of one's truths. In itself, this is an issue worth exploring and ameliorating in philosophical counseling practice. To analyze this infantilization of others in detail, this text proposes an in-depth look at Aristotle's account of children. We will suppose that his account speaks for Greek culture in a broader sense. Then, the text looks at the ways in which Thrasymachus tries to infantilize Socrates to show that he is no match for him in a debate. Last, the text features an exposition of a client's behavior from my own philosophical practice.

1. Are children subhuman for the Greeks?

Aristotle's position on children is rarely invoked in Aristotle studies. The discussion occurred to see its relevance for contemporary conceptions of children protection (Broadley, 2021), education (Sanderse, 2020), child rights (Schoeman, 1980), or virtue ethics (Fossheim, 2017), to name some of them. Inquiring about the subhuman term is rather unusual because it serves an exterior purpose: to further study how Socrates is being subhumanized by Thrasymachus.

First, we have to look at what children lack in Aristotle's eyes. For him, the answer to the question regarding the potential subhuman nature of children is rather positive. His remarks on children invite us to further specify what subhumanization means. Two passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics* stand out. The first captures Aristotle saying that "we do not call an ox, a horse or any other animal happy, because none of them can share in such activity. And for this same reason, a child is not happy either, since his age makes him incapable of doing such actions." (Aristotle, 2004, p. 16) The similarity between being and ox, a horse, or a human

child is given by their inability to engage in virtuous activities that lead to happiness. Eudaimonia resides outside a child's area of experience. Because of this radical inability, the child cannot be expected to engage in a rational discourse, in deliberation or debate, and is, as such, closer to irrationality and impulsivity, to being a beast. We extrapolate to say that, by Greek standards, children appear to be subhumans that, unlike other animals, have the potential of stripping away their subhuman status through education. This line of argument is coherent with Aristotle's concept of habit, the *hexis*, which stands as a second nature rewriting the experiential urges it finds in a person. It is only not a question of whether the child is capable of rational discourse. In addition to that, nobody even expects a child to perform rationally until he or she becomes an educated young person. A child would fail to appear to be rational even if the child were to behave rationally, most probably because of being educated in the spirit of Aristotle, who turns a blind eye on the potentially rational performance of children. On this point, Aristotle and philosophical practitioners most probably disagree. It is hard to imagine that Aristotle would see much sense in philosophy for children activities because of his view. There is little sense in doing philosophy for children if the practitioner is convinced that the child is naturally incapable of understanding a reasonable dialogue, or of distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable conversations.

The idea that children cannot be rational, and thus subhuman, to my understanding, is strengthened by the second passage from the Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle claims that "children and the other animals share in what is voluntary, but not in rational choice, and we describe actions done spontaneously as voluntary, but not as done in accordance with rational choice." (Aristotle, 2004, p. 41) A child's limit is a problem of rationally choosing something over something else. The problem is related to rational discrimination between possible actions and to the ability to analyze options. Indeed, choice-making is something philosophy for children trains, and yet it does so by presuming the child is capable of reasonable choice after having a rational dialogue with the philosopher, as it is capable of briefly explaining why he or she chose so. The assumption that children cannot perform rational choice-making involves the idea that children cannot switch between evaluations and cannot see, at least at an intuitive level, if one interpretation makes more sense than another interpretation. In other words, one cannot talk reason into a child, an idea that is problematic, to say the least.

In the context of this subhumanization of children, I propose we take a look at the way Thrasimachus infantilizes Socrates in Book I of the Republic. Doing so pushes us to understand the grey area between being arrogant with one's interlocutor and subhumanizing them to prove a point.

2. Thrasimachus' moves

The first book from the Republic illustrates a Socrates trying to understand what justice is in the company of Glaucon, Adeimantos, and a couple of others, including Thrasymachus. An interlocutor for the first book only, Thrasymachus enters the stage of dialogue in a rather abrupt manner, namely by performing a to the book *ad hominem* on Socrates and his intellectual friends.

a) Out of the blue, Thrasymachus intervenes in Socrates' discussion with Polemarchus about justice. He speaks loud and clear, asking the two:

What's this nonsense that has got into you two, Socrates? Why be so obliging? Why keep giving way to one another? If you really want to know what justice is, then stop simply asking questions, and scoring points by proving that any answer given by anyone else is wrong. You know perfectly well that it's easier to ask questions than to give answers yourself. Come on, why don't you give some answers yourself? (Plato, 2000, p. 13)

From the very start, we observe an assumption in Thrasymachus' speech, which is about the nature of dialogue: any form of dialogue is competitive, at least when unfolding in front of others. The assumption regarding competition explains the sudden negative outburst Thrasymachus targets Socrates with. First, Thrasymachus labels Socrates and Polemarchus as authors of nonsense. This is a fair indicator of a live infantilization of his interlocutors since children are frequently speaking in an irrational, non-sensical fashion. Thrasymachus' question even bears a note of surprise, mimicking the expectation that Socrates can surely perform better intellectually than he currently does. This is another sign of belittling the other, as Thrasymachus simulates a disappointment that relies on false respect for Socrates: he cannot be this worse, to simply speak nonsense.

Thrasymachus continues with his attack by claiming that there is no actual dispute between Socrates and Polemarchos, reinforcing the idea that, for him, dialogue is a competition, failing to see the cooperative nature of Socratic dialogue. Since the two interlocutors are unable to overcome the realm of nonsense, Thrasymachus proposes a solution for the two, namely to reduce the number of questions and increase the number of answers. Again, Thrasymachus' attitude is patronizing, as it feeds on the assumption that Socrates and his friends are incapable of pursuing an intellectual competition on a level that he can. This is not a simple underevaluation of the opponents or of their ideas. If it were a simple underevaluation, then Thrasymachus would have said that Socrates and Polemarchus are mistaken, or even better, he would have attacked the ideas without attacking the authors by saying that the ideas are wrong or limited in their reach of truth. Such examples are nowhere near Thrasymachus' dismissal of Socrates' and Polemarchus' possibility of even uttering something rational, fueled by his

explanation that this impossibility is disguised as a methodological preference for questioning.

b) A source for infantilizing others is the idea that you yourself are a child and cannot handle common situations such as losing a game. A child is angry at others when losing a game, even though the idea that a game is competitive is the child's own doing. Nobody makes a child more competitive than the child itself. This applies to Thrasymachus as well. He himself assumes that dialogue is competitive, yet he appears to lack the responsibility when losing his own game by not being able to convince Socrates of anything he believes in. As consequence, he says "Socrates, you are beneath contempt. You're taking what I said in a way in which makes it easier to misinterpret my meaning." (Plato, 2000, p. 15) This line is back-up by the same idea reappearing not long after this one: "You are always trying to trick people, Socrates" (Plato, 2000, p. 18). Thrasymachus assumes at this point that Socrates is going through bad faith and willingly misinterprets him in order to win the discussion. As a consequence of his assumption, Thrasymachus blames Socrates for an attitude that is only present in Thrasymachus' view: the attitude of undoing your opponent by any means necessary. In this case, Thrasymachus himself precisely tries to undo Socrates by harshly judging him through another *ad hominem*. Just like a child who kicks and cries if someone takes away his or her toy, so does Thrasymachus impulsively attacks Socrates for taking away his idea and questioning it. Thrasymachus' mistrust that interlocutors are well intended point towards the same issue: thinking that others are incapable of being rational. Yet this rationality is translated in the mind of an egocentric Thrasymachus as a way of agreeing with his on the matter. Thrasymachus' rationality is no more than sharing his view and telling him that he is right and that no more can be said about a certain matter. And this is precisely the opposite of what Socrates is doing, which naturally leads to triggering Thrasymachus' infantile self: if his views are wrong, he does not exist. Since Thrasymachus' rationality is no more than his personal truth, then his attacks on anyone disagreeing can easily be seen as a way to subhumanize others: they are beneath contempt for simply not sharing his views.

c) So far we saw that Thrasymachus infantilizes others and that he himself is a child who cannot stand not being appreciated for being right. His tirade of *ad hominem* attacks—"Do your worst. I make no special pleas. Try your tricks if you can. But you won't be able to." (Plato, 2000, p. 19), "I beg your pardon, have you got a nanny? [...] She takes no notice of your runny nose and doesn't wipe it clean when it needs it." (Plato, 2000, p. 21)—shows us that Thrasymachus cannot pursue truth for its own sake, but for selfish reasons only, namely to be a famed sophist. This pushes him to engage in the next level of being infantile: to walk out when things are not going as planned. His complaint of not being allowed to speak (Plato, 2000, p. 31) leads to the idea of leaving in order to have the last word. If Thrasymachus has the impression that Socrates does not let him speak, then he

easily imitates (something Plato would profoundly dislike) that behavior and tries to block the other people speaking to him by attempting to leave the discussion. Trying to silence others down, not by questioning or doubting, but by turning the back on the interlocutor is another clear indicator of Thrasymachus' attitude that does not change throughout his dialogue with Socrates.

These three moves by Thrasymachus are telling of his way of undermining the interlocutor. His attitude betrays his positioning regarding Socrates and his friends, as well as his stance towards anyone engaging him in dialogue, at least in front of others. In short, Thrasymachus infantilizes Socrates because of the menace of having your views questioned in front of others. Thrasymachus' attachment to his own ideas not only forfeits his potential quest for truth, but also shows us that such an attachment occurs to the detriment of seeing others as rational beings capable of thinking on your level.

3. Is Thrasymachus still alive?

Philosophical counselors often engage with clients who do not come to the counseling room to engage in a process of self-knowledge. This type of client is not primarily interested, or not at all interested in discovering things about oneself. The reason for this situation is this client's firm conviction of already knowing the essentials about oneself. Such a deep belief renders the philosophical counseling process useless to a person that already thinks he or she knows himself or herself better than anyone else. Then why do such clients come and sometimes even stick around for a little longer? I have formulated this question for some of my former clients. I have organized their answers into two categories.

The first category refers to clients that know philosophy, or think they know philosophy and apparently do not have interlocutors for their philosophical expositions. The problem with this type of client is that he or she is not willing to work on oneself and develop critical thinking skills because he or she thinks that they already possess them. The main reason that drives them to philosophical counseling is the isolation, natural or self-imposed, which they suffer because of their desire to lead a philosophical way of life. This situation is strange at first because a philosophical way of life does not necessarily include isolation. However, the client's conviction that there is no work to be done on their attitude and that the only work to be done is on their positions, namely to refine and bulletproof them, is not fruitful from the standpoint of philosophical counseling. On the contrary, such an attitude inherits Thrasymachus' assumption that there is no point to question what he already knows, since he is very sure that he knows the truth and that going back to square one is not only useless, but essentially offensive. This type of client usually fights with the philosopher every time when the philosopher invites them to reflect on themselves and their condition that brought

them to the counseling room. The resistance these clients put up either swiftly end their counseling attempt, or they become dissatisfied with the counselor who refuses to listen to them and who does not let him or her speak. On rarer occasions, such a client can get angry with the counselor and engage in a register similar to Thrasymachus and his subhumanizing routine from the Republic. On such occasions, the counselor has a good chance of abstracting the essence from the situation and not take it as a failure. On the contrary, such occasions show the limit of philosophical counseling and its essential requirement: two persons willing to have a thoughtful dialogue.

The second category refers to clients that are very competitive persons in general and like to constantly enrich the portfolio of the challenges and puzzles they ticked off during their lifetime. Philosophy is naturally an attractive puzzle for these people, so the counseling room is initially seen as a playground that is entered with enthusiasm. However, this playground soon becomes painful, since the puzzle is not exterior anymore to the client: on the contrary, the client becomes the puzzle. Suddenly, such a client renounces its competitiveness which is now directed against itself in an unbuilding way. Usually, such clients use puzzles to escape from themselves, their lives, and their personal histories. Immediate suffering is announced once the Socratic counselor does not step away from his or her method of questioning the client and facilitating the client's self-awareness—a self-awareness that is not always welcomed by the client. These clients often shift between resisting the process and submitting to the Socratic questioning lines, just like Thrasymachus does in the Republic. Unlike Thrasymachus, such clients rather easily identify their greatest puzzle: how to tackle the reality that their passion for puzzles is a distraction from themselves. In terms of philosophical training, such clients learn self-responsibility, and self-acceptance. This is done by dispelling one's escapism through whatever artificial challenges and puzzles can be created by the self-escaping client. Even though I am pushing the sense of what subhumanizing means, I can easily say that such clients subhumanize themselves by running away from themselves. In this case, the philosopher's job seems to be the facilitation of the client's process of rehumanizing oneself, of renouncing his or her own production of artificial challenges in favor of accepting one's limits. Unlike the first category, these clients tend to stick around a little longer and sometimes grow to like the counseling process. Yet, the process is far from easy for them, as they need to have a strong motivation to keep going through their journey of self-discovery and self-owning.

4. Conclusion

Plato's dialogue include myriad of characters worthy of analysis from the perspective of the philosophical counselor and his or her experience in the counseling room. It is not farfetched to say that these characters illustrate dynamics that help the philosophical counselor identify various problems in their clients more faster. This is the case with this version of subhumanizing I proposed for this text. Dismissing the interlocutor's rationality can take many forms and can have varying degrees, from having an agenda of showing one's intellectual or philosophical worth, to subhumanizing oneself through escapism and self-depreciation in favor of appreciating anything else other than oneself.

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