Having succeeded in throwing doubt on Thrasyclus’ association of injustice with wisdom and goodness, Socrates now returns to Thrasyclus’ earlier contention that the unjust are ‘stronger’ (kreittones) than the just (347e 3–4). Even if the unjust are not wise and good, injustice may make people more powerful than justice (351a 2–3). But how can this be so if justice has been seen to be wisdom and virtue, and injustice ignorance (351a 3–6)? Nevertheless, the argument examined in the last chapter was limited. All it showed was that the just fall on the side of the wise and good because they are more like the knowledgeable than are the unjust. But this does not tell us whether, and in what ways, justice is more powerful, more enabling, than injustice. After all, Thrasyclus’ view was that perfect injustice is more profitable to the agent than justice is (348b 9–10). Thrasyclus admires absolute power because it can achieve great material benefits, prestige and social status. It may very well be that in this respect injustice is more ‘power-giving’ than justice, even if justice is, in some other sense, more ‘enabling’. What exactly are the ‘powers’ of justice, and how do they relate to what is commonly recognised as power? The two arguments which conclude Book I of the Republic address themselves to two questions: whether the possessors of justice are made stronger by it than are the unjust by their injustice (350b–352b), and whether it is justice rather than injustice which enables a ‘soul’ to lead a eudaimon life, a flourishing, happy, and enviable life (352d–354b).

As mentioned earlier, after 350d Thrasyclus loses interest in continuing the argument with Socrates. Plato obviously does not think that the arguments which follow would convince a Thrasyclus, and commentators have found them exasperatingly weak and unsatisfactory. At best, they seem to beg the question; they depend on premises that would be acceptable only to those who already accepted the conclusion. At worst, they owe their force to a rhetoric which has limited scope and would only be effective if one accepted some very contentious ideas. For all that, the arguments succeed in suggesting an alternative conception of power to that implicit in Thrasyclus’ doctrine. Plato makes it clear that he does not think the arguments are dialectically effective.
against Thrasymachus. This does not prevent them, however, from introducing the sort of perspective, quite antithetical to Thrasymachus’, from which one may grasp the sense in which justice is an enabling power. Strategically, then, the structure of the three arguments against Thrasymachus in Book I is that while the first argument (discussed in the previous chapter) is meant to undermine Thrasymachus’ view, the remaining two are not so much arguments against Thrasymachus as attempts to set right the sort of mislocation of power and excellence that leads to the Thrasymachean view.\(^2\)

In view of this it is beside the point to attack these last two arguments for failing to succeed in rebutting Thrasymachus. The unjust tyrant, given the ends he pursues, may not need justice, but his life may lack what makes a human life effective and flourishing. So, there may be reasons why the prosperity and well-being of cities and individuals require justice. The task is to discover the considerations which show justice to be an objective need of both individuals and cities, even though there are individuals whose desires and ambitions prevent them from seeing such an ‘impersonal’ need. The generality and abstractness of these last two arguments in Book I are due, I believe, to the fact that Socrates’ thought is guided by the intuition that the power of justice resides in its meeting an ‘impersonal’ need—a need which arises in individuals and communities because of their ‘nature’. There being such a ‘need’ does not mean, of course, that even those who value justice (like Cephalus and Polemarchus) understand that its value consists in meeting such a ‘need’. Socrates’ task is to explain how and why it is that in meeting this ‘need’ justice becomes a force responsible for strength and well-being.

Even so, the arguments have some force against Thrasymachus. We recall that the core of Thrasymachus’ position was not merely that more benefits accrue, contingently, to persons who make injustice their aim; he views injustice as an ideal of a good and excellent life, one which is in itself superior to justice, ‘mightier and freer’ (344c 4–6), as well as more profitable. This is confirmed by Socrates’ remarks (349a) that Thrasymachus does not regard injustice as more profitable while admitting it is a vice and evil. Injustice for him will be good both in itself—it is ‘noble and strong’, a virtue, because of what it enables people to achieve—as well as good for what it brings to those who practise it. The ‘nature’ of injustice is for Thrasymachus such as to entail greater ‘powers’ than justice. Socrates’ sketch of an alternative conception of the ‘powers’ of justice is meant to counter Thrasymachus’ disregard of them. The latter’s view runs counter to the common view that justice is a cohesive social force, and that an individual is better off for being just. The essence of the traditional view that a polis requires justice, a ‘civic virtue’, is that it makes for social harmony and cohesion, that it safeguards the polis from the dreaded ‘disease’ of contention and civic strife. However, to produce a plausible alternative to Thrasymachus Socrates must