

Plato on Justice

The *Republic* – perhaps Plato's most well-known dialogue – is an exploration of justice, and in particular the relationship of the human self to justice. What is the state of someone who lives justly? And what of the person who lives unjustly? Is justice an end in itself, and its own reward, or is it a means to some other end, and only valuable if it leads to that end?

The dialogue begins with Socrates returning to the city of Athens having participated in the Bendis festival and its procession, the communal celebration of Bendis or Artemis, in the Piraeus – the seaport which serves the city. But his journey is interrupted by a request from Polemachus that he turn aside to the house of Cephalus where many of his friends are gathered in order to talk philosophy. The discussion is, then, located between two differing states – the ordered city and the port linked to the sea with its storms and uncertain adventures. As usual Plato sounds a keynote for the coming discussions through his dramatic setting.

The discussion quickly moves to subject of justice – what is it, and how are we to define it? Various possible options are discussed: Cephalus suggests that justice consists in "not cheating man or god of what is due to him, nor speaking falsely" But Socrates is not satisfied with this and replies, "But are we to affirm thus without qualification that it is truth-telling and paying back what one has received from anyone, or may these very actions sometimes be just and sometimes unjust? I mean, for example, as everyone I presume would admit, if one took over weapons from a friend who was in his right mind and then the lender should go mad and demand them back, that we ought not to return them in that case and that he who did so return them would not be acting justly--nor yet would he who chose to speak nothing but the truth."

But a more contentious view of justice is put forward by the rhetorician Thrasymachus, who holds that in a relationship, public or private, between a stronger and a weaker party, justice is the interest of, or that which advantageous to, the stronger. All rulers, he says, arrange things to ensure that they obtain the great share – he is upholding the view expressed by modern sayings such as "might is right" and "the survival of the fittest." Socrates refutes this:

". . .no science (epistēmē) or art (technē) considers or enjoins the interest of the stronger or superior, but only the interest of the subject and weaker. . . .no physician, in so far as he is a physician, considers his own good in what he prescribes, but the good of his patient; for the true physician is also a ruler having the human body as a subject, and is not a mere money-maker; . . .there is no one in any rule who, in so far as he is a [true] ruler, considers or enjoins what is for his own interest, but always what is for the interest of his subject. . . ; to that he looks, and that alone he considers in everything which he says and does." (342c-e)

By the end of the First Book (there are ten books which make up the *Republic*) series of possible ways of understanding justice have been examined in turn, and Socrates is challenged to show that justice is desirable not only for the good results which follow

from the reputation of being just, but also for the interior health that arises when someone is just – that is to say that justice is desirable for its own sake, whether or not others know that we are just. This is provides the subject matter of the other nine books of the *Republic*.

First Socrates must go in search of the nature of justice, and then its interplay upon the self – that is to say, in Platonic terms, the soul. But the soul, says Socrates is too close and too small for us to see clearly, and so he asks that the interplay of justice upon a city-republic is examined as a larger analogue of the self. The analogue is based on the following analysis of the city and the soul:

The soul has:

1) A governing part – the reason which directs the other parts towards appropriate goals. It must know what is good for the self and must make wise judgements.

2) A ordering power – a "spirited part" which prevents internal or external disruption from overwhelming the self: it should be responsive to reason and stable enough to ensure that particular desires are kept within its proper limits.

3) A body of desires which ensure that the organism as a whole is provided with the elements which allow continuance and progress. This gives a drive to the self, but must agree to be moderated by governing and ordering parts.

The city has:

A governing part – the ruling council (or equivalent) which directs the governed population towards good ends; it too must know this 'good' and make wise judgements.

A defensive and ordering part which maintains the city in the face of internal or external threats to its proper running, taking its direction from the governing council, and acting bravely when required.

A general trading and producing part which pursues all the necessities of life which enable the city to live and flourish: the part works best when it accepts the direction of the governors and ordinative elements.

In both cases three of the four great virtues of Greek philosophy are clearly required by these parts: the governing part requires wisdom, the ordering part requires fortitude, and the desiring/producing part requires temperance (or moderation). The fourth virtue is justice: where does this fit in which the two complex organisms? Let's pick up the discussion in the *Republic* once the place of the three virtues within the three divisions has been established, so that Socrates feels justified in continuing the hunt for justice:

432b SOCRATES: All right. We have now spotted three kinds of virtue in our city. What kind remains, then, that would give the city yet another share of virtue? For it is clear that what remains is justice.

GLAUCON: It is clear.

SOCRATES: So then, Glaucon, we must now station ourselves like hunters surrounding a wood and concentrate our minds, so that justice does not escape us and vanish into
 c obscurity. For it is clear that it is around here somewhere. Keep your eyes peeled and do your best to catch sight of it, and if you happen to see it before I do, show it to me.

GLAUCON: I wish I could help. But it is rather the case that if you use me as a follower who can see only what you point out to him, you will be using me in a more reasonable way.

SOCRATES: Pray for success, then, and follow me.

GLAUCON: I will. You have only to lead.

SOCRATES: And it truly seems to be an impenetrable place and full of shadows. It is dark, at any rate, and difficult to search through. But all the same, we must go on.

d GLAUCON: Yes, we must.

And then I caught sight of something and shouted:

SOCRATES: Ah ha! Glaucon, it looks as though there is a track here, and I do not think our quarry will altogether escape us.

GLAUCON: That's good news. (*Socrates reports, "and then I caught sight of something"*)

SOCRATES: Oh dear, what a stupid condition in which to find ourselves!

GLAUCON: How so?

SOCRATES: It seems, blessed though you are, that the thing has been roll- ing around at our feet from the very beginning, and yet, like ridiculous fools, we could not see it. For just as people who are holding something in their hands sometimes search for the very
 e thing they are holding, we did not look in the right direction but gazed off into the distance, and perhaps that is the very reason we did not notice it.

GLAUCON: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: This: I think we have been talking and hearing about it all this time without understanding ourselves, or realizing that we were, in a way, talking about it.

GLAUCON: That was a long prelude! Now I want to hear what you mean!

433a SOCRATES: Listen, then, and see whether there is anything in what I say. You see, what we laid down at the beginning when we were founding our city, about what should be done throughout it—that, I think, or some form of that, is justice. And surely what we laid down and often repeated, if you remember, is that each person must practice one of the pursuits in the city, the one for which he is naturally best suited.

GLAUCON: Yes, we did say that.

SOCRATES: Moreover, we have heard many people say, and have often said ourselves,
 b that justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what is not one's own.

GLAUCON: Yes, we have.

SOCRATES: This, then, my friend, provided it is taken in a certain way, would seem to be justice—this doing one's own work. And do you know what I take as evidence of that?

GLAUCON: No, tell me.

SOCRATES: After our consideration of temperance, courage, and wisdom, I think that what remains in the city is the power that makes it possible for all of these to arise in it, and that preserves them when they have arisen for as long as it remains there itself. And we did say that justice would be what remained when we had found the other three.

GLAUCON: Yes, that must be so.

SOCRATES: Yet, surely, if we had to decide which of these will most contribute to making our city good by being present in it, it would be difficult to decide. Is it the agreement in belief between the rulers and the subjects? The preservation among the soldiers of the law-inculcated belief about what should inspire terror and what should not? The wisdom and guardianship of the rulers? Or is what most contributes to making it good the fact that every child, woman, slave, free person, craftsman, ruler, and subject each does his own work and does not meddle with what is not?

GLAUCON: Of course it's a difficult decision.

SOCRATES: It seems, then, that this power—which consists in everyone's doing his own work—rivals wisdom, temperance, and courage in its contribution to the city's virtue.

GLAUCON: It certainly does.

SOCRATES: And wouldn't you say that justice is certainly what rivals them in contributing to the city's virtue?

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: Look at it this way, too, if you want to be convinced. Won't you assign to the rulers the job of judging lawsuits in the city?

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: And will they have any aim in judging other than this: that no citizen should have what is another's or be deprived of what is his own?

GLAUCON: No, they will have none but that.

SOCRATES: Because that is just?

GLAUCON: Yes.

SOCRATES: So from that point of view, too, having and doing of one's own, of what belongs to one, would be agreed to be justice.

GLAUCON: That's right.

SOCRATES: Now, see whether you agree with me about this: if a carpenter attempts to do the work of a shoemaker, or a shoemaker that of a carpenter, or they exchange their tools or honours with one another, or if the same person tries to do both jobs, and all other such exchanges are made, do you think that does any great harm to the city?

GLAUCON: Not really.

SOCRATES: But I imagine that when someone who is, by nature, a craftsman or some other sort of money-maker is puffed up by wealth, or by having a majority of votes, or by

his own strength, or by some other such thing, and attempts to enter the class of soldiers; or when one of the soldiers who is unworthy to do so tries to enter that of judge and guardian, and these exchange their tools and honours; or when the same person tries to do all these things at once, then I imagine you will agree that these exchanges and this meddling destroy the city.

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

- c SOCRATES: So, meddling and exchange among these three classes is the greatest harm that can happen to the city and would rightly be called the worst evil one could do to it.

GLAUCON: Exactly.

SOCRATES: And wouldn't you say that the worst evil one could do to one's own city is injustice?

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: That, then, is what injustice is. But let's put it in reverse: the opposite of this—when the moneymaking, auxiliary, and guardian class each do their own work in the city—is justice, isn't it, and makes the city just?

- d GLAUCON: That's exactly what I think too.

SOCRATES: Let's not state it as fixedly established just yet. But if this kind of thing is agreed by us to be justice in the case of individual human beings as well, then we can assent to it. For what else will there be for us to say? But if it is not, we will have to look for something else. For the moment, however, let's complete the inquiry in which we supposed that if we first tried to observe justice in some larger thing that possessed it, that would make it easier to see what it is like in an individual human being. We agreed

- e that this larger thing is a city, and so we founded the best city we could, knowing well that justice would of course be present in one that was good. So, let's apply what has come to light for us there to an individual, and if it is confirmed, all will be well. But if something different is found in the case of the individual, we will go back to the city and test it there. And perhaps by examining them side by side and rubbing them together like
435a fire-sticks, we can make justice blaze forth and, once it has come to light, confirm it in our own case.

GLAUCON: Well, the road you describe is the right one, and we should follow it.

SOCRATES: Well, then, if you call a bigger thing and a smaller thing by the same name, are they unlike in the respect in which they are called the same, or alike?

GLAUCON: Alike.

- b SOCRATES: So a just man won't differ at all from a just city with respect to the form of justice but will be like it.

GLAUCON: Yes, he will be like it.

SOCRATES: But now, the city, at any rate, was thought to be just because each of the three natural classes within it did its own job; and to be temperate, courageous, and wise, in addition, because of certain other conditions or states of these same classes.

GLAUCON: That's true.

SOCRATES: Then, my friend, we would expect an individual to have these same kinds of things in his soul, and to be correctly called by the same names as the city because the same conditions are present in them both.¹

(trans. Reeve)

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The dialogue continues by carefully examining the nature of the human self: for the present, though we need to discuss this view that justice arises when each does what its true nature is suited to do: whether we are talking about a society with its various divisions, an individual with his or her parts, a body with its various organs, or, indeed, the whole universe with its vast array of essences, powers and activities.

Socrates points out that nothing can function without some degree of justice – even a band of robbers must establish a minimum of justice between themselves, otherwise the thing will fall apart.

A number of issues arise here: how are we to distinguish anything's true nature? And how are we to avoid confusing accidental accretions with the essential nature? If something has a complex nature with many differing powers, can we find some way to establish a useful order of priority within that complexity?

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In another dialogue, the *Gorgias*, Socrates has some challenging things to say about the implications of accepting the *Republic's* view of justice. For example, that for each of us it is better to be treated unjustly than for us to treat others unjustly; that if we are guilty of acting unjustly it is better to be punished (i.e. treated for it by the correct medicine) than to "get away with it."

¹ We do need to take notice that the *Republic* is primarily interested in the internal condition of the person who lives justly or unjustly – the city is being used as an analogue. However, if we want to take this definition of justice as a political statement (as many do), we need to understand (1) that this is not a caste system, since there is movement in the Republic between the various classes and the city undertakes to provide suitable education and particular people find themselves moved into the governing class on merit. And (2) Plato is not in any case treating individuals as if they were simply a governor or one of the governed – in the *Laws* he insists that democratic elements are part of the whole scheme of good government, and that everyone should vote in the election of officers. He does want, though, those who are going to wield the most power to have cultivated wisdom, which importantly includes a high degree of self-mastery, so that the temptations of power do not overwhelm the city's governors. He expects his republic's governors to lead exceptionally frugal lives, well below the standard that the general population enjoys in material terms.