

**‘MIGHT IS RIGHT’ IN THRASYMACHUS: APPLICATION TO NIGERIA’S
SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION**

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Abstract

Justice may be described as the process by which fairness is administered. Some describe it as given everyone his due. But this definition has its defaults. Some suggest that justice issues from God who is All Just. In his “Republic” Plato recording led down an outstanding teaching on the meaning and ideal application of justice which has influenced many minds. Thrasymachus however views justice differently from the conventional view. For him, justice is the advantage of the stronger; obedience to the law and the advantage of another. This paper will reflect on the ‘Thrasymachean’ position on justice and its influence on the Nigerian society.

Introduction

Man has been described as a political and social animal. This is because no man is an island and wherever men exist as a society, there is always the tendency to jostle for the scarce resources therein. This striving and jostling for resources is done within a network of human relationship; leading to the growth and development of the society which eventually grows into a state.

In spite of the tendency to relate with others in the society, man is also selfish by nature. His egoistic tendencies often override his altruistic spirit. The need thus arises for checks and balances to be applied to curb this selfish side in man; else the society be overtaken by injustice and restiveness as a result of the clashing of egos that may arise. It is against this backdrop that the concept of law- a tool for promoting justice emerged.

But what is justice? What is right? What is lawful? Great minds from time immemorial have attempted to answer the above questions, albeit in both related and contrasting ways. This paper will attempt to capture Thrasymachus' concept of justice. It will also attempt to picture how this concept applies to the socio-political milieu in Nigeria.

Meet the Man, Thrasymachus

Thrasymachus is one of the oldest members of the cadre of philosophers who have come to be known as sophists. He alongside others like Antiphon, Critas, Hippias, Gorgias and Protagoras became famous in the 5th Century because of their skilled sophistry. He is said to have been born at Chalcedon and was known to be a distinguished teacher of rhetoric and speechwriting in Athens. Beyond these, very little is known about his life and works. His lasting influence in the intellectual realm is due to the sensitive role he played in the first book of Plato's *Republic*. It remains debatable though whether the views Plato ascribed to him are clearly those of the historical Thrasymachus if he indeed existed; or whether they are mere words Plato put into his mouth to better develop his thought on justice.

The Background of His Thought on Justice

It was Hans Gadamer who observed that ‘no one speaks from nowhere’. There is therefore precedence to every philosophical thought or mode of viewing reality. The ‘Thrasymachean’ position on justice is not an exception. Let us attempt an analysis of some of the ideologies in ancient Greece that may have influenced the development of his thought on justice.

The Apollonian and Dionysian Dichotomy

Apollo and Dionysius are both gods in Greek mythology and they are both the sons of Zeus. They have also come to occupy a sensitive position in the formation of human thought and in the history of intellectual development. “The Apollonian and Dionysian is a philosophical and literary concept or dichotomy, based on certain features of ancient Greek mythology. Many western philosophical and literary figures have invoked this dichotomy in critical and creative works.”¹ Thrasymachus is one of these. It should be noted that even though the two gods represent two different tendencies in man, “the Greeks did not consider the two gods to be opposites or rivals, although often the two deities were interlacing in nature.”² This is why in his masterpiece- *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche noted that “the supreme achievement of human nature occurred in Greek culture where the Dionysian and Apollonian elements were brought together.”³ As Stumpf enthused, “Nietzsche found in Homer’s account of Apollo and Dionysius the birth of tragedy, that is, the emergence of art and the fullest development of the aesthetic element in humanity, is the result of a fusion between the two principles that these gods respectively represent and embody.”⁴

But what do these gods- Apollo and Dionysius represent in human nature? “Apollo is the god of reason and the rational while Dionysius is the god of the irrational

¹ See ‘Apollo and Dionysius’ in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollonian_and_dionysian, 20/04/2016

² *Ibid.*

³ F. Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy” in *Philosophy: History and Problem*, S. E. Stumpf, p. 422.

⁴ S. E. Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problem*, 5th Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), p. 423.

and chaos. The Apollonian is based on reason and logical thinking. By contrast, the Dionysian is based on chaos and appeals to the emotions and instincts.”⁵ From another viewpoint:

Dionysian represent the negative and destructive dark powers of the soul which culminate, when unchecked in that disgusting mixture of voluptuousness and cruelty typical of the most savage beasts of nature. Again the Apollonian represents the power to deal with the powerful surge of vital energy, to harness destructive powers and to transmute these into a creative act.⁶

In the subsequent sections of this work, you will notice that Thrasyarchus’ concept of justice is greatly influenced by the Dionysian traits.

The Homer and Hesiod Dichotomy

Homer is said to have existed sometime between the 8th and 7th Centuries B.C. He is acclaimed one of the greatest poets in the history of Western Europe based on the great influence of two of his major works- *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Some scholars argue that Homer never existed as a concrete human person in the universe. They opined that “Homer means literally ‘hostage’ and the works which bear his name are mere collected folk tales.”⁷ Note that the works of Homer are collected oral histories, folklores, and mythology blended into poems. In both of his influential works- *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Homer manifested an unprecedented love for nobility, endorsing all their actions hook, line and sinker. He elevated them to the status of gods and consequently saw their actions as unquestionable. Thus, “through the *Odyssey*, Homer reinforces the belief that the

⁵ See “Apollonian and Dionysian”, *loc. Cit.*

⁶ S. E. Stumpf, *loc. Cit.*

⁷ See “Homer and Hesiod”, www.keithmurphy.info/399/homer.htm, 22/04/2016

nobility were the ones who the gods spoke to; there the nobles were the only ones capable of ruling or fighting for Greece.”⁸

In this regard Homer glorified war and made warring a virtue necessary for the nobles. “This is why he felt that poetry should give the reader vicarious satisfaction through battles which, through passion and sacrifice, Hellenism prevailed.”⁹ Note that for Homer, “it is not that the gods are moral and require goodness; they are merely stronger than human beings and exact obedience.... His conception of nature is that of capricious wills at work instead of physical natural laws.”¹⁰ Take notice of the similarity between Homer’s vision of morality and the ideals Dionysius represent.

Hesiod is said to be a contemporary of Homer. He was a farmer and a shepherd. His major works- *Works and Days* and *Theogony* dealt with the daily way of life of the people of his age. His doctrines on justice are embodied in these works. Contrary to Homer, “Through these works, Hesiod was able to criticize the injustices the nobility inflict on the common Greeks.”¹¹ He was a student of Homer’s work, but believed them to be lies, especially Homer’s glorification of war. Note that Homer suggested that only the nobles knew the will of the gods and thus could apply justice because the gods communicate with them. This explains why he (Homer) considered their actions as unquestionable.

Hesiod however postulates that, “if the nobles alone knew *themis* (the will of the gods) and *deke* (human justice), corruption is inevitable.”¹² It is worthwhile to observe that like Homer, Hesiod agreed that the moral order is the product of the gods (Zeus). But the will of the gods are not capricious or calculated to gratify the gods as Homer thought, but are rather fashioned for the good of mankind. “Although Hesiod retains the notion that the gods control nature he balances this personal element in the nature of

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ S. E. Stumpf, *Op. Cit.* p. 4.

¹¹ See “Homer and Hesiod”, *Loc. Cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

things with an emphasis upon the impersonal operation of the moral law of the universe.”¹³ You will also notice here that the principles of Hesiod align with the Apollonian.

From the above background or foundational analysis we have done, two broad tendencies in the Greek history of civilization and intellectual development which have continued to influenced human ideologies even till date, are evident. On one side, there is the tendency to subscribe to a lawless universe; a state of chaos and disorderliness; a state of nature as Thomas Hobbes would describe it; or a universe where justice is the decision and the property of the strong and mighty; a universe where the weak- the followers are always at the mercy of the powerful- the leaders. This tendency aligns with the principles of Dionysius and Homer and we see it in the speculations of Thrasymachus, Nietzsche, Machiavelli, etc. We also experience the same tendency in the politics of today especially in systems of government like Totalitarianism, Militarism, Communism and all other forms of dictatorship. On the other side, there is the tendency to subscribe to a universe where justice and orderliness reign; where the gods or God play a role in deciding human moral standards; where human reason and choice override instincts; where leadership is seen as an opportunity to serve and not to enslave the weak. This tendency is embodied in the works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc. It is also evident in the politics of the day especially in forms of government like constitutional democracy devoid of its flaws.

Thrasymachus’ Concept of Justice

It should be noted that almost all we know about Thrasymachus’ doctrine on justice is as contained in the first book of Plato’s *Republic*. Hence some scholars dispute if the said position of his on justice are actually Thrasymachus’ or mere words put into his mouth by Plato. The following is a brief summary of the dialogue between Plato and

¹³ S. E. Stumpf *Op. Cit.* p. 4.

Thrasymachus as contained in the *Republic* from whence his concept on justice was sieved.

Polymachus seems to accept Socrates argument, but at this point, Thrasymachus jumps into the conversation. He objects to the manner in which the argument is proceeding. He regards Socrates' questions as been tedious, and he says professional teacher of argument that he is, that it is time to stop asking questions and to provide some answers. But Socrates says he knows that he does know. He thus put the question before Thrasymachus; what is justice? Thrasymachus says he will provide the answer if he is provided his fees. He then said that justice is whatever is in the interest of the stronger party in a given state; justice is thus effected through power by people in power. People in power make laws; the weaker party (subjects) [is] supposed to obey the laws, and that is justice: obedience to the laws made by the rulers in the interest of the rulers. Socrates then argued that rulers can pass bad laws, "bad" in the sense that they do not serve the interest of the people. Thrasymachus says that a ruler cannot make mistake. Thrasymachus' argument is that 'might makes right'. But Socrates rebuts this argument by demonstrating that as a ruler, the ruler's chief interest ought to be the interest of his subjects, just as the physician's interest ought to be the welfare of the patient. A doctor may receive a fee for his work, but that means simply that he is also a wage-earner. A ruler may also earn a living wage for his work but his main purpose is to rule.¹⁴

Key Aspects of Thrasymachus' Concept of Justice

Contrary to Socrates' position that justice is an important good, "Thrasymachus considered the unjust person as positively superior in character and intelligence."¹⁵ "He claims that injustice, if it is on a larger scale, is stronger, freer and more masterly than justice."¹⁶ That is, "injustice pays not only at the meager level of pick-pocket, although there is profit in that too, but especially in the case of those who carry injustice to

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, Book 1, (m.sparknote. com/philosophy/republic/section1.rtml), 28/04/016

¹⁵ S. E. Stumpf, *loc. Cit.* p. 38.

¹⁶ N. Rauhut, "Thrasymachus" in *Internet Encyclopedia of philosophy* (www.iep.utm.edu/thrasymachus/), 22/04/016.

perfection and make themselves masters of whole cities and nations.”¹⁷ His argument against justice in furtherance of his case for injustice may be summarized as follows:

- “Justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger”¹⁸ (338c). Hence he opined that ‘might is right’ and justice is pursued by simpletons and leads to weakness. Take notice of elements of Nietzsche’s thought in this.
- “Justice is obedience to laws”¹⁹ (339c). Hence for him, the ruler is always correct and the people would be acting justly if they obey the laws made by the rulers dumbly whether they are draconian or not.
- “Justice is nothing but the advantage of another”²⁰ (343c). This is one of the reasons why Thrasymachus faults justice and sees it as a form of weakness. Nietzsche would do same centuries later.

Thrasymachus’ Doctrine and the Nigerian Situation

I was so much enthralled by the manner this ancient mind was able to capture almost perfectly the happenings in our society even though he existed hundreds of generations before our time. Thrasymachus, it may be argued, developed his concept on justice having in mind the rise of polities like Nigeria’s where the principles of justice have been effectively sidetracked. His melancholy against justice so much pictures the socio-political situation in Nigeria. His principles apply to every facet of life in the country, but for want of space we shall reflect on a few based on the following headings.

- 1. Separation of Power/Checks and Balances;** this is a political theory postulated by Baron de Montesquieu in his work- *The Spirit of the Law*. Baron argued for a constitutional government with three separate branches of government. Accordingly, it is expected that each of these three branches have defined abilities and functions. They would essentially function as watchdogs to monitor one

¹⁷ S. E. Stumpf, *Op. cit.* p. 33.

¹⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, in “Thrasymachus” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.iep.utm.edu/thrasymachus/), 22/04/2016

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

another in order to eschew any form of malpractice or corruption in governance. The concepts of separation of power and checks and balances cannot function in isolation from the rule of law.

Rule of law is a principle under which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the state itself, are accountable to laws [constitution] that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated, and that are consistent with international human right principles.²¹

In Nigeria, we practice constitutional democracy and so boast of three arms of government which are supposed to act independently but yet in harmony for the good of the country- the executive, judiciary and the legislator. Accountability before the law is needed for any government to function well because it will help to dispense justice to everyone at all times and cases. It is key to the application of the rule of law. “[It] is a condition in which the population, public officials and perpetrators of past conflict-related crimes are held legally accountable for their actions; the judiciary is independent and free from political influence.”²²

But how applicable is this theory in Nigeria today? Your guess is as good as mine. We notice that like Thrasymachus would say, justice in Nigeria is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. Hence no room is given for opposition in the politics of the day. So once a political party assumes the climax of political powers, they ensure that all the core governmental positions and offices are flocked with their guile members. The arms of the governments become exclusively theirs to control. They therefore make and bend the laws to their benefits; good or bad, irrespective of the interest of the people who voted them into office. ‘Might’ becomes ‘right’ in this case since the people are at the mercy of their senseless leaders. They have no choice about anything, they become blind followers weak as they are; and so obey the draconian laws forged by the leaders. This is Thrasymachus’ Nigeria today.

²¹ C. Ozoude, *Principles of Civic Education for Secondary Schools*, SS3. (Enugu: Raymonds Publication, p51), 2013.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56

2. The Supremacy of the Law: this principle suggests that no one is above the law of the nation. It is a fundamental principle in the democratic order as we have here in Nigeria. The supremacy of the law as a principle calls for generality in the making and application of the law. It is a further development of the idea of equality before the law. It decrees that laws should not be made in respect of particular persons and leaders should not make their own laws but rule according to the stipulated laws of the land. Supremacy of the law is an aspect of the principle of the rule of law. According to the World Justice Project:

*The Rule of Law is a system in which the following four principles are upheld; (1) the government and its officials and agents as well as individuals and private entities are accountable under the law (2) the laws are clear, publicized, stable and just and are applied evenly; and protect fundamental rights, including the security of persons and property and certain core human rights (3) the process by which the laws are enacted, administered and enforced is accessible fair and efficient (4) justice is delivered timely by competent, ethical and independent representatives and neutrals who are of sufficient number, have adequate resources, reflect the make-up of the communities they serve.*²³

Look critically into the above listed items which form the fundamentals of the application of the principle of supremacy of the law in every democratic regime; is there any aspect where Nigeria may score up to 50% in performance in terms of following the due processes as underlined above? The answer is NO. This is because the laws are not there. They are in place but are not applied at all, or wrongly applied most times. This is because we live in a country where many (especially leaders and their cohorts) are above the law. As Socrates would say, a ruler's chief interest ought to be the welfare of his subjects just like the physicians interest ought to be the welfare of his patient. This is however a far cry in the Nigerian context. The laws are applied mostly in the favour of the influential, those who aligned themselves with the government. Else, how do we account for the selective justice of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and that of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC)? How do we account for the selective interpretation of the law in

²³ See worldjusticeproject.org/what-rule-law, 22/04/2016

favour of the mighty where an ordinary man steals a handset and is left to decay in the prison while a public officer loots billions of Naira and goes untouched? How do we account for the reckless abandonment shown by the government to the many extra-judicial killings all over the country;²⁴ the barrage of alleged criminals waiting trials for years in prisons and so on? How many of those who aligned with the government of the day are allowed to spend a night in prison without immediate justice done to their case? None of course. We notice same even in terms of seeking employment. Recruitment is no longer based on qualification or capability but on who knows who. Those who align with the mighty are considered for lucrative positions and jobs even if they are not qualified. Justice then for us Nigerians is the advantage of the stronger.

Poverty in the Midst of Plenty; in the Vanguard Newspaper dated 20th August 2015, the vice president of Nigeria- Yemi Osinbajo stated that about 110 million Nigerians were still living below poverty line despite the policies of the past governments to improve their welfare. But how do you explain this in a country blessed with plenty of oil and other resources? How do you explain this in a country that boasts of the highest number of black wealthy men in the whole world? Poverty in Nigeria can also be caused [among other factors] by the political instability of the country [which amounts to] income instability and ethnic conflict. One of the core banes of the Nigerian society is discontinuity in government policies due to the selfishness of our leaders. Every government comes in with a new policy, discontinuing with those of the previous government even if they are worthwhile. Politics and governance is not greeted with the right mentality. Instead of being seen as an opportunity to serve and protect the interest of the led; it is seen as an opportunity to enrich oneself and his generation. They thus develop policies that would serve their interests and not those of the people; and this is what Thrasymachus was trying to put across to Socrates.

Hence today, the wealth of Nigeria is in very few hands. Workers are not well paid, fuel price is incredibly hiked, everything in the market is inflated, and the average

²⁴ See "Poverty in Nigeria", (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/poverty_in_Nigeria), 20/04/2016.

Nigerian hardly feeds twice a day. Yet our senators are the highest paid in the globe apart from those of the Australian parliament. The ordinary Nigerian lives in a poor environment, starves, and even finds it hard to access medical care when sick; while the strong- those who align with the powerful live in sumptuous apartments, attend the best schools within or outside the country, and even access medical care overseas. The idea of justice as Socrates conceived it which is the ideal is dead in Nigeria. What we have here is injustice, Thrasymachus' version of justice.

'Godfatherism' in Nigerian Politics; this is one of the greatest undoings to the Nigerian polity. Our politics which is a core aspect of democratic life is beset with this ugly hydra-headed cankerworm which is crippling the entire system. Today, success in politics in Nigeria does not depend on one's competence or proven record and capability. It rather depends on the individual's ability to align with influential men that can swing the pendulum to his favour. This is a good manifestation of Thrasymachus' 'might is right'. For those who do not have the support of these influential men, no matter how competent they may be, they end up as losers in politics.

The 'Man Know Man' Syndrome in Nigerian Society; this is another outstanding aspect of the Thrasymachean concept of justice as it applies to the Nigerian situation. It is almost a culture and an acceptable *modus operandi* that for one to succeed in whatever he does in the country, he must have someone who would work things out for him. Employment especially to key governmental positions and jobs are basically based on this principle of 'man know man'. It is thus always a thing that favors the stronger as Thrasymachus would say.

Evaluation

A critical look at the dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus presents the latter as a bad man, an unjust one. Thrasymachus, as evident from the dialogue, seems to be blind to justice as an ideal or rather has no sense or knowledge of what justice

represents. This is because all his thoughts about justice were negative. A traditional Greek would say, “Thrasymachus devoids himself of virtues because he is so arrogant; he is a power-seeker who applauds the application of power over the citizen.”²⁵

Thrasymachus seems to be a proponent of dictatorial forms of government like Totalitarianism; hence the blatant rejection of his position by Socrates. Nevertheless we must commend his sophistry and his ability to bring to light the dark side of justice which unfortunately has become the order in many societies. The pertinent question to be asked is; how plausible and feasible is the Socratic concept of justice which Thrasymachus opposed in the unjust world of today? The truth must be told, although the ‘Thrasymachian’ concept of justice is a mutilation and contradiction of the ideal, it represents better the situation in the world today where various forms of injustices are inflicted on the weak.

Conclusion

No matter how cruelly we criticize Thrasymachus and how aching his theory of justice may sound, one fact vindicates his position- his theory of justice is very much en vogue in many countries today. Many national constitutions declare the Socratic idea of justice which represents the ideal but practically, the reverse is the case. Leaders and even other prominent citizens of nations are wont to apply the ‘Thrasymachean’ justice more than the Socratic in their *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*.

This is why today the world is short of justice. Justice seems one of the core commodities which many leaders of nations have failed to lavish on their citizens. Yet one of the core reasons for the rise of societies, states or nations is to ensure justice and equality among people. And until citizens of nations like Nigeria rise to liberate themselves from foul obedience to selfish laws and unworkable policies, poverty and

²⁵ See “Thrasymachus” in m.sparknote.com/philosophy/republic/section1.rtml, 28/04/016

other forms of social malaise will continue to plague them. Countries like Libya and Egypt have made the step; the ball is on our court.