

HS0.301: Classical Text Readings-1

Term Paper- 1

Q:

Read Book 1, Chapter IV of Plato's *Republic* (pp. 30-40 in F.M. Cornford's translation)

- a. Breakdown the argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus into premises and conclusions
- b. Would you agree or disagree with the conclusion? Provide reasons to justify your position.

Word Limit: 1200-1500

Analysis of the argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus

In Book 1, Chapter 4 of Plato's Republic, Thrasymachus says that most people appear to be "good" because they're afraid of punishment and argues that strong men dare to do wrong and bring arguments for the benefit of injustice. Thrasymachus lays arguments to emphasize that an unjust person is more likely to succeed than a morally ethical person. He claims that an unjust person can take advantage of various situations for personal gains, whereas a just person can not; hence, the immoral person is the smart one. One central observation I had is that the argument presented by Socrates was quite attached to moral philosophy, which is quite evident in his arguments. In contrast, Thrasymachus seemed to be influenced by greed.

However, Socrates challenges the following three premises presented by Thrasymachus, i.e.,

1. The unjust are superior to the just in character ('virtue') and intelligence.
2. Injustice is a source of strength.
3. Injustice brings happiness.

And Socrates came up with three counter-arguments that we will analyze further:

1. *Argument 1:* The unjust is NOT superior to the just in character ('virtue') and intelligence.
2. *Argument 2:* Injustice is NOT a source of strength.
3. *Argument 3:* Injustice DOES NOT bring happiness.

Argument 1: The unjust is NOT superior to the just in character ('virtue') and intelligence.

P1: Socrates admitted an analogy between the art of living and other arts.

P2: The musician, tuning an instrument, knows that each string has a specific pitch that is right. He shows his excellence and mastery of the art by aiming at that 'limit' or 'measure' (as the Greeks would call it), and he would be satisfied if he could attain it.

C1: As Socrates admitted, the analogy between the art of living and other arts. So, there should also be a 'limit' or 'measure' for the art of living. *(from P1 and P2)*

P3: The measure is moral conduct to measure the art of living.

C2: A just man can prove his superiority over the unjust man by knowing the 'limit' or 'measure' of the art of living. *(from P1 and C1)*

P4: The unjust, who acknowledges no measure or limit because there is no limit to getting more and more for yourself at others' expense, and that is his object.

C3: The just man that is wise and good (is superior in character and intelligence), the unjust that is ignorant and bad. *(from P4 and C2)*

In this argument, Socrates admitted the existence of an analogy between the art of living and other arts. He compares that just as having relevant skills is a measure for a musician, moral conduct must be a measure for the art of living. As the just man acknowledges the limit and measure of the art of living, it would make him work hard to be a better man. On the other hand, an unjust man would refute the existence of moral conduct, which makes him devoid of respect for the same and eventually lacking the zeal to act as per moral conduct, resulting in the just man being superior in character and intelligence.

The first premise about the analogy between the art of living and other arts doesn't sound good to me as, firstly, art is not quantifiable, and the definition of a brilliant piece of art is not absolute. A masterpiece by Picasso might be an ordinary painting for someone. So, we don't know where the line of acing at an art exists. Moreover, art is recognized with the respect people have for it and its impact on the world. Similarly, moral conduct can not be fixed as the definition of morals changes concerning individuals, cultures, societies and time. For example, homosexuality was once taboo, but now it is welcomed.

The real problem is the universalizability of the analogy between the art of living and other arts. Instead of deducing them as per logic or modern-day ethics, the argument feels more like, proven according to Socrates' beliefs. The conclusion holds, but the premises are weak and often don't lead to the conclusion.

Argument 2: Injustice is NOT a source of strength.

To prove his second argument that unjust is not a source of strength, Socrates tried to set up that self-assertion is unjust behaviour and took up examples of the social structure of the society and state.

He explained that unlimited self-assertion could never lead to a strong foundation for any association. For a group of people to work together, they must let go of their gains and act as a unit to complete the goal. He justified the same by saying that if everyone acts for selfish reasons, this may create disputes and mistrust. Moreover, as self-assertion is considered part of unjust behaviour, then according to Thrasymachus, an unjust person should perform his unjust behaviour to an unlimited level, which again creates considerable disputes in the association, and the strength would decline to the dispute.

He emphasized that only fair treatment or justice is a solution for the strength of a state. Injustice, such as quarrelling or capturing other states, often leads to any possible result, whether positive or not. 'Socrates infers that injustice will have the same effect within the individual soul, dividing a man against himself and destroying the unity of purpose.

Socrates gave an example of a group of thieves who also let go of their unjust behaviour and agreed to divide equally because the unjust behaviour in their group too would lead to chaos among them and eventually the fall of their group. The argument presented by Socrates seems to be supported by Thrasymachus's extreme definition of unjust. Proving the same argument with a moderate definition of unjust would be difficult. It is not wrong if someone wants to have some personal gains or be a little self-assertive because it is basic human behaviour to root for the best possible outcome.

And the analogy of the effect of injustice on the soul and injustice on an association seems forced because one self-assertive man may complete his selfish goals and find happiness. At the same time, it could not be fruitful for an association where everyone is aiming for personal gains.

Argument 3: Injustice DOES NOT bring happiness.

P1: Everything has a peculiar work or function, the adequate exercise of his well-being or happiness.

P2: A man's function will involve reason, which man alone possesses and can do.

P3: A peculiar excellence or virtue, namely a state of his soul from which satisfactory activity results.

C1: Man's virtue is the state of character that makes him a good man and does his work well. The quality enables him to live well, for living is the soul's function, and living well is happiness. (from P1, P2, P3)

P4: According to Socrates, Injustice is not a virtue.

C2: Injustice won't help you live well and hence live happily. *(from P4 and C1)*

Here Socrates argues that everything, be it living or non-living, has a peculiar function, which his happiness consists of. One needs virtue to accomplish the function which brings happiness to him. However, Socrates argues that one can not perform a function without virtue. And as injustice is defined as something not virtuous, it can not lead anyone to happiness.

However, I cannot entirely agree with this argument. The argument is valid only if we consider the argument for a large set of people. It is self-explanatory that injustice will always bring disputes and disharmony in society. But when we talk about an individual's happiness, it is subjective. One may find happiness in doing injustice. A person might find happiness in performing against moral conduct. For example, killing someone is wrong. But a serial killer may find happiness in the same. Moreover, pleasure and happiness were not adequately defined, making us question the argument's credibility. However, for any society, the road to justice leads to harmony.

References:

1. Book 1, Chapter IV of Plato's Republic (pp. 30-40 in F.M. Cornford's translation)