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Plato's Inquiry into Justice

In the *Republic*, Plato seeks to answer the question: What is justice? He finds that justice is a virtue that arrives from rational order – when each part performs its function and does not interfere with others – whether it be within a soul or a city. In the following essay, I will examine Plato's inquiry into justice, not only within the *Republic* but also within *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. In addition, I will show the several faults and discrepancies within Plato's ideas that ultimately leave his investigation incomplete.

Before following Plato's inquiry, it's important to understand the historical motivations that caused Plato to dedicate much of his life's work to understanding justice. Plato (427-347 BC) was born in Athens, Greece during the midst of the tumultuous Peloponnesian war with Sparta (431-404 BC). During the war, Athens was stripped of its democracy and its democratic leaders were banished. It was only after the war that the Athenian Revolution (403 BC) brought back democracy. The reinstated Athenian democracy, however, was not ideal and in its insecurity executed Socrates – Plato's mentor and teacher (Mishra, 2018). Following Socrates' death, Plato realized that Athenian democracy was degenerating and its leaders were filled with amateurishness, needlessness, and political selfishness. He believed that justice was the only solution that would keep Athens from completely crumbling and saw it as "a fundamental principle of a well-ordered society" (Bhandari, 1998).

In response, Plato wrote the *Republic,* a Socratic dialogue that aims to tackle justice and provide an outline for an ideal state. The *Republic* takes place at Piraeus, the Port of Athens, as Socrates heads back from a religious festival and is asked to join Polemarchus at

Cephalus's (his father's) house. The entirety of the book revolves around a long discussion held between Socrates, Glaucon, Polemarchus, Cephalus, Thrasymachus, and Adeimantus. It is worth mentioning that Socrates is a central character within many of Plato's works and some are thought to encapsulate a "historical Socrates". For his later ideas, however, it is believed that Plato uses Socrates as a "mouthpiece" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, xi*)*. As such, it can be assumed that most of what Socrates argues within the *Republic* really belongs to Plato.

Before introducing his own theory of justice, Plato begins by discussing and refuting several common theories from his time (Bhandari, 1998). The first is proposed by Cephalus and Polemarchus. Cephalus claims that justice can be defined as "speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 331c). In other words, paying what one owes. Socrates swiftly refutes this theory with a counterexample; if one borrows a weapon from a sane friend he should not return it if his friend has gone mad – even if he asks for it returned (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 331c). It would be unjust to return a weapon to a mad friend and thus justice cannot be defined as paying incurred debts. Polemarchus provides an alteration to this definition and says that justice is benefiting one's friends and harming one's enemies. Socrates refutes this idea by saying that one can be mistaken in their judgment and harm their friends – thinking they are their enemies – and benefit their enemies – thinking they are their friends (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 334e). He also says that it does not seem just to harm another person, even if they are an enemy, because doing so makes them more unjust (Plato & Reeve, 2004, *335c).* Cephalus and Polemarchus's ideas represent that of traditional morality. They defend justice as the right

thing to do. While Socrates does not oppose them in that regard, he does find their definitions of justice flawed.

The second theory is more radical and introduced by Thrasymachus. The theory claims that "justice is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 338c). In other words, Thrasymachus views justice as what is in the interest of the rulers. He thinks that what is just – and by extension legislature – is dependent on the regime and its rulers. In addition to the definition, Thrasymachus claims that being unjust is "stronger, freer, and more masterful than justice" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 344c). He also says that those who are unjust and undetected are happier than those who are just (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 343e). Although considered radical, it's easy to see Thrasymachus's argument; those who are unjust and undetected are able to thrive off others and freely choose the route with the greatest returns. They reap only benefits with no costs. Socrates criticizes Thrasymachus's initial theory by showing that the craft of being a ruler is to enjoin what is advantageous to his subjects – similar to how a doctor's craft is to enjoin what is advantageous to his patients (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 342e). Socrates successfully disarms Thrasymachus's claim and moves on to disprove that being unjust is better for an individual than being just with three claims. He begins by arguing that a just individual is wise and good while an unjust individual is ignorant and bad (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 350c). He then argues that not only are unjust individuals unable to act together but also being unjust creates disharmony within oneself (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 352a). In other words, injustice isn't superior to justice with regards to effective action and harmony between individuals and within oneself. Lastly, Socrates proves that justice is the soul's virtue because it performs the soul's functions well: living. This means that a just individual will

live well and as a result be happy (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 353e). Through Socrates, Plato successfully disproves Thrasymachus's unconventional and radical theories of justice. Plato shows that justice is not what is advantageous for the stronger and just individuals are happier than unjust people

The last theory is presented by Glaucon as an alteration of Thrasymachus's ideas. Glaucon claims that people love justice, "not because it is a good thing, but because they are too weak to do injustice with impunity" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 359a). Like Thrasymachus, he believes that injustice reaps greater benefits when undetected. Although he defends injustice, he views justice as a shield to protect the weaker – a social contract that stops unjust individuals from taking advantage of those who can't protect themselves. To prove that humans are innately unjust and justice acts as protection for the weak, Glaucon presents the Myth of Lydian Shepard. The myth presents a seemingly just individual – a shepherd serving the ruler of Lydia. Once the shepherd acquires a ring that allows him to become invisible, freeing him from punishment, he unjustly overthrows his ruler. The myth shows that any human – no matter their moral orientation – would choose to be unjust if they are given impunity. Glaucon furthers his argument by saying that the unjust individual with a just reputation is happier than a just individual with an unjust reputation (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 362a). Glaucon's argument is concerningly convincing. Humans are innately selfish and given the opportunity to reap greater benefits with no consequence, will choose to be unjust. This view is not uncommon; Christianity believes that all individuals are not only unjust but sinful and are only made righteous by the decrees from God. Plato chooses to push aside this argument and proceeds to focus on justice in itself instead of incorporating external factors such as reputation.

After arguing the aforementioned theories, Plato introduces his own theory of justice. He begins by investigating social justice and then using it as an analogy to define individual justice. In other words, he compares justice within the social "organism" with justice within the individual "organism". Plato achieves this by having Socrates build an ideal state from the ground up, investigating what makes it just, and then incorporating those ideas into a human. Socrates starts by creating the first city – a city that only satisfies basic human necessities. Each person within the city has a single job which he or she is most suited for. The city is rugged, unguided by reason, and gets into a "feverish condition" caused by an "expansion of human wants" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 372a). Then Socrates adds a division of labor to create a hierarchical ideal state, the platonic Kallipolis. The first class is made up of producers who are known for their virtue of temperance. The second class – the guardian class – is educated in physical training and intended to protect the city's citizens, laws, and customs (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 376d). The guardians represent the virtue of courage. To train and educate the guardians, as well as rule the city, Socrates proposed a third and final class. The rulers would be picked from the guardians, are educated as philosophers, and represent the virtue of wisdom (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 412a*)*. To keep each citizen within their selective class and execute their specific function, the city would propagate the Myth of the Metals. The myth states that each class has a precious metal within them. The rulers would have gold, the guardians silver, and the producers bronze (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 414c). The myth ties each individual to their social class and makes it part of their identity. According to Plato, by building a city in which the classes are separate and complete their independent function without interfering with other classes, he has made a just city.

Interestingly, the social classes within Plato's ideal state resemble that of India's caste system. India's caste system divides Hindus into four hierarchical castes – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and the Shudras. A person's caste is based on their family's caste and determines where a person can live, what kind of job they can work, and who they can interact with. The ideal state's social classes are hierarchical, have different jobs within the city, and are determined from birth. Given this similarity, it's unsurprising that Plato came into contact with Indian scriptures through Egyptians during his twelve years of wandering after the execution of his mentor (Mishra, 2018). While reading these scriptures, Plato might have seen the advantages of the caste system and drawn on them to create his ideal state.

Nevertheless, within the *Republic,* Plato creates an ideal state that is just and uses its structure to identify justice within an individual. The fruits of his inquiry define individual justice as harmony within one's soul. Plato believes that the soul is composed of three components: reason, spirit, and appetite. The appetite component corresponds to the producers within the city and it is what makes a person feel passion, hunger, thirst, and desires. The spirit component corresponds to the guardian class and is responsible for anger and other emotions. The reason component corresponds to the ruling class and is rational, wise, and seeks truth. An individual is just when each component of his or her soul performs only its function (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 444e*)*. To achieve this, an individual must submit the non-rational parts of his or her soul to reason. It must feed reason and restrain spirit and appetite. Spirit should subvert itself to reason but also take command over appetite. This is because if appetite is left unrestrained, it will enslave the other components with the desire for bodily pleasures. Thus, justice within an individual is a

balance of the components of the soul while injustice is a disharmony of those components. It's important to note that Plato's definition of individual justice contrasts with Glaucon's theory of social contract justice because Plato believes that justice originates from the soul rather than from external factors. In fact, this is also what distinguishes it from Thrasymachus's radical theory and Cephalus's traditional view of justice.

To put it another way, Plato defines justice as a metaphysical tri-part virtue. It's the manifestation of the virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance acting in harmony with reason restraining the other components of the soul. His theory is interesting because it doesn't just define reason as justice. It instead acknowledges that a soul must have emotions and intuitions in order to be just. A purely rational soul would be unable to feel empathy, gratitude, and courage. While emotions can be blinding, emotions tempered by reason can sometimes see better than reason alone. Without empathy, no kingdoms can be ruled and without courage, no battles can be fought. Another interesting aspect of Plato's theory is that it does not include laws and makes the "leader" the actions of an entire "organism". In this way, it is dissimilar to conventional justice that takes the form of laws, declarations, and contracts. It is theoretical rather than a set of practical guidelines. Plato's theory, however, is not without its own problems.

The first potential fallacy is derived from the analogy between the city and the soul. As previously explained, Plato uses the structure of his just city as an analogy to find justice within an individual's soul. The city is just because its social classes all represent different virtues, don't stray from their functions, and are ruled by the class of wisdom-loving rulers. Therefore, a just individual must have the different components of their soul represent those same virtues, restrain those components, and control them using the component of

reason. Plato assumes that he is able to make this connection but does little to justify this claim; he compares the analogy to discerning small letters from a distance or large letters on a larger surface (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 368d). The fundamental flaw he makes is assuming that what makes the social "organism" just has to manifest the same way within an individual. In other words, he assumes that the social "organism" and the individual are fundamentally the same except for their sizes. Furthermore, he changes this assumption throughout his investigation. Socrates says, "it would be ridiculous to think that spiritedness did not come to be in cities from the private individuals who are reputed to have this quality" (Plato & Reeve, 2004, 435d). In other words, the city has just properties because of the attributes of the individuals within the city. Although Plato's assumption may be correct, he uses the connection between the city and the soul within *The Republic* rather loosely and with little proof which ultimately undermines his theory.

Assuming Plato's analogy of the city and soul is valid, he still completes another potential fallacy. David Sachs in "A Fallacy in Plato's Republic" claims that Plato's theory of justice is problematic because it defends the idea of mental health or rationality. Sachs points out that Plato doesn't explain why having a balanced soul and mental health amounts to justice. He also says that Plato doesn't show how having a balanced soul disincentivizes an individual from performing unjust actions (*Sachs,* 1963, 157). Sachs' concerns are valid, Plato does describe an individual who is rational and has good mental health. The problem is, as previously mentioned, that Plato provides a theoretical theory rather than a pragmatic one. Given an action, it is impossible to know if it is just or unjust based on Plato's theory. Given a just individual, it is impossible to know for certain whether his or her actions are just. This demonstrates how Plato's inquiry into justice is incomplete.

He may have found a definition for theoretical justice within, but this completely disregards the programmatic side of justice that involves external factors.

This fundamental problem within Plato's theory is also exemplified by the connection of piety to justice in *Euthyphro* – the first of the several Socratic dialogues that encompass the trial and death of Socrates. The dialogue takes place near a courthouse between Socrates and the priest Euthyphro. Socrates inquires into Euthyphro's business at the court. He is told that one of Euthyphro's laborers killed a household slave in drunken anger. In response, Euthyphro's father left him in a ditch and sent a messenger to question the priest about what should be done. Before the messenger returned, the laborer died and, as a result, Euthyphro decided to persecute his father for murder. Euthyphro believes that the action of persecuting his father is pious and says that those that claim otherwise not only have an incorrect idea of piety but are also contradicting themselves. This naturally leads Socrates to inquire into Euthyphro's understanding of the pious and impious.

Their discussion leads to a circular argument with no conclusion on the definition of piety, but it isn't without its merits. The discussion gives Socrates and Euthyphro some understanding into the nature of piety, and in consequence, justice. The first insight can be seen when Euthyphro and Socrates come to the agreement that "the godly and pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods, while that concerned with the care of men is the remaining part of justice" (Plato & Grube, 2002, 12e). They agree that all that is pious is just but not all that is just is pious; piety is a part of justice. Whatever applies to justice also applies to piety and whatever applies to piety applies to a part of justice. The problem of Plato's theoretical theory of justice recurs here once more: How does piety fit into Plato's definition? Plato's idea of a balanced soul makes it difficult to incorporate piety

because it relies on external factors – gods. Plato's theory strictly aims to exclude external factors because he thinks that justice originates from within. One could argue that God can exist within a balanced soul. Having God within you means that you abide by the ways of God. This means that if a soul abides by the ways of God, it is pious, and from the argument within *Euthyphro*, it is just. A soul that abides by the way of God is balanced. If you have a balanced soul, however, it does not mean you abide by the ways of God.

This argument allows for piety to exist within Plato's theory but it has its own faults and it further exemplifies the faults of Plato's theory. The primary flaw within the previously presented argument is that it is impossible to know what actions abide by the ways of God. Socrates comments on this in *Euthyphro* when he says that different gods will be at odds with each other because they consider different things to be "just, beautiful, ugly, good, and bad" (Plato & Grube, 2002, 7e). Ancient Athens was polytheistic but Socrates' point holds true for monotheistic religions as well; it's difficult to be certain of God's views. This is why Christianity says that everyone will sin, in other words, fail to abide by the way of God. If one were to know God's views upon every action he would never perform sin. This is further exemplified by Euthyphro's claim that "pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious" (Plato & Grube, 2002, 9e). Socrates responds to this by posing the question "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods'' (Plato & Grube, 2002, 10a). If pious is pious because it is loved by the gods, then via the previous argument, you can't know what is pious because it is impossible to know what the gods love. If pious is loved by the gods because it is pious then what is pious cannot be what is god-loved and thus piety remains undefined. This is rather convoluted but in short, fitting piety into Plato's theory of

justice fails because it requires the soul to abide by the ways of God and it is impossible to know the ways of God. This is the same issue that Plato encountered when defining his theory; it is difficult to agree upon a theory of justice that relies on external factors.

Furthermore, fitting piety into Plato's theory of justice does not change the nature of Plato's argument. Even in *Euthyphro*, Socrates seeks a "model" to apply to other actions to see whether they are pious or impious (Plato & Grube, 2002, 6e). Socrates and Euthyphro never agree on such a model, and thus they are left without a pragmatic answer. Fitting piety into Plato's theory doesn't change that his theory is theoretical. His theory is still unable to define an action as just or unjust and it is also unable to classify it as pious or impious. Given this, the argument that God can exist within a balanced soul and piety can fit into Plato's theory is unviable. This does not mean that Plato's original theory of justice is invalid. Instead, Socrates' investigation within *Euthyphro* finds some truth about justice (a part of justice is pious) that fails to fit into Plato's theory of justice he formulated within the *Republic*.

Finally, it's helpful to look at Socrates' trial to get a glimpse into Plato's motivations for the creation of his theory of justice and to get a better understanding of justice. Plato documents Socrates' trial with the Socratic dialogue *Apology*. Within this dialogue, Socrates provides a defense speech to the jurors of Athens. He provides a convincing argument to dispute the generational slander against his name as well as the validity – and frivolousness – of the claims that brought him to court. After receiving the verdict of guilty and the penalty of death, Socrates shows the jurors the futility of their decision and how it reflects their corruption. It's these last words to the jury that emphasize Socrates as a just figure facing an unjust court. He says that he was convicted because he refused to say what

they wanted to hear, begging and asking for pity. He does not regret his defense and he does not cower from death (Plato & Grube, 2002, 39b). In this, Socrates is shown exemplifying the three virtues that makeup justice. He is courageous in the courtroom facing his persecutors, shows temperance in the face of the desire to live, and uses the virtue of wisdom to speak the truth. It is plausible that Plato, having attended Socrates' one-day trial, was influenced by Socrates' actions during the trial while constructing his theory of justice. Once again, it is worth bearing in mind that Plato's theory cannot practically classify an action or an individual as just i.e., it is unknown if Socrates' soul is balanced.

In the *Republic,* Plato seeks to answer the definition of justice. He begins by exploring and refuting popular ideas from his time. Starting with moral theories, he refutes the idea that justice is paying one's debts with a counterexample of someone owing a weapon to a mad friend who was once sane. He also says that justice cannot be defined as benefiting one's friends and hurting one's enemies because you can be mistaken about who your friends and enemies are. Next, he moves on to a more radical theory; justice is what is advantageous for the stronger. He refutes this by showing that rulers aim to benefit their citizens rather than themselves. Finally, he discusses justice as a social contract, which assumes that everyone is innately unjust but performs justice to protect the weak.

After discussing these theories, Plato presents his own theory by constructing a theoretical city with a hierarchical division of labor. He mirrors this structure within a human soul to construct his theory of justice; the soul is made up of appetite, spirit, and reason. A just soul's components all perform their functions and don't impede on the other parts. The reason component of the soul rules over the other components and keeps them

from growing out of proportion. Plato, however, fails to mention why he is able to use the city as an analogy for the soul and how having a balanced soul leads to just actions.

There is also a discrepancy between Plato's ideas within *Euthyphro* and his theory of justice. Within *Euthyphro*, Plato agrees that a part of justice is pious. However, it doesn't fit into his theory of justice because it includes God as an external factor. Ultimately, it is the fact that Plato's theory is purely theoretical and doesn't include external factors that lead his theory to be incomplete. His theory is unable to classify actions or individuals as just. It isn't pragmatic and it doesn't fit the contemporary idea of justice as laws and legislature. Plato's theory of justice is difficult to apply and leaves many essential questions unanswered.

But why is creating a holistic definition of justice important? Having a greater understanding of justice would allow humans and systems to be more just and fair. The reason it is difficult for humans to agree upon systems of government and laws is that we don't have a complete understanding of what is just. Like the Greek gods, we fight over what we believe is good, fair, and just. Until we find a definition for justice, we have to keep searching and begging the question "What is Justice?" to better ourselves and the society we live in.

This is the exact reason that Plato set out to define justice: to restore Athens and its government. Although Plato's inquiry might have not found a holistic definition, its merits yielded progress. He was able to discredit other popular theories, give a plausible definition of justice within an individual, and create a model for a just city. It's not surprising that Plato's work was foundational for philosophy, ethics, and law.

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