

Plato's Republic

Polemarchus initially defined justice as “speaking the truth and giving back what one takes” (331 a). This idea meant that friends deserved help and enemies deserved harm. However, after discussing this definition in detail, Socrates revealed the glaring contradiction in Polemarchus’ statement: that it is never just to do harm. Given this, justice, according to Polemarchus, is not clearly defined but had been dissected enough to conclude that his initial definition cannot be true if harm is never justified.

The flaw in Polemarchus’ way of thinking is that to stay true to being just, helping friends, and harming enemies, one would need to always have a clear understanding of who is a friend and who is an enemy. Socrates touched on this idea by saying “then the good man, as it seems, will by this argument be a friend, and the good-for-nothing man an enemy?” (335 a), to which Polemarchus agreed. The problem with this statement is that not all people who do not help someone are therefore harming them. Not all of those who are not friends are automatically enemies. By the same logic, not all those who help someone is that person’s friend. People often help others for their own gain and do so to benefit themselves. Someone who donates to homeless people for the sole purpose of being praised is not just. They are not a friend of the homeless. Someone who chooses not to donate at all is not actively choosing to harm the homeless as they would be if they stole from them. Rather, they are choosing to not help, which, if anything, is a form of passive harm. For these reasons, Polemarchus’s definition of justice cannot be applied as a standard to all situations.

The core of Polemarchus’s argument is “that it is just to give to each what is owed” (331 a). Socrates challenges this idea with his example concluding that it would not be just to give a

friend of unsound mind a weapon that belongs to them. This is because if the result of their possession of the weapon under the circumstances is negative, the act of giving them the weapon is negative as well. In this way, the action of giving the friend what they are owed harms them instead of helps them, which would make the giver the enemy. Because of this, Polemarchus agreed to a revised definition that “it is just to give every one what is fitting” (332 c). This changed the contingent factor from the action to the person receiving it, and that defined justice. Justice is not giving what is owed, but more broadly performing the fitting action to a person based on their status of friend, deserving help or to be given to, or enemy, deserving harm or to be taken from.

However, despite this seemingly sealed definition, Socrates goes on to further challenge the revised idea by asking what the effect of harming something was, in the case of a just person harming their enemy. Polemarchus agreed that harmed beings become worse and therefore become unjust. There raises the question, “are just men able to make others unjust by justice, of all things?” (335 d) to which Polemarchus answered, “impossible”. Socrates uses analogies to conclude that only something of a kind can convert something else to its kind. Ultimately they both agree that “it is not the work of the just man to harm either a friend or anyone else... but of his opposite, the unjust man” (335 d) because heat does not know how to make something cool, the way good does not know how to make something bad.

After coming to this conclusion, Socrates and Polemarchus seem to leave this definition be as it is, as they move on to discuss Thrasymachus’s definition of justice. This leaves the ultimate conclusion of Polemarchus’s opinion that the just people give what is fitting, but if harm is fitting to an enemy, the just does not give them that. However, what is not explained is why harm is fitting to enemies. This relation is based on a preexisting idea held by both Socrates and

Polemarchus. If a just person is to give people what is fitting, and by some unstated law, friends and enemies and what is respectively fitting to them is defined, that person, by definition is just in giving what fits both parties. The idea that harm is fundamentally unjust and cannot possibly come from a just person makes logical sense but creates a contradiction at the core of Polemarchus's idea of justice.

This definition cannot be proven wrong or right, but it demonstrates that the definition of justice is reliant on its context. Like Socrates's example, if a friend asks for help to inflict harm, it is unjust to help. Not helping is what is fitting to the definition of justice. In that way, the definition exists in a way that removes the option of harm from a just decision. By contrast, one can say the person refusing to help their friend is unjust, because not helping is harming, and harming should only be done to enemies. Hence, Polemarchus's definition of justice has a fundamental flaw that disassembles its veracity. Overall, that attests to the inability for justice to have a constant definition.