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Polemarchus's Definition of Justice

"The Republic," written by Plato, is the first true work of political philosophy. The Republic's original title translates to "regime," a reference to how society is structured and ruled, which is the root of the idea of justice. "The Republic" gives an account of the human community and what surrounds it. In the first book, a conversation about the definition of justice takes place in which Polemarchus explains how to determine ownership. Ultimately, he concludes with Socrates that every aspect of his understanding of justice is relative. No finite set of terms can be applied to fit every situation of justice.

This conversation starts with Socrates being compelled to participate. Polemarchus has his slave approach Socrates to ask him to wait to speak to Polemarchus. With this, Plato symbolically sets up the context for a dispute of justice because a slave is in a position of political domination. Then, Polemarchus threatens Socrates and Glaucon into a conversation. This threat of violence is implicitly playful because Glaucon and Polemarchus are brothers. After some dialogue between Socrates and Polemarchus, Glaucon works out a compromise with his brother. Through this, Socrates is arrested because Glaucon and Polemarchus establish a legal framework, or agreement, by which Socrates is expected to operate. This agreement prevents violence, and without its playful implications, this situation would be viewed as an injustice. Therefore, Plato has this theoretical discussion of justice take place under an act of injustice, instead of within a casual conversation, because justice is often never mentioned until an injustice takes place.

Socrates and Cephalus have a conversation that sets the foundation for the themes of justice to follow. Cephalus represents the ancestral, meaning what has been passed down over time. Plato symbolizes this by emphasizing Cephalus's old age and recent sacrifice. Cephalus

introduces the theme of body and speech when he says, “I want you to know that as the other pleasures, connected with the body, wither away from me, the desires and pleasures that have to do with speeches grow the more” (328 d). However, as Cephalus’s answers to Socrates’ questions center on wealth, it is presumable that he handles old age well because he has money, not because of his character. It is rarely pleasant how wealth is accumulated, alluding to a possibly unjust foundation of the ancestral representation’s comfort. Cephalus also centers the city in his answers, referring to the human community and, more specifically, the political community, which combines the body and speech using the city and its human beings as a bond. These themes are the foundation of the discussion of justice.

“What is justice?” means “How can the wrong done to us be rectified?”. “What is the best way of organizing the human community such that it is just?” This idea refers back to the title of this work. To ask about justice is to ask what makes a community a community. No society can ask what justice is; most citizens will not because it is challenging the tradition. Similarly to justice, one only challenges tradition when there is something wrong. However, the ancestral cannot win against philosophy. One may assume that for Socrates to ask these questions, he must know the answer. Instead, in the following conversations, he pulls out the implied definitions of justice based on what the other person says. Then, he asks, “Is it this?” In this conversation, he extracts the implied definition from the representative of the ancestral. For, in any case, one can only share their own definition of justice; a universal one does not exist.

Cephalus says the greatest benefit of his wealth is that he can afford to make any sacrifice and die without owing anyone; these ideas refer to ownership. This part of their dialogue soon raises the concern that ownership must be defined to determine what is owed before something can be given back, which Polemarchus attempts to do. Ownership also relates to the body

because there is nothing someone owns that cannot be taken from them, except their body. Again, this conversation highlights the ancestral's inability to win against philosophy in an argument about justice because the topic is vulnerable to interrogation and ambiguity; no answer can be justified. That is why Cephalus doesn't argue with Socrates and instead leaves. Here, Plato expels the ancestral representative to create space for a rational conversation about political order, separate from tradition and in union with philosophy.

Polemarchus is Cephalus's son and bases his definition of justice on that of Cephalus and Simonides. He reframes Simonides' idea to focus on ownership, stating "that it is just to give to each what is owed," eliminating his father's idea of returning something. Socrates then gets him to agree that Simonides's idea of giving what is owed is actually giving what is fitting to each and, therefore, what is fitting to each is what they're owed. Socrates calls the statement a riddle because it is impractical. If society says one is owed what is fitting, it has to give them that of which is fitting. To explain, if a person deems it fitting for another to have a million dollars, one can argue that that person owes them the million dollars. Finally, Polemarchus admits to Socrates, after questioning, that he believes the definition of justice is the rendering of benefit to friends and harm to enemies.

They then explore the three aspects of the statement, starting with rendering, which defines the relationship between domains. If justice operates on a domain, on what domain is a just person an expert? They conclude that there is no domain of justice because there is no domain where a just man is superior to an expert. Instead, it is based on the community between people. Justice is implicitly relational because nobody is statically just by themselves.

Next, they define friends and enemies. The original idea in Polemarchus's definition of justice implied that those who seem good are friends and those who seem bad are enemies.

However, people make mistakes, and friends betray each other because man is fundamentally flawed. Humans may trust someone who doesn't mean well or not trust someone who does. Given that, Socrates refines the explanation by stating, "it is just to do good to the friend, if he is good, and harm to the enemy if he is bad" (335a), to which Polemarchus agrees. Still, friends and enemies are relative to relationships and not constant.

Finally, they discuss harm and benefit. Socrates maintains that one should not harm anyone, friend or enemy, because harming people makes them worse and more unjust, which is never a just thing. He also draws a semantic distinction between the virtue of a dog and horse, essentially saying, "harm a dog with the virtue of the dog and harm a horse with the virtue of a horse." This statement exemplifies the different meanings of harm depending on what is inflicted on, maintaining the idea of relativity. What may harm a dog may not harm a horse and vice versa. Conclusively, there is no isolated harm or benefit outside of context. The human community determines what actions are harmful and prohibited.

Polemarchus' argument explains how to determine ownership. The conclusive implication they came to after Socrates's questioning is that everything is relative. There is no static just man or domain of justice, there is no static friend or enemy, and there is no static measurement of harm or justification for harm. In essence, it all depends. From Cephalus's answers, Socrates extracted a double-pronged definition of justice using Polemarchus and Thrasymachus's responses because they did not contradict. Still, the question remains whether both definitions are constantly just or sometimes unjust. Plato is implying the radical idea that these definitions are only occasionally accurate. Depending on the context in which justice is being called upon, that may be true. Every relationship embraces the relativity of justice and its infinite definitions.