

Plato's republic

Philosophy



Thrasymachus takes the cynical but honest view, that there is more benefit in plainly appearing just than there is in actual being just. He does not necessarily refer to hypocritical villains, those who deliberately nurture a veneer of a socially just man in order to reap personal benefit. He could also be referring to those who have convinced themselves that they are good, apart from society recognizing them as good. As an example of the first we could take Moliere's Tartuffe. He has entered the household of Orgon with deliberate intent to appropriate for himself the property of his landlord.

He takes note of the superficial natures of Orgon and his mother, both of them who are fond of shows of piety and uttering platitudes. He tailors his conduct exactly to please these two. He makes sure that religion is always pouring from his lips. His conduct is always immaculate in the presence of them, and he is never short of advice to the others, who hold him in various degrees of suspicion, regarding the pious and just life. Tartuffe is not only a hypocrite but also a calculating villain. He is the sort that works his way to social standing and privilege by express knowledge that the larger part of society is weak to such charms.

It is easy to see that anyone in Tartuffe's position would lose out by trying to be really just to those he encounters. The counter argument to this is that villains like Tartuffe are usually found out in the end, and therefore suffer in the long run, at the hands of the same society. For example, Tartuffe overreaches himself when he tries to seduce the wife of Orgon, while at the same time courting their daughter. When he is found out he loses the favor of Orgon, after which point he resorts to outright villainy. But when

Thrasymachus argues for the appearance of virtue he also has the example of Orgon in mind.

For Orgon, and even more so for his mother, the appearance of virtue is the most important thing. So important is it to them that they do not realize that they are dealing with appearances. They believe themselves to be virtuous because they abide by the rules of conventional virtue and piety. Orgon is a wealthy man, and it is clear that his wealth is derived through his ability to adapt. He has no concern whether justice is really done, but only that it should appear to be done. He is so blinded by the show of virtue of Tartuffe that he does not even suspect ulterior motives in his lodger wanting to wed his daughter.

When the daughter complains he signs away his property to the lodger in a show of defiance. Of course, his blindness is the cause of his ruin in the end, which is shown for dramatic purposes. But the general argument remains, which is that the likes of Orgon prosper in society. He does not enquire into true justice, and any effort in this direction would disrupt his social standing from the root. The likes of Orgon happily give charity to murderers. The vanity of giving blinds them to all other considerations. The mistake of Thrasymachus is that he considers contingent benefits and fails to arrive at a comprehensive account.

To provide such an account is extremely difficult, and part of the difficulty is that the listener must have an open and enquiring mind to be able to grasp the subtleties of it. This is why Socrates (Plato) provides three different explanations of why the just life is preferable to the unjust one, and the three

responses are suited to the three different attitudes of the questioners. The rich Cephalus is smug in his righteousness that he repays his debts, and that he gives to charity. He is confrontational, and therefore it is only possible to contradict his smug assertions bluntly.

This is why Socrates merely asks him to consider whether the returning of a weapon to its rightful owner, a murderer, is justice. Thrasymachus is more constructive. He claims that justice is merely what the powerful impose on the weak. To this Socrates argues that all constructive activity has the powerful acting in favor of the weak, not the other way round, as Thrasymachus contends. If justice be admitted to be constructive then Thrasymachus' is plainly wrong. The more subtle argument concerning harmony is reserved for the honest enquiries of Adeimantus and Glaucon.

Justice is introduced now as a harmony in a body, where the ruling part subdues and controls the rest of the body, so that no part is in discord with another. The final notion is not easy to grasp, for it seems to imply that rulers must have complete wisdom in order to rule, for only with complete wisdom will they be infused with the sense of harmony that is required to effect justice. As a first example we take a football team. The manager of the team is the ruling part of this body. If he can effect harmony here, between all the players, and each of them with himself, then the team will win consistently.

But this very success is bound to bring problems. If the team is so good that it never loses, then after a point the players lose motivation, they become complacent. Only after a few bad losses are they able to regain their efficient

level again. Complacency, however, is the least evil. Success brings in its train a plethora of evils, all capable of disrupting the harmony. The players begin to nurture big egos and there are personality clashes. In dire circumstances they had all stuck together; but with success even the manager is not beyond reproach anymore.

Faced with all these problems the manager becomes more and more dictatorial rather than wise, and this in itself is a cause for disruption. The same is true of any organization. A company starting from scratch is fired with a zeal that is conducive to harmony amongst its employees. But we cannot call such a company absolutely harmonious before it begins to reap enormous profits, because harmony must be equated with success. We are applying the word "harmony" in the strict sense here, meaning that something in harmony cannot have discordant parts.

A company that is unprofitable is not in harmony. Only when it has reached the very top of the field can we begin to harbor such notions as perfect harmony. Then again, the higher it aspires the less and less is management able to maintain harmony. Managers themselves start to look after their own instead of the interests of the business. And so we observe in real life that managers award themselves huge pay packets even when the business is floundering. The arguments of Socrates are always in favor of universals and opposed to particulars.

Particular justice, or particular virtue, will not always make sense, but this is only because the all-encompassing or universal picture evades us. Socrates confesses that he does not know what justice is, or what virtue is, or what

truth is. To know these would mean having a universal idea in the mind, which is not possible. If the arguments of Socrates mean anything, they are means by which one comes to believe in the universal ideal, becomes convinced that it exists. And so one must not despair if injustice or untruth appears to have the upper hand. Skeptics may easily cast doubt on the existence of universals.

They might argue along the lines that we have no experience of universals. That all experience is particular and contingent, and that it is pedantic to introduce the notion of universals. They might say that all justice is merely a point of view. Different cultures evolve with different notions of justice, and this is the principle reason why nations go to war with each other, to fight for a particular notion of justice, or for certain ideas about beauty. The skeptics might argue that if there was a universal idea of justice then it would have been discovered by now and nations would live in peace.

In response to such arguments Plato would emphasize existence. For example, people use the word "table" in everyday discourse. It doesn't seem to spread confusion, but instead facilitates understanding. But this is strange, because there is no standard table in the world. All tables are different from each other. This difference is a source of confusion. And yet people from diverse cultures and diverse walks of life get away by simply mentioning the word "table", and things are immediately clear to all parties as to what is being said.

Such fluent communication would be impossible if not every mention of "table" was referring to a standard. And if this standard does not exist in the

material world, then it surely exists transcendentally, something which Plato calls the world of ideals. We could not imagine the ideal table, for every effort in this direction would spring up a particular table. But it is an overwhelming certainty that we have language and communication, in the place of confusion and chaos. This is how Plato confirms the existence of universals.

What is true of the word "table" is also true of the notions of justice, virtue and beauty. People hold relative notions of these, not only between cultures, but also between individuals of the same culture. The skeptics point to a cacophony in such matters, but they can never identify chaos. If difference was the norm, and no standard had ever prevailed, we must judge that there has been time enough for all structure to break down. But what we see in human society is miraculous as it is. The most miraculous structure of them all is the Republic.

People can always find fault in the way the state is run. But if they could see things plainly, free from every sort of bias, they could not help marvel at the very existence of the Republic. It is a place where individuals meet with common notions of justice, virtue and beauty. So the existence of the state is a testimony that universal justice exists, as do universal virtue and universal beauty. Plato uses the existence of the Republic to prove that universal justice exists, and that the just life is preferable to the unjust one.