

Plato's concept of justice



Aside from “reason,” the concept of justice is a common topic in every dialogue of Plato like in “Parmenides” and “Timaeus”. However, it is in “The Republic” that the concept of justice is intensively argued, scrutinized, and differentiated. Specifically, the dialogue on the essence of justice in “The Republic” is largely brought up by the challenging inquiries of Glaucon and Adeimantus. Glaucon, spoken as devil’s advocate, classified justice similarly to the goods chosen, not for the goods themselves, but for the other things that they may bring.

Glaucon argued that people do not want anyone to obstruct their unceasing desire for everything and only act in such a way that they avoid unjust treatment. As an analogy, he used the story of Gyges' ring, the ring that gives magical invisibility to its bearer. Anyone who becomes a possessor of that ring can hardly resist the temptation of becoming like a god among others. He or she, unrestrained by justice, will use the ring to satisfy his desires for everything. On the contrary, Socrates pointed out that justice, both in itself and what it brings is good while injustice, even unnoticed, is injurious.

Thus, to confute the impressive challenge of Glaucon, Socrates it is imperative to understand the essence of justice before one can really know whether justice is good in itself or it is good due to the things which come from it. However, to expound the Plato's concept of justice, the different gaps in his arguments are needed to be filled with the missing premises.

Historical Background In the ancient time, Greeks conceive justice through the poets' ideas like those of Hesiod. Hesiod described justice by conforming

to certain set of acts; to avoid Zeus' punishment and achieve his rewards, man must act in accordance with Zeus' will.

However, this concept of reward and punishment has lost its credibility during the late period of the fifth century. As people came to observe that most unjust men flourish as good citizens continue to suffer hardships and trials, they denounced the pre-conceived notion that rewards are given to the good doer while punishments are inflicted to the unjust. Consequently, as democracy in the Athenian society evolves, few Athens can hardly see to give importance on the afterlife and the questions on the essence of justice became a great controversy. This controversy was exacerbated by the Sophists who act as hired tutors for wealthy students.

Sophists denied the existence of the standards or objective truth concerning right and wrong. They rather treated morality and law as the bases of truth. For instance, Antiphon publicly declared that one must choose to be unjust for it is an advantage. Hence, Plato decided to defend justice against the Sophistic challenge. The Argumentation Thrasymachus claimed that justice is merely an advantage of the stronger citizens. In Book I, he argued that the societal norms and mores are merely conventions which serve as constraints for those who abide with them while others who ignore them are benefited.

Whereas the unjust people gain power, become strong and rulers in the society, the weak conform to the justice which places them in a disadvantaged position. Thrasymachus then believed that the justice's norms and mores are merely conventions promulgated by the strong, powerful people and the rulers to protect their own interest and keep the weak into

the state of oppression. On the other hand, the second book presented Thrasymachus' challenges not only to the standards of right and wrong but also on the Socrates' method of searching for the truth, the method of elenchus.

The Socrates' method of finding the truth commences by building up ideas from the people's beliefs. Thus, if Thrasymachus is impeccable with his notions, truth about justice is merely imposed by rulers. This gave a great task to Socrates to assert that justice is both good and desirable and it is more than conventions; rather, it is connected to the standards of morality and it is our advantage to adhere with it. In the progression of the argumentation in Plato's "The Republic," justice was discussed and described in different ways.

Some of these ideas were rejected for they inaccurately described justice. Hence, in the end, the argumentation does not only lead to what justice is but also defined what it is not. By analogy, the conception of justice was compared to the political structure of the city and the components of an individual. "Justice emerges from the relation of these parts in both the city and the individual." Although justice, in form, is not identical to the structure of the city or the form of the soul, the manner of the various parts of the soul or city must function imply the harmony that the justice could bring. Justice in the city and the individual's soul is the relating and functioning of parts in a systemic way to produce a graceful harmonious result. "In its comparison with the city, "justice is everyone doing one's part into the best of what he or she can and not meddling in others business". On the other hand, justice results when the three components of the soul function in a graceful manner.

Thus, as the individual parts of the soul and the city work properly, the resulting harmony is excellence in their function. This resulting excellence then is justice.

In the case that one of their integral parts does not function well, the entity or individual suffers resulting to the lack of justice. Justice then for the individual is internal as he or she tries to align it from the soul with his or her body's external actions which in turn directly affected by the external world; hence, a just person will not commit unjust actions. In such way, the internal justice of the person is directly affected by the external world. Moreover, Book I presented the conception of justice as an internal virtue and external quality with more complexities and implications.

The discussions of such can be directly seen from the propositions of Thrasymachus, Cephalus and Polemarchus which scrutinized by Socrates. Cephalus perceived justice as telling the truth and paying one's debts while Polemarchus proposed that " justice is giving each what is owed to them. " Socrates told is not always true as perceived by Cephalus for it could create disastrous results like in returning weapon to a mentally-defective person who could harm others and even herself or himself. Even the conception of Polemarchus is defective for it signifies the intention to help friends and to do harm to enemy.

Socrates argued that a just person must not do anything harm to anyone for he or she must do good things and doing harm to anyone is not good.

Nevertheless, Thrasymachus conceived justice as " the advantage of the stronger and obeying the rulers," which was contradicted by Socrates due to

its insufficiency. Thrasymachus' notion can also be stated as “ advantage of the stronger,” which requires a deeper interpretation. In this way, Thrasymachus suggested that justice can only be fully understood by a person in power. So as to become powerful and ruler, that person must possess knowledge in producing justice and ruling for his or her favor.

If the ruler has knowledge and knowledge is good, this goodness will lead everyone to happiness while happiness is ultimately justice. Looking gain at the proposition of Thrasymachus, he pointed out two essential things between the ruler and the ruled. First, the ruling group or person who will create laws is stronger and advantageous. Then, these laws inflict punishments to the ruled group which place them in a disadvantageous position. Thus, justice is compliance with the laws made by the rulers. As such, in the ideal world of Thrasymachus, the rulers pass laws for their favor and entirely for their own benefits.

On the other hand, the ruled group is mandated to obey the laws in order to avoid punishments and to achieve the collective good. By implementing this, the ruler helps the ruled group to attain internal personal justice as well as to help the city in pursuing justice for “ the individual justice echoes out to effect the city as a whole. ” Therefore, compliance with the laws is also justice. The “ good” for Thracymachus is doing what perceived to be good. Eve though there is no standard good, one must do things which bring profits and benefits to self.

On the other hand, the powerful can act the way they want for the laws are made for their own favor. Meanwhile, the soul's function is living. Everything

that functions has excellence and justice is the excellence of the soul. As well, the achievement of justice will eventually lead to the well-living and the happiness of a person. As justice leads to happiness and "just" person is also a happy one, the person has happiness if he or she has the sense on justice and the person is only "just" when he or she has happiness.

Therefore, Thrasymachus believed that happiness is the end goal.

Furthermore, Thrasymachus added that justice is only advantageous for the stronger and it is better to be unjust than just. Since getting more things bring happiness, it is better to get more in life. He suggested that if it is possible to act without the consequences of one's actions, anybody would transgress the set obligations and legal standards. Since laws are merely created to benefit the stronger, anybody may probably choose to act in a way which benefits him or her. In this manner, the person acts unjustly if in this way he or she will be benefited.

By living then in unjust manner the person will be benefited and eventually will attain happiness. These propositions of Thrasymachus were largely shaped by his position as a sophist with no morality standards or objective truth belief. Man is capable of pretending just externally but internally unjust. For Thrasymachus, this ability is an advantage because the person can obtain the external reward of pretending as just while simultaneously avoiding the consequences of being unjust internally. In addition, the unjust man can take the advantage of the "just" man in a similar fashion.

Thrasymachus set the example of a man who is a good tax payer and a law-abiding citizen as compared to the unjust tax evader who violated the law

due to the belief that laws are not beneficial to him or her. For Thrasymachus, this situation necessitates a special skill or craft which can be perfected through practice. That is, an individual can possibly perfect the skills of being unjust while simultaneously pretending as a just person. Originally, it was Polemarchus who assumed that justice is a craft or skill which was debunked by Socrates but in the same argument Thrasymachus has fallen.

Hence, by using the same analogy as with Polemarchus, Socrates was able to refute the proposition of Thrasymachus. Finally, at the end of Book I, Thrasymachus agreed with Socrates that a just man attains happiness while the unjust man falls into the trap of misery. As Thrasymachus retracted his previous propositions, Socrates further explained that the unjust man is unwise and ignorant. A wise man seeks the trail of other wise men that existed and made a path of wisdom; knowledge and wisdom must be achieved by a man to become just. Furthermore, Thrasymachus ideas of justice contradicted the Socrates' a band of thieves' analogy.

As injustice brings hatred, each member of the band of thieves will come to a moot point where they could hardly trust one another which eventually lead to misunderstanding and separation. If injustice results to such worst ending, we may say then that only justice can preserve love and unity among individuals. Thus, justice is again associated with the " good" while the injustice is to unbeneficial which denounced the notion of Thrasymachus that injustice is beneficial than justice. Therefore, Thrasymachus ultimately believed that the soul directs the person's life.

This means that an individual with a good soul lives a good and beneficial life while an individual with a bad soul has a miserable life. In connection to this, Socrates firmly stated that a just man has a better life than the unjust for “ justice is the peculiar excellence or virtue of the soul. ” Plato’s “ The Republic” presented a systematic analogy of the soul and the city. Plato proved that the human soul has various parts that work harmoniously. On the other hand, the city has different structures that work for the common good in order to attain peace and order and to avoid civil war.

Whereas the social structures of the city must collectively work for the common good, the components of the soul must maintain harmonious relationships for the achievement of a collective functional excellence. As the soul functions justly, it is working with excellence which is the utmost functional goal of the soul itself. The Nature of Actions As discussed above, man’s action is a basis of justice. Man acts in way to attain happiness and to avoid pain. As such, Plato believed that the supreme good is the ultimate goal of every human endeavor. What then is the “ good” for a man that can be possibly attained through his endeavors?

It is happiness but relatively defined; vulgar men associated it with pleasure while people with refined character ascribed it to honor. While these things are pursued to achieve happiness in one’s self, but “ good” should be pursued not only for happiness but for the “ good” itself---as an end. The “ good” brings happiness and is associated with function or activity. For instance, if you are a behest pianist then, you are good in playing piano for you are functioning well. The well-performance of your function creates

happiness not only for yourself but also for the others, thus, giving you a unique identity.

In the same line of reasoning, soul is an aspect of humans that differentiated them from the rest of the animals. Thus, man's function concerns the soul. The rational component of the soul controls man's impulses, thus, makes him virtuous. Therefore, " human good turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. " Meanwhile, the nature of man's actions was classified as voluntary, nonvoluntary and involuntary.

Involuntary actions are done against one's disposition; voluntary actions are in accordance with the disposition; and nonvoluntary actions are accidentally done due to ignorance. Since virtue governs one's disposition to act in accordance with the " good," the primary basis then of a virtuous action is the goodness of choice. For an action is always a product of premeditated choice of an individual for the attainment of one's purpose, it is therefore voluntary. This also satisfies the conditions that Plato believed are necessary for virtue: knowledge, volition, and doing.

On the other hand, if an individual was forced for a certain action, although seem involuntary, he is still responsible for that action for he has a choice for not doing. Meanwhile doing things because of ignorance is involuntary if at the end, one recognizes ignorance while failure to do so, makes it nonvoluntary. For instance, if a drunkard is addicted to liquor due to inability to discern virtuous things, the person then is guilty of ignorance and the

action is nonvoluntary. If at some point of time, the person realized his ignorance, the action then becomes involuntary.

With these, only ignorance can excuse an action to be called a vice but has limitation. If after realizing virtuous things, the person has continued to be a drunkard, then the action is voluntary and he is therefore vicious. It is common sense to us, for example, that insufficient food and water taken into the body results to poor nutrition while a balanced diet ensures good health. " So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and other virtues. " Avoidance of fears leads to timidity while extreme braveness endangers one's life; absolute abstinence creates insensibility while hedonism shapes one's indulgence.

Since wrong doings are committed due to pleasure and noble character is avoided due to pain, pleasures and pain then are subjects of every virtue. Just and temperate actions are done by a man who has the sense of justice and temperance. " But if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. " Several conditions are necessary for the conduct of every virtuous action: knowledge of virtues; disposition for virtuous actions; and power to do virtuous actions.

Hence, knowledge on virtues is not enough to become virtuous; rather, the disposition to put virtues into actions is a must. Limitations of Human Judgment Through the hierarchy of things here in the world, we perceive that several creatures are much better, thus, higher than the others: creatures that are alive are better than inanimate objects; living organisms that have

senses are much better than plants; and humans that are alive have senses, and have the gift of reason are much perfect to the rest of the creations.

However, even if we are the highest form of living organisms, we are not capable of an absolute understanding of reality. For we judge reality based the way we perceive things, beauty, truth or evil. In order to perceive, we make use of definite criteria that if are correct, entails the veracity of our judgment. Can we absolutely perceive the truth? In judging, we are guided by the truth but we do not judge the truth. The truth therefore is higher than us.

Nonetheless, in perceiving the truth, we must grasp with something that does not change (solid basis). For if our basis changes, the left over is just a part of the truth. This is also true in perceiving the real essence of justice. In trying to explain free choices through other things may limit the rationale for the true justice. For different things may require different explanations. Hence, in trying to conceive for the real sense of justice, this may lead us to a perilous situation that is substituting vagueness to its real essence.