

The concept of justice

[Law](#), [Justice](#)



Socrates and Aristotle both have contrasting views of the concept of justice which serves to influence their notions of an ideal constitution. The abstract, speculative ideas of Socrates will be compared and contrasted with the practical, sensory ones of Aristotle in matters concerning justice and politics. Both Aristotle and Socrates disagree with regards to the definition of justice and what qualities are attributed to a just person. According to Aristotle, a just person must follow the law and refrain from greed. In the opinion of Socrates, greed consists of taking more than what is required to survive.

He stresses the importance of prudence and temperance in the lives of a just person. Aristotle, however, states that a greedy person is someone who does not understand the difference between taking what is good and what is not good. A wealthy person can also be just. Aristotle provides two different types of justice which he labels distributive and rectifactory justice.

Distributive justice is concerned with the distribution of money, honour, and other resources amongst those who have a share in public organization.

Equality is of the greatest importance when distributing goods.

Rectifactory justice concerns transactions between individuals in which both parties mutually exchange goods or services. Through both of these means Aristotle seeks to provide justice in the written law of his polis which is devoted to the advantage of all. However, Socrates views justice as the harmonious parts of the person or of a city. A just man, therefore, is in just the right place and doing his best to perform his function. He claims that the function of a human being is deliberation, ruling, living, and taking care of things.

The ideas of Aristotle differ greatly from this perspective. He states that the human function is to perform activities that express reason. Socrates views his ideal city in which every person performs his or her function. His views pertain to the community in which a person lives while Aristotle's views are more individualistic as someone who expresses reason in his logic can do so without other people or his community. In the Republic, Socrates attempts to illustrate his views with the parable of the ship.

The unjust city is like an open ocean crewed by a powerful but drunken captain (representing the ignorant common people), a group of untrustworthy advisors (politicians), and a navigator (the philosopher). The only way the ship will reach its destination, the good, is if the navigator takes charge. Philosophers, who are lovers of wisdom, should rule because they understand what is good and just. It is also the opinion of Socrates that people who have been the victims of injustice are more likely to become unjust themselves.

He disagrees with the notion that returning debts owed, helping friends, and harming enemies are not suitable reasons for doing injustice: " So if someone tells us it is just to give to each what he is owed and understands by this that a just man should harm his enemies and benefit his friends, the one who says it is not wise. I mean, what he says is not true. For it has become clear to us that it is never just to harm anyone" (Plato, Republic, 335e). A wise person would understand that it is not beneficial to his soul to do injustice only to his enemies.

A wise person, according to Socrates would never harm anyone. He maintains that a kind just ruler judges what is best for his people and holds their interests in greater esteem than his friends or family: "... No one in any position of rule... considers or enjoins what is advantageous for himself, but what is advantageous for his subjects" (Plato, Republic, 342e). A ruler who performs acts of injustice is, by nature, more prone to corruption and tyranny. In this way he gives increased support to his argument concerning philosophers as rulers of the polis.

Socrates and Aristotle also differ in their opinions as to which form of government is best to rule the polis. Socrates defends the notion that the city would best be governed by the philosopher-kings; a group of people who had endured rigorous mental and physical training for the majority of their lives. They would govern together as a group or an oligarchy. Aristotle recognizes the fact that it is possible for an oligarchy to degenerate into a tyranny, which is the worst possible state. He recommends the formation of a polity or a democracy as the lesser of two evils.

Socrates draws a fine line between ignorance and wisdom. It is, in fact, recognizing what one does not know from what one knows. Therefore, if one cannot recognize the virtue of justice, one must be said to be ignorant: "... if justice is indeed wisdom and virtue, it will be easy to show, I suppose, that it is stronger than injustice, since injustice is ignorance" (Plato, Republic, 351a). Wisdom is undoubtedly the more esteemed when compared with ignorance and consequently justice must be better esteemed than injustice. However, Socrates is confronted with arguments in favour of injustice.

He attempts to defend justice as being more profitable than injustice: "... that to do injustice is naturally good and to suffer injustice bad... The best is to do injustice without paying the penalty; the worst is to suffer it without taking revenge" (Plato, Republic, 358e). In other words, it is acceptable and encouraged for someone to perform acts of injustice as long as he is not found out and does not suffer the consequences. If however, an act of injustice is carried out against someone, it is the duty of the victim to take revenge on him.

Socrates points out that this course of action leads only to unimportant material gain. Thrasymachus claims that committing acts of injustice without being caught is more profitable to one's reputation and would allow one to achieve more. Socrates acknowledges that although a person engaging in injustice will most likely become wealthy in physical attributes, he lacks the fundamental virtues and characteristics of a good man. The virtue of something is the state or property that makes it good. For instance, the virtue of a man may include his intelligence, courage, or sense of justice.

Justice, in this case, is a moral behaviour which is said to belong to virtuous people. Therefore, justice itself is a virtue. Thrasymachus' argument has no merit because a man who strives to achieve more by acquiring material wealth through committing acts of injustice lacks the more esteemed virtues of wisdom and justice. It is also the opinion of Socrates that just people are happier and live better lives than unjust ones. He is, of course, talking about the happiness of the soul rather than its shell, the body. Much as the virtue of the eyes is to see and the virtue of the ears to hear, the virtue of the soul is

justice: “... justice is a soul’s virtue and justice its vice” (Plato, Republic, 353e).

It is more profitable for a person to be just than unjust, as he will be giving his soul its virtue and therefore living a happy life. Better is the poor man with a good just soul than the rich man who has made his wealth through vice with a tainted soul. However, it must be pointed out that although Socrates claims that justice leads to happiness, he deprives the rulers of his city of happiness, though they are supposed to be trained in justice and wisdom. As Aristotle states: “... even though Socrates deprives the guardians of their happiness, he says that the legislator should make the whole city-state happy.

But it is impossible for the whole to be happy unless all, most, are some of its parts are happy” (Aristotle, Politics, 1264b). Socrates thought it was crucial that the guardians were not given the sort of happiness which would no longer make them guardians. For a potter who is given jewels and riches no longer practices the art of pottery and so is no longer considered a potter. Likewise, a guardian must not be given wealth or earthly comforts but remain content with his role.

Aristotle argues that even if the guardian class is not happy, it is impossible for the craftsmen, farmers, and lower classes to be happy. Without happiness, there is no justice. Socrates also claims that just people are able to work together in order to achieve a common goal. He maintains that just people working together are able to get along without doing injustice amongst themselves: “... just people are wiser and better and more capable

of acting, while unjust ones are not even able to act together” (Plato, Republic, 352c).

Injustice causes factions, hatreds, and quarrels among people and friends. A band of robbers with a common unjust purpose would not be able to achieve it if they are unjust amongst themselves. Injustice provides conditions in which it is impossible for people to work together. Therefore, injustice prevents the different parts of the soul from working together toward a common goal. In the case of friendship and justice, Socrates and Aristotle seem to be in mutual accord. Aristotle believes friendship and comradeship to be one of the key components of leading a good life.

He viewed justice as the equitability or fairness in interpersonal relations. Virtuous habits can be acquired within a moral community which ultimately leads to a virtuous and moral life. Socrates believes that the nature of the state is analogous with the nature of the individual and the nature of the soul. The soul comprises of three key principles which he calls reason, appetite, and spirit. Justice in the individual is harmony among the principles of the soul achieved by rationality and reason.

He believes that the guardians have achieved harmony within their souls and so must be considered just. Since the faculties of an individual correspond on a smaller scale to that of the state, justice must also exist in the individual. Socrates believes in unity, as expressed by his confidence in the ability of just people to work together and of the family structure in the Republic. Women and children are to be shared communally by the guardians. No one

woman, child, or possession is to belong to one man but rather to be shared by the whole.

The well-being of the polis is placed before the well-being of an individual. Aristotle agrees that unity needs to be present to a certain extent within a city but alleges that a man who can call something his own takes more pride in it. He loves a son he can call his own more than a boy who is a son of every man. He also takes more pride in his work when he knows that what he is producing will benefit himself and his family. Socrates claims that temperance is the path to happiness and virtue and a person should only own what he needs to live temperately.

Aristotle disagrees with this notion and states that it is possible to live temperately and wretchedly; the lack of property does not necessarily lead to a good life. A good person can be good even independently of the society. However, a good person is a good citizen and a good citizen can exist only as a part of the social structure. In this way, the state is, in a sense, prior to the citizen. It is evident Socrates and Aristotle share the common belief that justice is undoubtedly more beneficial than injustice. However, their definitions of justice vary greatly.

The main and most crucial difference between the perspectives of Aristotle and Socrates is their view of friendship and unity. Aristotle believes that the virtue of justice encompasses all other virtues because it treats the interactions between people rather than just the dispositions of the individual. Socrates believes that the virtue of justice is first and foremost beneficial to one's soul. Despite their contrasting views, both Aristotle and

Socrates believe that justice is one of the highest and most sought after virtues. If one is to have a good life, one must be just.