

The more convincing theory of justice



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Justice has always been a major subject for debates and exploration among philosophers and for centuries. Plato and Aristotle, the two most important philosophers of Western civilisation are the earliest to investigate different dimensions of justice and develop their own theories respectively. Before a closer examination of their concepts, one must first define the term. Justice is defined as “ just behaviour or treatment ” and “ the quality of being fair and reasonable”.^[1]In the following essay, both the Platonic and Aristotelian theory of justice in the state and individual will be discussed and their possible law will also be analysed to achieve an objective conclusion on whose theory is more convincing.

Plato (427 BC-347 BC) is one of the founding figures of Western philosophy and is well-known for his work “ The Republic”, in which he noted the qualities of an ideal state and a just individual by presenting his theory of justice through the words of Socrates. Plato’s aim of The Republic is to explain that we have to be just in all circumstances, for being just is always in our best interest. Through describing the perfectly functioning state, it is obvious that Plato supports the system of rigid social hierarchy. This is seen through his assertion that cooperation amongst citizens of different classes to serve the common good is the key to achieve a successful state and thus attain social justice. The wants of individuals are therefore fulfilled when each citizen performs their duty for which he or she is best suited, eventually bringing the greatest happiness for all its citizens. Moreover he views justice, wisdom, bravery and moderation as the four essential virtues that enable a city to flourish.. Plato opines that wise and rational citizens ought to be the rulers of the city. Whereas those who are strong, and therefore best at

physically demanding activities, should make up the auxiliary class – with the virtue of courage to defend the city against enemies. Those who are good at natural crafts such as: farming, trading, mining should have the virtue of moderation and exercise their duty to satiate the requirements of the society. Finally, in order to achieve social justice, each citizen has to carry out their own functions in the society and not to attempt in meddling with the work of another. On the other hand, justice of an individual according to Plato is achieved when “ each part of their soul performs its proper function, with the result that the individual attains psychological harmony”. [2] This allows a person to be content and complete, without any desire to perform unjust actions.

Aristotle (384 BC- 322BC), a student of Plato and one of the the founder of modern Western ideology, holds different views on the subject of justice. According to his famous work “ The Nicomachean Ethics”, there are two distinct forms of justice – lawfulness [universal justice] and equality [particular justice]. Aristotle argues that that laws, which include ethical virtue aim either at the common good of the state or those in authority, therefore, it promotes and protect happiness of the political community. [3] He further pointed out that in a correct constitution, justice promotes the common advantages of all citizens but in a deviant constitution, it only promotes advantages to oligarch and the wealthy ruling class. Equality, on the other hand, involves three specific forms of justice that affect common advantages of the society – distributive, corrective and commutative justice. The first form of justice involves in distributing common assets in a just proportion among people in accordance with their merits, while the second

form amends any previous unjust transaction between citizens to restore fairness. Lastly, commutative justice is found in communities of exchange, where citizens transact in equal terms. In addition, Aristotle places a strong emphasis on the close connection between constitution and justice as he states “ all constitutions are a form of justice, for [a constitution is] a community, and everything common is established through justice”.

[4]According to his work “ The Politics”, justice is being referred to as the communal virtue, which presents itself in the most perfect form of community, i. e. The political community. Justice in this sense is aimed at concerning the goods of others and is the most perfect form.

Having explained both Plato’s and Aristotle’s respective theories of justice it is evident that Plato pursues the construction of a Utopian city state with emphasis on inner personal development as a contributing member of society, whereas the latter is more pragmatic and grounded in reality. Plato uses dialogues and point-counterpoints as argumentation to clarify his principle of justice in The Republic, yet, the definition of justice throughout the whole book is ambiguous as Plato never defines the term clearly.

Therefore, while he stimulates readers’ thinking on what is just and unjust, it is Aristotle who elucidates how.

Critics argue that Plato’s theory of justice has nothing to do with the ordinary understanding of the term, which is to act with some regard for the good of others. Rachel Singpurwalla substantiates this, asserting that “ Plato cannot assuage our worries about justice by giving an account of it that ignores this essential other regarding aspect of justice”.[5]Moreover, Plato emphasized inner personal relations rather than interpersonal relations as he stated,” its

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[justice's] real concern is not with external actions, but with a man's inward self, his true concern and interest" (Plato 161) ".[6]In fact it is the connection with others in the society that defines the ordinary sense of justice. For that reason when comparing Plato's concept of justice with a typical understanding of it, the former only provides us a reason to have a just soul, but fails to address the reasons to give the good to others.

Furthermore, Plato's theory is self-contradictory. The aim of *The Republic* is to show that justice is always in our best interest. However, individuals with just and rational souls ought to be the Guardians in his ideal functioning society. These philosophers rule the city simply because it is their duty and it is just to do so. They must fully dedicate themselves, sacrificing personal ambitious, family life and personal properties to promote welfare of the state. In this context, it does seem that a just individual sacrifices his/her self-interest for the common good. On the basis of this, Plato failed to explain why people should be just as it is not always in our best interests, contradicting the purpose of writing his book.

In Plato's ideal state the submission and subordination of personal desire are seen as essential in the construction of a successful society. The interests and rights of the individual citizen are largely overlooked, especially the bottom of the social class and slaves. While in contemporary society, where we are taught that everyone is equal, Plato's rigid social hierarchy system and the disregard of social rights may not be accepted by everyone. Plato's ideal social system is emblematic of low class mobility and overlooks the dissent that would be caused by keeping the lower classes and slaves in their position- with minimal prospects. Finally, Plato's theory of justice is too

idealistic and is almost inapplicable to modern society while the idea of the just individual is unattainable to many. If a theory was neither applicative nor achievable, then it is unconvincing for people to follow.

In contrast, Aristotle approaches the subject of justice systematically and provides classification of his theory to help understanding his theory, although some argue that different people may have various interpretation of his specific forms of particular justice. For instance, people may disagree on the correct proportion when distributing common assets among social groups. This problem arises not because of Aristotle's defective analysis of particular justice, but rather the different value inputs into the system. His theory of justice can also be applied to different classes in the society. The practice constitution and law provides a fair framework of interests and rights for individuals, as well as safeguards citizen's basic rights and happiness. As a result, when comparing Plato's idealistic concept with Aristotle's empirical model of justice, people will have more confidence in the latter, a society which bounded and safeguarded by just laws

Essentially, it will be argue that Aristotle's theory of justice is more convincing not only because it is applicable to every social class and the contemporary society, but most importantly, it allows citizens to pursue their values and realise their highest nature, providing them a higher degree of satisfaction and achieving a good life. Plato's theory is therefore, comparatively philosophical and idealistic, neglecting the general interests and rights of citizens.

(1450 words)