

# A defense of plato's idea of the good in his republic



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The main prompt or assertion provided in the lecture notes, being “ Whatever might be its philosophical value, the idea of the Good has no political relevance,” goes completely against Plato’s philosophical tenets and contrasts sharply with his two major syllogisms concerning the idea of the Good and the relevancy of the Good in a political environment. Thus, it is the aim of this paper to defend Plato’s viewpoint as presented in the concluding comments in Book One and the opening arguments in Book Two of his Republic with the assistance of Plato’s supportive dialogues with Polemarchus and Thrasymachus and the refutations of Glaucon and Adeimantus. In Book One, the passage related to justice demonstrates Socrates’ powerful intellect and his unflinching skepticism. The conversation itself seems to end at several points with no clear-cut conclusions, such as when Socrates says “ The just is happy, and the unjust miserable? So be it. But happiness and not misery is profitable. . . injustice can never be more profitable than justice.” What appears to be functioning here is a type of irony in which Socrates and his fellow conversationalist accept without hesitation certain opinions that otherwise leave the reader pondering their vapid conclusions. With Polemarchus’ definition of the conventional morality of justice (“ It is just to do good to our friends and harm to our enemies. . . It is just to do good to our friends when they are good and harm to our enemies when they are evil,” the vulnerability of the speakers can be seen in their separate terminology. Yet not surprisingly, Socrates probes every single deviation and term, thus exposing all weaknesses and limitations in his search for the absolute Truth. In essence, it is Socrates’ prodding that leads Thrasymachus to accuse Socrates of only answering his questions with another question. Socrates’ response quickly clarifies the situation, for he

expresses “ And the result of the whole discussion has been that I know nothing at all. For I know not what justice is, and therefore I am not likely to know whether it is or is not a virtue, nor can I say whether the just man is happy or unhappy.” Plato, on the other hand, appears to acknowledge a great deal in contrast to Socrates’s admission that he “ knows nothing.” The core argument in the Republic revolves around the first of Plato’s syllogisms- A: To be happy, one must participate in the Good; B: To participate in the Good, one must be just; C: Therefore, to be happy, one must be just.” This statement is diametrically opposed to that of Polemarchus, for if an individual is truly good and just as a result of being happy, then any slights or acts of retaliation against an enemy is an unjust act. The second definition of justice is obtained via the dialogue of Thrasymachus in his justification for tyranny, where he declares “ that in all states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government. . . . (thus), the only reasonable conclusion is that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the strong.” This declaration, like that of Polemarchus, is directly opposed to that of Plato and Socrates, who suggests that the stronger may not always be aware of his influence on his lesser subjects, thus making it necessary for the weaker to disobey him. The conversation then progresses to the point where tyranny (perfect injustice) and benevolent rule (perfect justice) are juxtaposed against one another. But Socrates, via a set of examples, prevails once again, for he states that justice is not in the best interest of the stronger, due to “ the conclusion that the weaker are commanded to do” what, in the long-term, “ is for the injury of the stronger.” This illustrates that the pride and ambition of the unjust man are symbols of his weakness; the just man, however, while being

manipulated by the strong, remains humble, wise and objective. In the final stage of the conversations in Book One, Socrates strives to prove that the life of man must be based on justice and not injustice. For this, he utilizes the age-old analogy of the human soul as a symbol of perfection during his discourse with Thrasymachus: “ And we have admitted that justice is the excellence of the soul, and injustice the defect of the soul. . . the just soul and the just man will live well, and the unjust man will live ill. . . And he who lives well is blessed, and he who lives ill the reverse of happy. . . (thus) injustice can never be more profitable than injustice.” All of this juxtaposition, however, still draws no conclusive answers as to the nature of justice, mainly due to the fact that such an extrapolation into justice is in itself a mere abstract concept which according to Plato deserves to be placed in some other spatial dimension beyond what can be objectively defined. In Book Two of Plato's Republic, the conversation between the participants take on a more intellectual approach, due to Glaucon, one of Plato's staunchest supporters, immersing himself in true argumentation in order to arrive at some type of consociation between the parties. Glaucon asserts that “ man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him. . . but of necessity, for whenever anyone thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust.” Yet this declaration can be viewed from another perspective as asserted by William S. Broadman: “ The requirements of justice are not creatures of human decision. . . Thus, the trouble with Glaucon is that he does not even begin to understand what communal justice is all about” (Forms in Plato's Republic, Internet). At this point, Adeimantus, the second of Plato's unswayable supporters, interjects with some lines of poetry from the Greek masters in order to broaden Glaucon's

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argument. He roundly asserts that parents are constantly telling their children to be just “ not for the sake of justice, but for the sake of character and reputation,” for the noble Hesiod “ says that the Gods make the oaks of the just.” Here, Glaucon is re-emphasizing his cultural roots and traditions which do not contain, at least in his mind, any relevant examples of true and selfless justice. Thus, after arriving at no definite conclusions on the just, the unjust, justice and injustice, Socrates commences on his quest to construct his personal ideal of the Utopian state where justice will be balanced out against injustice and all individuals will be tried for their just or unjust ways. “ A State,” according to Plato, “ arises. . . . out of the needs of mankind; no one is self-sufficing. . . let us begin and create in idea a State; and yet the true creator is necessity. . . the mother of our invention.” This assertion then leads us to the second important syllogism devised by Plato, being A: Human happiness equals the good life; B: Knowledge of the Good is necessary for living the good life; C: Philosophers and only philosophers know the Good; D: Therefore, only if philosophers rule will the polis (the city) be led toward the good life and human happiness.” This syllogism was created via Plato's premise that Good does exist and can be demonstrated as existing, and that only philosophers can truly have a knowledge of the Good. As part of this, Plato also maintains that “ an evil soul must necessarily be an evil ruler. . . and the good soul a good ruler.” And here we can also move back to the main prompt or assertion at the beginning of this paper, namely “ Whatever might be its philosophical value, the idea of the Good has no political relevance.” With this in mind, consider the viewpoint of W. H. D. Rouse: “ Robbery and violence are normally called ‘ injustice,’ but when they are practiced. . . by rulers, they are justice. . . When we consider ordinary

citizens “ the just man comes off worse than an unjust man”. . . Since the rulers do not obey the principles. . . they are. . . “ unjust” (137). Therefore, Plato's two syllogisms seem to be dependent upon one another and often converge into a single philosophical paradigm. In relation to the prime assertion, the question of whether knowledge of the Good is politically relevant can be answered in the affirmative, for if Plato had his way, society would be organized and operated by the so-called “ philosopher kings” who understand the connections between being good, just and objective. Yet even with these enlightened persons “ in charge,” the right and proper “ opinion” would only work for a limited sphere of possibilities, especially those associated with the familiar, while true knowledge, even that held by the unjust and those without Good, will always work. Bibliography Boardman, William S. Forms in Plato's Republic. Internet. Retrieved December 20, 2002. [www.lawrence.edu/fac/boardman/FORMS\\_Republic.html](http://www.lawrence.edu/fac/boardman/FORMS_Republic.html). Jowett, Benjamin, trans., The Project Gutenberg Etext of the Republic by Plato. Internet. Retrieved January 26, 2003. <ftp://sailor.gutenberg.org/pub/gutenberg/etext98/repub11.txt>. Rouse, W. H. D. Great Dialogues of Plato. New York: New American Library, 1956.