

How might makes right:

A case against Plato regarding justice being the advantage of the stronger

by

Vladimir Bilenjki

Prof. Hailey Murphy

AS/POLS 2900B

Tuesday November 15th, 2016

In Plato's *Republic*, Thrasymachus states "that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" (Plato 1.338c). While Socrates follows this up with strawman arguments, Thrasymachus insists rulers decide the laws which govern justice in alignment to their system, hence, justice serves the advantage of the system and those in power. Throughout *Republic*, Socrates discusses how justice can serve the citizens of an ideal society, the kallipolis, to reach eudemonia through virtuous social order. However, Thrasymachus' claims are more correct than Socrates' because they are true at all levels of society, while Socrates' arguments work when a content society operates at the mean. By examining the fallacy of Plato's argument for the kallipolis, deductively engaging the concept of justice and proving how might ultimately makes right, this essay will deconstruct *Republic's* notion of justice and apply justice to objective society at all levels in order to understand the truth in Thrasymachus' statement. If not instinctual, the chief administration of justice on an individual basis, meaning removed from society, is based on its alignment with one's virtues; virtues being the constituents of eudemonia. The kallipolis, the central focus of *Republic*, must be a luxurious city that fosters eudemonia so that no one would care to deal injustice regardless of their strength. This argument neglects the core facets of human nature, namely ambition. Before examining these core facets, it is only fair to assess Plato's argument for justice in the kallipolis.

Adeimantus stresses the goal of the kallipolis is "to make everyone as happy as his nature allows" and that the pursuit of "justice in it is guaranteed not to be futile" (94)¹ because justice is one of its established virtues, alongside wisdom, courage and moderation. While these four virtues are both individualistic and systematic, justice is most clearly defined systematically because of society's written law. As concrete and mostly irrefutable order, all citizens in the

kallipolis are subject to obey its laws, while wisdom, courage and moderation can be seen as positive but ultimately unrequired qualities for its subjects; they are only required of ruling citizens who participate in administering justice and engaging with the law. Although the kallipolis requires guardians (wisdom) and auxiliaries (courage) to uphold social order between the classes (temperance), the philosopher king is the ultimate voice that cannot be disputed because of his perfect election and perfection of virtues. The philosopher king must work towards the goal of eudemonia for all his subjects respectively. However, the complacency of the “iron or bronze” castes that include “craftsmen and farmers” (3.415b), whose election to guardianship would ruin the city, disregards their carnal desires that are actually just, chiefly ambition. The people will “establish as guardians those who are clearly capable of guarding the laws and ways of life of the city” (6.484c) in spite of Glaucon’s wrong belief that citizens can be excluded from these positions by their nature because in reality philosophic nature is not quantifiable. These positions must be reserved for any competent person of fair election who is not a criminal serving punishment because any further restriction, the individual’s nature in this case, will leave the masses who serve the kallipolis of a philosopher king that instills goodness, and not fear, disgruntled. *Republic* argues that good action and virtue endows one with eudemonia while reasoning that it is more rewarding to be just than unjust. One cannot expect a citizen to be just when a city is unjust by not allowing all its citizens opportunity to ascend the ranks of rulership. The democratic will of the people will ultimately filter out the most virtuous ruler. While the philosopher king is essentially the most capable ruler whose creed would be indisputably good, the fact that the will of the people as a whole is not constantly acknowledged as it is with election cycles is a grave misgiving in Plato’s idealistic philosophy.

Without fear of their ruler and with great disgruntlement, upsetting their temperance, the citizens can overthrow the ruler when their exclusion turns to bitterness. Because “those who practice justice do it unwillingly and because they lack the power to do injustice”, the philosopher king’s duty is to level the playing field by suppressing “the desire to outdo others and get more [which] is what anyone’s nature naturally pursues as good” (2.359c). Law is an insufficient means to this end; the people must earnestly be made good under the philosopher king’s rule. The desire to outdo others cannot categorically make ambition a negative quality because the philosopher, who sees “others filled with lawlessness [and] is satisfied if he can somehow lead his present life free from injustice” (6.496d), must accept the ambition of his countrymen to be their king in order to serve the greatest good. Since “the majority cannot be philosophic” (6.494a) within the kallipolis’ eugenic structure in which only noble offspring are spared orgiastic conception, the son of the philosopher king will assume power after his father. Because “the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible” (5.459d), no one would “dispute [Socrates’] view that the offspring of kings or rulers could be born with philosophical natures” (6.502a). He will uphold virtue within the kallipolis while the people will elect guardians and auxiliaries that are “liable to error” (1.339c) would elect the chosen philosopher king. The subsequent philosopher king will be groomed by the current one, making the kallipolis a monarchy. The expectation that these subsequent kings will make the citizens obedient not by restricting their law, rather making them inherently good, still keeps this singular ruler in an idyllic position over his society that places him on an unattainable pedestal. It is a story as old as Plato; about Adam and Eve who live in paradise but may not take a bite of the forbidden fruit. It seems Plato’s kallipolis has the same fault as God’s Eden in its intelligent

design. And when these good souls dare bite the fruit, they became mere mortals who in due time witness the first injustice occur between their kin. As with God, Plato's world has an afterlife that would hold "prizes that a just person, but not an unjust one, receives from the gods" (10.613b). In both cases, this is a poor closing pitch for their oases because their belief that mortals would act eternally good while under overly good, untouchable rule pacifies the human urge for social dominance. With an eternally present and exclusive post in society, anything less than a circuit board society would dare climb to the heavens. This is the irresistible desire to do more than what is required that fuels human excellence and achievement. Ambition is a natural tendency and so long as it exists, people will try to outdo one another. So when utopias crumble, know that the cause is rooted in the right to question authority because so long as there looms a superior presence in one's life, one is subject to their justice. With this presence removed in a categorically even playing field, it is left to the citizens to decide whether or not they will adhere to the law and if they choose not to, they must be ready to deal in justice themselves.

Socrates says "there is the justice of a single man and also the justice of a whole city" (2.368e) and when looking at justice in its most basic function, "justice is the good of another, the advantage of the stronger, while injustice is one's own advantage and profit, though not the advantage of the weaker" (2.367c). It is as unnatural to pursue committing only injustice as it is to pursue only justice when affection does not blind one from committing injustice to their objection of affection. When the social constructs that uphold justice are removed and, for the sake of argument, all of society is removed, only two individuals would be left. If there is an incentive to deal injustice to a weaker party, the stronger party will do so because "injustice is

to one's own profit and advantage". The notion that "justice is what is advantageous to the stronger" (1.344c) comes with the understanding that the weaker will be spared of injustice and would uphold the stronger party's justice because they are in no position to flip the power dynamic between themselves and the stronger party. Once order has been established and a clear ruler is helmed, Socrates supposes "no one in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his subjects; the ones of whom he is himself the craftsman" (1.342e). The difference between the ruler's subjects and the craftsman's crafts is that the crafts cannot be dissatisfied with the craftsman, nor can they lash back at him and ask to be made better by a better craftsman. If there is enough strength in the numbers of discontent subjects who disagree with their ruler's administration of justice, then they can come into a position in which they are powerful enough to reclaim justice. Thrasymachus tells Socrates that "[a] ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never makes errors and unerringly decrees what is best for himself, and this his subject must do" (1.341a). This is a precise deduction on the role of a ruler; like any occupation, a ruler must serve the people foremost because they uphold their ruler's position. By making content "[t]hose who reproach injustice [who] do so because they are afraid not of doing it but of suffering it" (1.344c) with a fair set of laws, rulers put themselves in a position in which so long as they satiate the needs of their people, their decree is the law of the land. While it is inarguable that between two individuals might will make right, in civilized society, those who have risen the ranks will with equal certainty be the arbiters of what makes right and it will always be to their advantage. To understand where justice develops between individualistic and systemic notions, Adeimantus points to "somewhere in some need that these people have

of one another” (2.372a). This need is in achieving eudemonia within the order of the luxurious city.

In a utopia where laws and currency have been relinquished because the wholly good and equally strong citizens can depend on themselves to engage fairly, Socrates posits that “justice [is not] worth much, since it is only useful for useless things” (1.333e). It is useful for the exchange of goods and services and for upholding libertarian concepts of proprietary rights in society. Polemarchus rightly refutes Socrates’ claim that “the definition of justice [is not] speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed” (1.331d) because this is what justice essentially is. This is the point at which the supposedly virtuous man may be at odds with the intelligent and cunning man because in the case of the latter, their choice to uphold justice is contingent on their preparedness to deal with injustice. If one can be made self-sufficient and would find themselves in a consistently dominant position, then the argument for justness being its own reward in hierarchical society falls apart because there is no hierarchy to protect the obedient meek. Society must be a democratic competition for the right rule because if a society’s strength is greater than the sum of its parts, then this strength would logically be best guided by the hive mind without any exclusive role of ruler¹ship in place. Eudemonia suggests excellence and therefore, in accordance with Plato’s eugenic philosophies, utopia would consist of actualized citizens and not content commoners if there is genuine equality between citizens. Justice serves as the great equalizer between the weak and the strong, whether it exists at an institutional level or a personal level. Only in a single-class society, in which envy does not exist and eudemonia is a standard all citizens have reached, will justice not be the mere “advantage of the stronger” (1.338c). Till kingdom come, might does make right.

Upon understanding the folly of the kallipolis and deductively reasoning the case for justice's operation on a systemic basis being an extension of its principles on an individual basis, one can conclude that justice is the advantage of the stronger. In the words of Socrates, "a good judge must not be a young person but an old one, who has learned late in life what injustice is like and who has become aware of it not as something at home in his own soul, but as something alien and present in others, someone who, after a long time, has recognized that injustice is bad by nature, not from his own experience of it, but through knowledge" (3.409b). While "the most noble" (3.409c) judge must be objective and impartial, a true arbiter of the law must practice it until refinement has promoted him from legal practitioner to judge; knowledge of law is of the utmost importance but not all cases are cut and dry. Therefore, a judge must be adept at carrying out fair punishment upon those who violate laws and this deliberation cannot be perfected through simply observing justice; it must be practiced. Once engaging with justice, it is no longer a precious standard because it becomes a righteous tool, both a sword and a shield.

Work Cited

Plato. *Republic*. C.D.C. Reeve, trans. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co. pp. 1.331d–10.613b. 2004.

ⁱ pg. 94 of cited C.D.C. Reeve translation, extracted quotes are part of a summary by Reeve contained at the start of Book 4.