

Socrates on the concept of Justice

In Plato's Republic various views on justice and virtue are narrated by Plato through the voices of some very important characters. Thrasymachus, the sophist is one very important character introduced in The Republic. His views did not serve as a shock to the Athenian people however; his views were immensely debated on and often argued against by Socrates, the leading character in The Republic. Socrates and Thrasymachus both reject traditional moral values on the grounds of what they see as reality. Although both see themselves as realists and reject the traditional basis for the good life, their individual views on the question of justice are in many ways on opposite ends. Perhaps it can be argued that both Socrates and Thrasymachus' views on justice are very far apart from one another because of their individual views on how a city should run, and their personal portrait of an ideal ruler. It is essentially through these topics that both Socrates and Thrasymachus begin to differentiate on the question of justice, and what is considered "just".

In book II of The Republic, Socrates poses a short however very complicated question: what is justice? According to Cephalus, a rich and elderly man justice is simply living up to legal obligations and being honest with them. His definition unlike Thrasymachus or Socrates focused greatly on give and take and what one is obliged to do. Cephalus's son Polemarchis also provides his definition of justice which according to him means owing friends help, and enemies harm. Socrates expresses disagreement, which allows for the understanding that his view of justice is substantially different from those around him. He states that "justice is not speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed" (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 6). According to Socrates, the definition of justice which suggests owing friends help, and enemies harm would inevitably cause harm to those that are good and help

the bad. He challenges the claim, and points out that a just man can not harm anyone (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 10).

Thrasymachus asserts his claim that “justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger” (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.14). According to Thrasymachus particularly in each city, justice is only to serve as the advantage of the established ruler (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.15). Thrasymachus, the sophist in *The Republic*, believes that there are no worthy rewards or benefits for one to want to be just or act justly. He makes his view clear when stating:

You think that shepherds and cowherds seek the good of their sheep and cattle, and fatten them and take care of them, looking to something other than their master’s good and their own...you believe that rulers in cities true rulers, that is-think about their subjects differently than one does about sheep, and that...they think of something besides their own advantage...justice is really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves” (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 19).

By declaring his views on justice, Thrasymachus asserts that those who act just or believe in justice are the ones at loss, as they receive no benefit. Justice according to him is solely for the ruler, who rules the city. Unlike Socrates, Thrasymachus claims that there is no advantage for the weaker to be just. According to Thrasymachus, “A just man always gets less than an unjust one” (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 19). This view is very different from the view Socrates holds on justice, as Socrates tries to make justice appear desirable rather than something that contains many disadvantages.

Socrates, on the other hand believes Thrasymachus’s view allows for the unjust to occur, because people would never want to be just or act justly. This would then

create a city consisting of people who allow for injustice to occur which is against true wisdom according to Socrates. Socrates also has different views in regards to money and power. Unlike Thrasymachus, Socrates does not believe that the city and the ruler's main goal and interest are money or power. Socrates does not promote injustice like Thrasymachus as he believes a city will not function without necessary wisdom, and virtue which can only be found when justice occurs. Justice is essentially virtue and wisdom according to Socrates (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.24). Thrasymachus on the other hand feels that injustice is profitable, and justice isn't, he praises injustice greatly (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.24). According to him, this will allow for the ruler to be at an advantage which will allow for money and power to be attained for the "stronger". In a city, justice is something only to advance the benefit of the stronger (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.14).

Both Socrates and Thrasymachus agree on the idea that "the just is some kind of advantage" (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.15). However, the idea that this advantage is solely for the "stronger" as Thrasymachus puts it, is something that they do not agree on. Socrates asserts that if a ruler does not seek advantage for himself in a city rather, a ruler seeks the advantage of its subjects (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.16). For example, a doctor will not think of his own advantage, rather of his patient despite being a ruler of bodies (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.16). Socrates believes that "every kind of rule...doesn't seek anything other than what it is best for the things it rules and cares for, and this is true both of public and private kinds of rule" (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.21). This view is completely different from the view Thrasymachus put forth. This is because this view makes it clear rulers do not only think of their benefit, rather they think of the people they rule, their subjects. Justice therefore, is not the advantage of the stronger, it is rather the advantage of all. Because Socrates thinks an ideal ruler in a city thinks for the benefit for his subjects,

his view of justice is very far apart from Thrasymachus, as he feels that justice will benefit people who are both weak and strong

Socrates claims “injustice is not more profitable than justice” (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.21). In a society, people are naturally suitable to perform certain duties, and tasks. He concludes that therefore, “each craft brings its own peculiar benefit”, and that craftsmen aside from getting wages get no benefit; they actually provide benefits to their subjects (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.22). For example, medicine provides health, wage earning provides wages, and house building provides houses, therefore “each of them does its own work and benefits the things it is set over” (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.22). Socrates proves his point that no craft, or no ruler, provides for its own advantage rather aims for the advantage of its subjects, which is that of the weaker not the stronger as Thrasymachus claims (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.22).

Although considering all the good things Thrasymachus mentioned for the unjust life, Socrates firmly believes that “the life of a just person is more profitable” (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.23). He believes that a city of good men would fight not to rule as they realize it will require them to put forth work to benefit others. A ruler benefits his subjects, not himself as Thrasymachus believes. According to Socrates, justice is the greatest good, and something to be valued by anyone who is going to have happiness because of what comes from it (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg.34). He asserts that the worst thing someone could do to his city is injustice, something Thrasymachus stands for (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 109). The goal of Socrates’ ideal city is to not make any one group outstandingly happy at the expense of others, which is what Thrasymachus wanted, the happiness and benefit of only the stronger (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 74). Rather, Socrates believes a city should make

everyone as happy as nature allows and this is to him is justice (Plato, Grube, and Reeve pg. 75).