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Philosophy 101

An Analysis of Justice through *The Republic* and “Moral Beliefs”

The question of whether it is beneficial for one to do anything at all is something that is of concern for human beings, particularly those who only wish to act in their best interest. In Plato's *The Republic*, it is thought by Thrasymachus that “justice” -- a concept that may impel one to put aside their self-interest for the sake of others -- is something that is not good for the individual or the just man, because “Justice ... is, as it were, the good of another” (343c). While this claim is certainly a point of contention, it holds some bearing in our understanding of what it means to *be* just, and our reasons for doing so. Before discussing justice as a concept that is either beneficial or detrimental to our functioning as human beings, it would be prudent to provide a working definition of “justice” -- something that is not yet accomplished in our reading of books I-IV of *The Republic*. According to Plato, “Justice is...at once a part of human virtue and the bond, which joins man together in society.” (Bhandari). Philippa Foot in her analysis of Socrates' defense of justice believes that “a great deal hangs on the question of whether justice is or is not a good to the just man” because justice does, in her view, pose a benefit to the individual and, subsequently, to humanity as a whole. (“Moral Beliefs”, 101). One should always choose to be just when given the opportunity, instead of fluctuating or being unjust. Justice is also a topic that requires much deliberation, it is a concept that can be evaluated objectively -- much like the goodness of health can be evaluated objectively. She builds on her claim that justice is objectively good by conceding to Thrasymachus' egocentric tendencies regarding

self-preservation and arguing that acting justly has beneficial, protective properties -- more so than acting unjustly would have. Lastly, Socrates would agree with her claim that justice is a virtue of the just man; however, he would take an extreme position on the matter by arguing that one's life if not lived justly is a life not lived at all.

In Foot's discussion of justice as a benefactor, she explains that all emotions we feel are "internally related to their object" (87). These feelings are contingent upon the values we hold -- we deem the "good" to be virtuous and beneficial to us, and the "bad" to be the opposite. Frightening events cannot elicit fearful emotions from us if we do not view the frightening thing as threatening, and so on. An arbitrary action such as "...clasping [one's] hands three times in an hour..." cannot be recognized as being "good" without value being applied to it. (93). Why is something like this even worth doing if it is arbitrary? Thus, providing reason for people to act justly is crucial in understanding why it is necessary. What we value is usually interconnected with things that are true, Foot believes, and these values and facts are related to virtue. Therefore, a great deal hangs on the question of justice being different from the other cardinal virtues, which are "...prudence, temperance, courage and justice." (97). All of these virtues but the latter are seen as "good" for the individual, whereas "justice" is not seen as such. A distinction is to be made between these qualities, because reasoning and rationality are needed to make people act justly in all circumstances. Foot even considers the possibility of justice not being a virtue, because it has the capacity to threaten the individual. This acknowledgement in and of itself reinforces the idea that "a great deal hangs on the subject of whether or not justice is good..." (101), because justice is weighty -- it is not one or the other, but it is both. It is to be understood differently than health, or the other cardinal virtues, which aim to benefit the individual directly.

Another reason that justice is so significant is because it is not something that you can pick and choose to adhere to -- otherwise, one cannot truly be just -- "If a man is just it follows that he will be prepared, in the event of very evil circumstances, even to face death rather than to act unjustly..." (104). Rather, it is a way of life, one that is taught and reinforced by one's parents, in their effort to successfully raise a child. It is vital to make justice a part of one's nature, Foot believes, because doing otherwise is counterproductive to the carrying out of it. Nevertheless, justice holds much gravity in discussions ranging from personality to politics due to its intricacies and not-yet-founded benefits, and, according to Foot, it is wise for one to fully immerse themselves in justice, because it is rational to do so.

Foot answers the question of whether or not justice is good for the just man by conceding to Thrasymachus' claim that justice is, indeed, not always beneficial to him. But if this is the case, then why is it of importance to us to be just? She acknowledges that providing a reason for someone to operate justly is of utter importance, as following a code of conduct generally accompanies a good reason for doing so. She then cites Hume in her argumentation --

"Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire why he desires health, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries further and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can never give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object."
(Enquiries, Appendix I, V.)

The exercise example can be analogized to understanding the necessity of justice, which arguably functions as a safeguard. If you ask a man why he is just, he might reply with, "I am just because I desire to keep my virtue, and virtue is good." Or, he may reply with "I would rather be just and treated justly in return, whilst not being resented by others." He may even reply with, "I wish not to live with the guilt of being unjust, having to conceal my actions or risk being outed or harmed." But is clinging to justice foolproof and guaranteed to protect your

livelihood in all situations? Certainly not. But it is presumably bound to work most of the time, except for when it does not. Foot brings up the example of owing an undeserving, overall scummy person money. Human benevolence, she implies, cannot help you here and is different from justice. Even if acting benevolently in this situation will achieve justice and happiness in some way, this idea does not hold with most people -- “Thus, given Thrasymachus’ premiss Thrasymachus’ point of view is reasonable; we have no practical reason to admire those who practise justice through timidity or stupidity.” (102). But does she imply that injustice is somehow better than justice? Not necessarily. Upholding injustice requires skillful effort that may likely do one more harm than good:

“Philosophers often speak as if a man could thus hide himself even from those around him, but the supposition is doubtful, and in any case the price in vigilance would be colossal. If he lets a few people see his true attitude he must guard himself against them; if he lets no one into the secret he must always be careful in case the least spontaneity betray him.” (103).

Speaking in terms of sheer probability, justice is more likely to work out for a person, while injustice is merely *incidentally* profitable. Analyzing justice through a series of particular separate acts will not vindicate the name of justice, but considering its holistic impact on mankind and virtuousness will. Most people teach their children to be just for the reason that it makes them well-rounded humans beings, and because they have an internal drive to shield their children from reckless harm, if it is under their control. A child that grows up just may undeniably suffer from being taken advantage of, but it is still a way to ensure that more often than not, the child will be safe, guiltless, and satisfied. Justice is blind and spontaneous, and it makes itself visible through a person’s *nature*, operating separately from their whims.

Socrates would tend to agree with Foot’s assertion that justice is more profitable than injustice, and that an individual should choose to be just whenever they are able. However, his

reasons for believing so would be entirely different, because of his differing societal and individual views on justice. In Book IV of *The Republic*, Socrates makes distinctions between justice as it is employed in a grand societal context, with the concept of job specialization equating to the city being just. Therefore, justice as assessed through this context is "...the practice of minding one's own business" (433b). The happiness of the city as a whole as opposed to the happiness of the individual is what gives it this degree of wisdom, courage, moderation and justice -- the guardians being wise, the auxiliaries courageous, and the laborers moderate and just (for the sake of the city, not their individual selves). Thus, he would uphold justice as a means for the preservation of an entire city. If there is an absence of any one of these groups or qualities, the city will crumble, therefore unity is likely the most important factor in sustainment.

/Philippa Foot's approach is much more reasoned, given that she does not assess the value of justice on nearly as large a global scale as Socrates does. Moreover, she considers what it may do for an individual, and according to her, executing the deed of justice is both rational and beneficial. On an individual scale, Socrates devises a model known as the "tripartite soul", consisting of the appetitive, spirited, and reasoned parts to explain justice as pertaining to the individual. Socrates in his affirmation of individual justice believes that a balance between all three elements of the soul is needed in order to produce a purely just being. However, reason should *always* preside over the other elements, reigning supreme in order to provide the rationality needed to make good decisions. Being just is always a good decision, according to Socrates, because it aids in the fulfillment of the reasoned soul, as well as the rest of it. Justice as a form of character is necessary to produce the ideal being and without it, the human being is imbalanced and possibly brutish. Foot does not base her ideas of justice off of a person's soulful

constitution, however, and she grounds her belief of justice in rationality. To do justice is to be rational because doing injustice is irrational -- an assumption of risk is involved, whereas in doing good, there is less "risk" and more opportunity for others to be happy with you. You may even be happy with yourself. Socrates believes that "all justice is good justice regardless of its consequences." Foot believes that justice is good "because of its consequences", and this is precisely where their agreement would fall short.

Justice as it functions in Plato's *The Republic* and in Philippa Foot's "Moral Beliefs" differs in the reasons for its necessity, but is equally necessary in helping to provide a framework for the actions of a being. When viewed from Thrasymachus' perspective, it makes sense to believe that the detriments of justice override its benefits, if such a perspective were truly correct. Foot does a sound job in maintaining the practicality of justice by conceding to Thrasymachus and disagreeing with his conclusions. Though the illusory subjectivity of today's moral relativism tends to elude us, Foot makes it her mission to inform us of its inherent objectivity, grounded in the fact that justice is likely to attain a better outcome for the egocentric, consequence-oriented human.

Works Cited

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