Accounts of Justice

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1. **Introduction**

In Plato’s *Republic,* the author gives several different accounts of justice and what it means in society. One of the main themes in this work of literature is justice and its context, which goes on to explain further themes. When asking the question, “what is justice?”, it must be looked at from different perspectives in order to properly answer. Is justice giving someone what they deserve, or is it speaking the truth and not succumbing to outside pressures/temptations? Is it better to be just or unjust in society? Plato gives different accounts and perspectives of justice beginning with Socrates, and followed by Cephalus, Simonides, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus. Each gives a different report of what justice is and what it means for people. After providing multiple accounts of the meaning behind justice, I will give a philosophical argument in favor of one of these accounts to make the point that this is the account of justice that should be followed.

1. **Exposition**

Socrates has a very specific account of justice and continuously makes rebuttals against all the others’ arguments of justice. Socrates believes that justice is the virtue of the soul. Injustice is never more profitable than justice, so justice is what we should strive for. Just people do not just want to do better than other just people, but they do want to do better than an unjust person, which is not possible according to Thrasymachus. An unjust person, though, wants to do better than everyone, including just people. Socrates explains this thought process using an analogy of musicians and non-musicians, and connects the attributes of knowledgeable and wise to these types of people. The conclusion is made that just people are knowledgeable and wise, and unjust people are ignorant and bad. When examining the question of whether justice is better than injustice or not, Socrates asks, will a “city that becomes stronger than another achieve this power without justice, or will it need the help of justice?”[[1]](#footnote-1) In order to answer this, we must look at the danger of injustice among groups. Injustice causes hatred and factions among groups, while justice brings common purpose and friendship. The second part of Socrates’ argument looks at justice as a function, and virtues associated with that function. There is a function associated with an eye, to see, and the virtue associated with that function is seeing really well. There is also a function to the human soul; Socrates says this function is taking care of things, ruling, or deliberating. The virtue to this function is justice, which is prominent in the human soul. Socrates also talks about the tri-partite soul, which are rational, spirited, and appetite. Justice is the balance of all three of these parts. Another key component to Socrates’ argument is that there is an agreement between rulers and followers that everyone has a place in society and you must not meddle with that. He gives an example of a carpenter doing the work of a guardian and how it might damage the city.

Cephalus has the perspective of an older man, who has much more life experience and adamant opinions on the problems with the youth and the benefits of wealth in society. Wealth, in society, causes people not to cheat, steal, or lie since they will not encounter debts that they are unable to pay. Cephalus’ account of justice focuses on speaking the truth and paying debts owed. However, Socrates offers a solid objection to this: if weapons are borrowed from a sane friend who then goes mad, do you tell the truth and give them the weapons or do you lie for their own sake, therefore being unjust? In this case, you should lie to protect not only your friend, but also your own personal safety. Justice might not be just telling the truth, since sometimes white lies benefit people and society as a whole. Paying debts also does not make a person just; people who are not credible can pay their debts to others but they should not be considered to be just in society.

Plato also outlines Simonides’ account of justice and objections that go against it. Simonides believes that justice is giving someone what is owed to them, and Polemarchus agrees with him and explains the account further. Polemarchus clarifies that friends owe something good to their friends, never something bad. However, Socrates objects to this account and claims that Simonides contradicts himself when he says that “it is just to give each what is appropriate for him, and what he called giving him what he is owed”[[2]](#footnote-2). By this logic, justice is also giving what is owed to enemies and giving what crafts owe to society, such as shoemaking or farming. In my opinion, this is not what justice is because someone can be a shoemaker and give what is owed to people, but also lie, cheat, or steal from others which is not what should be considered just. A big objection to this account is that is it is difficult to determine what is appropriate to give.

Polemarchus also offers further accounts of what qualifies as just. Justice to Polemarchus means doing good to your friends and bad to your enemies. This becomes complicated when looking at who is capable of benefitting friends and harming enemies, such as in wartime when dealing with enemies and alliances. Examining alliances and usefulness brings about the topic of partnerships. Another objection to Polemarchus’ account is looking at who is better to partner with, an expert or a just man/woman. Looking at it from this way, we can conclude that the only time a just man is a good partner is when something does not need to be used. This determines who to be good to and who to be bad to. Another criticism to this theory is that the just man is a thief. To explain this, an example is used to show that the best person at landing blows is also the best at guarding against them; the best person at guarding something is also the best person at stealing. It is also very difficult to determine who is your friend and who is your enemy, in order to decide who to benefit and harm in society. Friends are either those who are actually useful to you, or who you *believe* to be useful to you. The line between these different types of people is so thin that sometimes you can accidentally benefit your enemies or hurt your friends, since your friends can actually be bad people and enemies can be good people. Polemarchus then clarifies that a friend is defined as one who not only appears good but is actually good[[3]](#footnote-3). A just person would never harm anyone, so a person who harms their enemies is therefore unjust. This is not the best account for justice since someone who is just would never harm anyone, even if they were enemies.

Thrasymachus, as one of Socrates’ biggest challengers, offers another account of justice. Thrasymachus criticized Socrates, believing that he always intended to deceive others. He defines justice as what is advantageous for the stronger, or the ruling of the city. In a democracy, the stronger is the people, and in a tyranny the stronger is the monarch. However, it is not always advantageous for the stronger; in this case, justice requires that subjects do what is disadvantageous to the ruler. However, Thrasymachus counters with the fact that rulers do not make mistakes and if they do, then they lose that position of power. An analogy made is that a doctor is a doctor due to their knowledge, not their mistakes. So, rulers do not make mistakes. What is advantageous for the craft is advantageous for its subjects. Socrates makes the point back to Thrasymachus that those who rule, rule willingly. Therefore, those who practice their craft well do what is best for their subjects, not themselves. This then gets into the topic of wage, honor, and penalty for those that rule. Thrasymachus’ account of justice also touches on instances when it is better to be unjust than just. These situations include paying taxes, in a partnership, politics, and tyranny, which makes sense since being a just person in those scenarios can cause personal loss.

Glaucon also has an account of justice. Following laws that prevent suffering of injustice is the nature of justice. Justice is the middle position between suffering injustice and committing injustice. Glaucon looks at justice in a way that proves that those who practice justice, do so unwillingly only because they cannot get away with committing injustices. Glaucon uses the Ring of Gyges to show that both the just and unjust are not able to resist its power, since those who do not do injustice in this situation would be thought of as foolish. He touches upon the extremes of justice and injustice, where those who are just are believed to be unjust, and those who are unjust are believed to be just. Glaucon believes that the just person will be punished, and the unjust person will become wealthy and marry whomever he pleases. His argument is concluded with a description of the Afterlife, where poets bestow honor upon the unjust. This then gives a bad impression for the youth. The main argument of Glaucon is that justice is somewhere in the middle of suffering and inflicting injustice, but I believe that there is another explanation for where justice falls. One can suffer the consequences of injustice but still be a just person.

1. **Argument**

I will be making a philosophical argument in favor of Cephalus’ account of justice. I gave an objection to his account earlier, but now I will give an argument to prove that speaking the truth and paying debts is the key to becoming a just individual in society. Cephalus’ account of justice focuses on speaking the truth and paying debts owed. It says that wealth causes people not to cheat, steal, or lie since they will not encounter debts that they are unable to pay. If everyone were wealthy, would anyone be unjust? In this case, it is important to look at what causes people to lie, cheat, and steal. Most accounts of these illegal actions occurring stem from those who are less wealthy, sometimes jealous, or in need of what others have already. It can be seen as unfair in society that some people are wealthy and do not need to resort to ways of lying, cheating, or stealing in order to get necessities in life. These well-off people are mostly free from temptations to commit these crimes, and statistically commit less of them. A large portion of Cephalus’ account revolves around paying back debts that are owed to others. This makes sense in the context that a person is only just if they do not take what is not rightfully theirs, which would occur if a debt is not paid to someone. Paying debts is something that builds credibility; in our society, repaying a loan builds a positive credit score. A high credit score shows someone’s dependability, credibility, and trustworthiness. All of these adjectives and characteristics go hand-in-hand when describing a person that is just. Therefore, a person who repays their debts and what is owed, is a just individual.

Someone who does not repay their debts is unjust. For example, a person who is constantly avoiding car loan payments is not doing everything in their power to repay their debts, and is therefore not just. You may make an objection that someone may not have the means to repay those debts. However, I will counter that by saying that they should have never taken the burden of that loan upon themselves while knowing that they may have the possibility that they cannot pay it back. Also, if someone is prioritizing the repayment of their debts over other payments, then the debts that they owe will get repaid.

Th next part of Cephalus’ account of justice is to speak the truth. This, as well as being a fair individual, is key to being just in my opinion. Someone who lies, cheats, or steals, can not be considered to be just since they are morally wrong in doing so. An exponential component in speaking the truth is doing so even when faced with adversity, or if others disagree. It is important to tell the truth even if it goes against what others say or if you could be faced with ostracization or other repercussions for going against the norms. Someone who stands up for what is right and speaks the truth while doing so is a just person. For example, a person who tells the truth about situations and stands up for the lives of African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, even when faced with major adversity and consequences, is a more just individual than those who do not.

Someone who does not speak the truth is not just. Those who lie for their own personal gain or interest are unjust. Many times, people resort to lying when they cannot get their way or succeed otherwise. For example, someone who lies about a money scandal to cover up their own wrongdoing is only as unjust as a person who lies about a sexual assault in order to protect the perpetrator. No matter the reasoning behind the lie, the person who lies is not just. Telling the truth is always more just than lying and covering up for others, especially at the expense of others.

An objection can be made. You borrow weapons from a sane friend, but then they go insane and ask for the weapons back. In this case, would it be just to lie to protect your own safety as well as theirs, or would it be just to tell the truth and hand over the weapons? Consequences of both scenarios must be analyzed. Protecting your safety and lying can save you, your friend, and society as a whole but it would be morally wrong. Telling the truth and handing over the weapons can endanger you and many others. In morally questionable decisions like this, it may be necessary to expand the definition of “always speak the truth”. We can expand it to “always speak the truth, except in situations when dire consequences could arise”. Therefore, this does not create *objections* to Cephalus’ argument, but it expands the definition to cover those cases in which a small white lie might benefit society more than telling the truth and risking the aftermath of telling the truth.

1. **Conclusion**

Plato’s different accounts of justice helps give perspectives onto what it truly is, and shapes insights onto what it is not. It is imperative to look at different outlooks and perspectives in order to make our own judgments, take-aways, and conclusions on what we believe justice to be. Socrates defined justice as the virtue of the soul while Cephalus defined it as speaking the truth and paying debts you owe. Similarly, Simonides believes that justice is giving what is owed to people, and Polemarchus defines it as doing good to your friends and doing bad to your enemies. Finally, Thrasymachus believes justice is advantageous for the stronger. Each account offers a new mindset concerning justice, and each are also impacted by different objections. While they all encounter objections to their arguments, Cephalus has the stronger philosophical argument since his is the least impacted by the objections.

1. Plato, G.M.A Grube, and C.D.C Reeve. *Plato: Republic*. London: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992. 351b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plato, G.M.A Grube, and C.D.C Reeve. *Plato: Republic*. London: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992. 332c. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plato, G.M.A Grube, and C.D.C Reeve. *Plato: Republic*. London: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992. 335a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)