

Plato's Theory of Justice: A Critical Analysis and its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract:

The paper seeks to critically analyze the theory of justice in *The Republic* by Plato. It examines the philosophical background that shaped his thinking, such as the theories of earlier Greek philosophers, and his criticism of Sophist relativism. The paper dwells upon some of the major ideas, including the Theory of Forms, the tripartite nature of the soul, and the concept of justice as harmony in the individual and in the state. The argument on justice being done when every part plays its correct role, made by Plato is examined. The paper also assesses the criticism of democracy by Plato and his suggestion of the philosopher-king as a perfect ruler with his knowledge and wisdom. Besides this, it indicates the applicability of the Plato theory in the current world where the problem of ethical leadership, governance, and social harmony are still pertinent. It is briefly compared to the Indian philosophical thoughts, especially to those of *Bhagavad Gita*. The paper concludes that although today the model of Plato is not completely applicable, its main principles can still provide a lot of valuable information.

Keywords: Justice, Plato, Harmony, Tripartite Soul, Theory of Forms, Philosopher King, Democracy, Ethics, Political Philosophy, Governance, Virtue, Moral Truth, Social Order, Contemporary Relevance

Introduction

Plato is considered to be one of the most powerful philosophers in the political thought history. His justice theory, which is found in *The Republic*, is one of the groundbreaking works in political philosophy. Plato does not view justice as a legal or institutional idea; instead, he views it as a moral ideal that governs individual behaviour as well as the structure of society. His work tries to find one of the main questions: what justice and how could it be realized in personal life and political systems? The author Plato wrote at a time when there was political turmoil in ancient Athens. His thinking was influenced by the failure of the democratic government, as well as the execution of his teacher Socrates. Through these experiences he had doubts that democracy could possibly be able to deliver justice. He noted that politics were usually made

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on the basis of opinion, feeling and selfishness as opposed to knowledge and rationality. Consequently, Plato attempted to come up with a theory of justice that would be based on reason and objective truth. It is one of the peculiarities of the theory of Plato, the relation which he creates between the individual and the state. According to him, justice in society could only be attained when people were just themselves. This concept causes him to make the analogy of the arrangement of the human soul and the arrangement of the state. He tries to tell how a just society can be brought about by learning about justice at the individual level. This is a psychological method that sets Plato apart as compared to most other political thinkers. Moreover, the theory by Plato is not only practical in governance, but rather it transcends into the field of philosophy. He proposes the Theory of Forms to indicate the presence of absolute truths such as justice. In his opinion, the material world is corrupt, in a continuous state of flux, whereas the world of forms is eternal and unchanging reality. Justice is, thus not an opinion but a universal truth, which can be cognized by reason. This paper aims to discuss the theory of justice as developed by Plato, its philosophical grounds, major ideas, and its significant implication. It also seeks to examine how his ideas are relevant in the contemporary world, where the society is still faced with challenges of corruption, inequality, and poor governance. The role of knowledge-based leadership and ethical leadership outlined by Plato offers a significant view herein. Therefore, the present paper aims at showing that the theory of Plato, with all its shortcomings, can still be an important reference point to analysing justice as a moral and political ideal.

Methodology

The current research uses a qualitative and analytical approach relying on textual analysis of The Republic by Plato. It uses interpretative analysis of primary texts as well as secondary sources in trying to comprehend the notion of justice. The method is both descriptive and critical and has a goal to assess not only the theoretical framework but also its relevance in modern society.

Philosophical Background

The theory of justice developed by Plato did not come out of the void; it was influenced by an intellectual rich tradition of the Greek philosophy of the past. His teacher, Socrates was one of the most influential. Socrates emphasized the importance of questioning, dialogue, and the pursuit of truth. He had the view that knowledge and virtue are tightly coupled and that wrongdoing is a consequence of ignorance. Plato shared this perspective and elaborated it thus; knowledge became the focus of his theory of justice. The second significant impact on Plato was Pythagoras, whose concepts of harmony and numerical order have influenced Plato in his concept of balance in the universe and the society. The idea that order and proportion



are the key to stability can be seen in the sense of justice in Platonism, where justice is harmony between various parts. Heraclitus and Parmenides also had an impact on Plato with their opposing philosophies. Heraclitus believed change is the essence of reality and Parmenides believed in the permanence of being. Plato has tried to harmonize these opinions by his Theory of Forms. In accordance with this theory, the physical world is always changing and defective, whereas the world of forms is eternal and perfect reality. Justice is a part of this elevated truth. Moreover, Plato was highly critical of the Sophists, who argued that truth is relative, and subjective to perception. The Sophists were more focused on rhetoric and persuasion as opposed to seeking objective truth. Plato opposed this method and claimed that moral truths, such as justice, are universal and they can be found by reason. In order to do this, Plato used the approach of dialectics which entails questioning and reasoning. The method assists in differentiating between knowledge and opinion enabling people to be closer to the truth. The difference between knowledge and opinion is essential in the Platonic theory of politics because he considers that only individuals, who have true knowledge, are capable of ruling. Therefore, the philosophical background of Plato is a synthesis of various influences which in the end results into a distinct framework where justice is regarded as a goal, rational and universal principle.

Plato's Theory of Justice

The main theme in the political philosophy of Plato is his understanding of justice as harmony. In contrast to traditional conceptions of justice in terms of laws or punishment, Plato introduces a justice as a moral state that provides order and balance not only to the individual but also to the society. His account of justice is worked out by analogy of the organization of the human soul and that of the state. This technique enables him to travel between the micro aspects of individual psychology and the macro aspects of political structure. Plato starts by examining the human soul which he breaks down into three components, that is, reason, spirit and desire. Reason is the rational thought and to make decisions that are founded on knowledge. Spirit is linked to feelings of bravery, drive and honour. Desire on the other hand is associated with physical needs and appetites like hunger, pleasure and material desires. Plato claims that there is conflict that exists within the individual, when such parts are not in harmony. Justice is, then, that which is produced by the rule of reason in relation to the other two elements, so that each element performs its own part. It is this psychological construct that is extended to the society. Just like there are three sections in the soul, so is the case with society; therefore, Plato affirms that society is split into three classes: rulers, auxiliaries and producers. Governance and decision making are the prerogative of the rulers. They should be wise and learned because they are to lead the state as guided by reason. The auxiliaries are the fighters



or defenders of the state and they are brave and disciplined. The producers are farmers, artisans and traders who address the economic demands of the society. When the classes execute their assigned duties without interference in the functions of other classes, justice is done. This thought may be reduced to the well-known principle of Plato: doing what a person does and not fiddling with what is not his own. Justice in this sense does not deal with equality in the modern sense but with functional specialization and order. Everyone does work to the society based on their capabilities and the stability of the state is based on the division of labour. This concept of justice has a philosophical basis in the Theory of Forms by Plato. He claims that the physical world that we see with our senses is not perfect and subject to constant change. Real reality is the world of forms which is eternal, unchanging and perfect. Among these forms, the most important one is the Form of the Good, the ultimate truth and moral perfection. Justice is an image of this greater truth and to know justice one must know the Good. The Theory of Forms also describes the reason why Plato attributes such significance on knowledge in government. As most individuals can only see the world through the prism of appearances, they are led by opinion instead of knowledge. Philosophers alone are those who can get the real knowledge by the world of forms which can be acquired by reason. Thus, Plato states that philosophers are in the best position to govern because they can make moral judgments on the political choices. The other significant element of Plato theory is the element of education. He stresses that the rulers should be exposed to a strict intellectual and moral training till they are fit to rule. This education comprises of subjects like mathematics, philosophy, and dialectics which aid in creation of rational thought. The intention is to raise leaders who do not serve based on self-interest but on seeking the truth and the wellbeing of the state. Another theory proposed by Plato is the significance of cohesion and unity within society. Conflicts are minimized by ensuring that every class does its role well, and social harmony is achieved. Justice in this context, is not only a personal virtue but a social status, which is helpful to the whole society. Nevertheless, the idea of justice presented by Plato does not lack its constraints. The classification of people into classes has been criticized as too strict and limiting the freedom and movement of individuals. The criticism is that this type of system could result in inequality and lack of opportunity. However, the focus on order, specialization, and moral responsibility by Plato is still a valuable addition to the political thought. Simply put, the theory of justice by Plato is a comprehensive outlook where the morality of individuals and their social structure are intertwined. He defines justice as harmony and by so doing gives a framework that transcends the legal definitions of justice but rather gives attention to the moral basis of the society. This methodology still has an impact on philosophical debates on justice and governance.



Virtue Framework

The theory of justice by Plato is closely related to his theory of virtues, which can be a key factor in the preservation of harmony in the individual and the state. He singles out four cardinal virtues which are wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. These virtues are not independent but are intertwined and comprise the foundation of a just and well-ordered society. Wisdom is an attribute that relates itself with the rational aspect of the soul and aligns with the ruling classes in the society. It is a symbol of knowledge, perceptions and capacity to make good decisions. Rulers should be wise because then they have the power to rule and make sure that state is governed by reason and truth. In the absence of wisdom, leadership would be grounded on ignorance and opinions, resulting in chaos. The brawny aspect of the soul is associated with courage and represented by the auxiliaries or the warrior caste. It involves the ability to face challenges, defend the state, and uphold justice even in difficult situations. Bravery makes sure that the actions of the rulers are put into practice and guarded. Temperance or self-control, or moderation is the virtue that balances all the components of the soul and society. It makes sure that desires do not prevail over reason and that all classes admit their part in the social structure. Moderation is critical in bringing peace and avoiding war. Plato defines justice as the supreme virtue since it is a combination of all others. It makes sure that wisdom, courage and temperance work in harmony with one another. Justice is when every portion of the soul, every kind in society, fulfils its own business, without meddling. Thus, it is the result of the proper ordering of all elements. Within this theory, Plato shows that justice is not only a political but also a moral and ethical state. It is the inner peace of the person and the outer peace of the world.

Critique: Democracy and Philosopher King

One of the most controversial issues of the political philosophy of Plato is his disapproval of democracy. He thought that democracy which gives equal power to every person irrespective of his or her knowledge or competence results in poor governance. To him, knowledge and reason ought to be the basis upon which political decisions are made and not the popular opinion or majority rule. Plato suggests that democracy is an individualistic and too free. Although freedom is regarded as a good thing, Plato points out that excess freedom may bring about chaos. Society is unstable when people put their own interests ahead of the common good. Such a lack of discipline ultimately leads to chaos and creates circumstances in which tyranny can come up. Plato is of the opinion that the concept of democracy is the one in which there is lack of hierarchy or structure. The electorate elect leaders on the basis of popularity and not on merit and this results to poor governance. He likens this kind of system to a ship without a competent captain and where the inexperienced people strive to control the direction of the ship. This is the analogy and shows that he



believes that expertise and knowledge are necessary in governance. Instead, Plato suggests the notion of the philosopher-king. He states that it is only people who have reached true knowledge especially knowledge of the Good who can rule justly. The philosopher-king is not driven by money, power and self-interest but by desire to be true and just. Such a leader would make sure that the state is ruled in a logical and moral way. But the philosopher-king concept by Plato has been much criticized. Political philosophers nowadays believe that the habit of accumulating power in one person or a few individuals may result in dictatorship. Such a system can led to power abuse, unless there are accountability mechanisms. Moreover, critics highlight that Plato under-appraises the worth of democracy. Democracy is not perfect but it is participatory, representative and it guarantees personal rights. There are checks and balances that are provided by modern democratic systems to avert the concentration of power. Regardless of these criticisms, the analysis by Plato is important as it emphasizes on the role of knowledge and ethics in governance. His criticism is a caution against the perils of making uninformed choices and the abuse of freedom. It gets us to critically reflect on the qualities needed to be a good leader.

Contemporary Relevance

Even though Plato formulated his theory of justice in relation to the ancient Greek society, it is still very relevant in the contemporary world. His main concept that justice is a kind of harmony both in the person and in the society offers a good outline to the modern political and social organization. In the modern multifaceted societies, where various institutions and groups are in contact, it is crucial to preserve the balance and coordination. The importance which Plato placed on every individual playing his/her assigned role in a responsible manner can be viewed as a precursor to the contemporary ideas of division of labour, specialisation in the institutions and efficiency in administration. Ethical leadership is one of the most significant issues of Plato theory in the given context. Corruption, power abuse and lack of accountability tend to influence the governance in most countries. The political leaders might put their own interests or the party interests ahead of the interests of the masses. The argument by Plato that rulers ought to be wise, knowledgeable and of moral character offers a valuable remedy to such inclinations. Although it is not directly applicable to his concept of the philosopher-king, it brings to the fore the necessity of leaders who are guided by reason and who are dedicated to the common good. In this regard, the philosophy of Plato promotes a different standard of leadership beyond simple electoral victory but competence and moral accountability. The other dimension in which the ideas of Plato are still applicable is the difference between knowledge and opinion. In the contemporary era, particularly with the emergence of social media and online communication, public opinion is an important factor that influence the political discourse. Not every



opinion is informed and based on rational understanding, however. There is usually misinformation, propaganda, and emotional appeals that affect the decision making of the people. Here the criticism of democracy, as a mob rule, by Plato, as based on opinion and not knowledge, is especially important. His educational focus, his emphasis on critical thinking and rational inquiry reflects on the significance of an informed citizenry as a key to the effective operation of democratic systems. The concept of justice as specialization suggested by Plato can also be traced in the modern life of the professional and institutional world. In modern societies, roles based on specialization are very common and people are supposed to undertake work based on their skill and expertise. To take an example, there are various branches in governance which include the executive, legislature and judiciary, each having its own functions. This separation is a guarantee of efficiency and elimination of concentration of power. Likewise, specialization in economic and administrative systems leads to productivity and growth. Even though the concept of justice as presented by Plato, in which he states that justice is doing one's own work, this principle can be associated with the notion that it is modern societies that are more flexible and mobile than Plato was due to the strict division of classes. Indian philosophy, especially the Bhagavad Gita, also bears a considerable similarity to the ideas of Plato. Dharma is an idea that stresses the need to do what is right according to the role and duties one has. The famous verse, which implies that people should have no attachment to the outcomes of their actions, is as follows: "कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन" This concept is similar to the concept of justice as suggested by Plato, whereby each component is required to do what is right without meddling with other parts. The two traditions emphasize discipline, responsibility and the need to uphold order both at the individual level and in the society. Simultaneously, the limitations of the theory suggested by Plato should also be critically considered in the contemporary setting. His categorical division of society into fixed classes is not consistent with the modern ideals of equality, freedom, and social mobility. Contemporary democratic societies focus on the rights of individuals and freedom of people to follow their careers and roles. In contrast with the ideal state described by Plato, where roles are predetermined, the current systems promote diversity, innovation, and choice. But despite this loose structure, there is the principle of responsibility and efficiency. Additionally, it is true that the scepticism Plato has towards democracy might seem out of date in a world where democracy is the norm. However, his worries regarding ignorant choices, populism, and the abuse of freedom still resonated. Plato cautioned against the evils of misinformation, identity politics, and populist short-termism policies, all of which are reflected in many modern political issues. His criticism is a reminder that democracy cannot be effective without education, ethical leaders, and institutional protection. To sum up, the theory of justice by Plato has been a powerful and lasting model of the moral and political aspects of society. Although his ideal state might not be



applicable at all, the main concepts of harmony, ethical leadership, specialization, and responsibility are still relevant. Through the thoughts presented by Plato, we are prompted to consider the underlying principles of justice and how individuals and institutions can help to make the society more balanced and fairer.

Conclusion

According to Plato, the theory of justice provides an in depth and all-inclusive view of how the individual and the state relate to one another. Defining justice as harmony he has given a system which combines both moral philosophy and political organization. His discussion emphasizes that there should be balance, order and responsibility when it comes to realizing a just society. The important focus on the ethical aspect of politics is one of the strengths of the theory of Plato. He contends that justice does not only revolve around the external laws but the internal status of people. This notion promotes a more insightful conception of justice as a moral value and not an institutional notion. Simultaneously, the criticism of democracy by Plato and his idea of the philosopher-king are critical inquiries into the matters of governance. Though his ideas are not entirely consistent with the contemporary ideals of democracy, they make us consider the place of knowledge, competence, and ethics in leadership. Even today his fears of the misuse of freedom and the power of opinion that is uninformed have their place. In a wrap up, the theory of Plato remains a major contribution to the political philosophy. Despite some limitations, its main principles can teach great lessons about the essence of justice and the role of moral responsibility. Through the ideas of Plato, we have a better idea of how difficult it is to build an ideal and harmonious society.

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