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PLATONIC JUSTICE FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM?

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Introductory remarks

Before answering the posed question as to whether a Platonic form of justice will suffice in the new millennium, I would like to put forward a few general remarks on the concept of *justice*.

Ever since the creation of the man and his involvement in specific social and political structures, he/she was confronted by a majority of rules, duties and obligations - be it divine, judicial or moral. One of these rules or obligations evolved around the concept of justice, eventually leading to certain crucial questions such as to the nature and scope of justice. In the Old Testament and in the *Iliad* for example, justice was very much bound up with the punishment, or more accurately, with retribution and revenge. But even by the time of Socrates and in the teachings of Jesus, revenge had been clearly separated from justice and was viewed as a vice instead of a virtue. The problem of punishment would remain a central concern of every imperfect society, but justice became more a matter of social harmony (in Plato) and mercy (in Christian ethics). In Plato, the ideal of justice was bound up with the ideal community, while in the Torah, and later in the Gospels and Koran, the idea of justice was bound up with belief in and obedience to a merciful God. But even in ancient times, the concept of justice had particular application to the details of ordinary household life, to the question of fair wages and the distribution of rewards and honours. The particular concept of justice developed by Aristotle, for example, has much to do with *fair* exchange and "equality" (that is, more accurate, proportion) or what we would call "desert," what a person *deserves* or has *earned*. In modern times, the focus of justice has come to be more concentrated on such questions of distribution and exchange and, particular, questions of private property and individual liberty. But here, too, the apparent focus reveals a blur of competing images (such as South Africa and other countries on the African continent has experienced): How are we to reconcile the supposedly inalienable right of individuals to own private property with the tragic existence of misery and poverty in the same society; misery and poverty which is often not unrelated to precisely the same activities

through which the wealthy obtained their property? How are we to reconcile the rights of individuals to hold onto property that they did not in any sense earn (e.g. through inheritance or lucky bet in the state lottery) with our insistence that people should earn and thus deserve what they've got? Indeed, insofar as justice is the legal and moral right to hold onto what one already has, is it too far-fetched to suggest that, once again, we find ourselves faced, in neo-Thrasymachian language, with the rights of the stronger, the entitlement of the powerful and the privileged to hold onto what they already have? What are the rights, in such a framework, of the poor and unpropertied? Or are we putting too much emphasis on property rights as the focus of justice? Are other rights and liberties not ultimately more important than the right to unlimited ownership? And is the overall public good not more important than the rights and liberties of any particular individual? Or should our focus be somewhere else as well, on the conception of universal equality, according to which it is any difference in the distribution of wealth that needs justification, instead of the alternative presumption that established differences are by that fact legitimate, and it is any redistribution that needs justification?

When turning our attention to a more philosophical interpretation of justice, we are confronted, on the one hand by an invitation to the most abstract sort of philosophical speculation. Questions posed in this regard could be as follows: What is the good (the best) society? What makes a government legitimate? What kind of creatures did (or does) God (or Nature) intend us to be? What is our essential relationship to our fellow beings, and what obligations do we have to one another? Where do these obligations come from? On the other hand, the question of justice focuses our attention on the concrete problems of our times: Is it just for there to be poor people living virtually nextdoor to people who have more money than they could ever possibly spend? Is it fair that hard-working people of considerable talent go unrewarded, while others, smiled-upon by fortune and raised with wealth and power, are constantly "rewarded" in return for no work and no contribution to society whatever? Should the rich be taxed to help the poor? Should "unearned income" be taxed in the same way as "earned" income? Should men and women receive the same wages for the same jobs, without regard to need? Should people be paid or should students be graded on the basis of their efforts or their results? Do people whose ancestors were treated unfairly deserve compensation for what their grandfathers suffered? What should a society do with

those who break the law? Should we execute criminals for the most heinous crimes? A theory of justice has the extremely difficult task of bridging this abyss between the abstract and the eminently practical. No theory of justice can long remain on the luxurious level of philosophical speculation without diving down into the particularities of social life, but no attempt to solve the problems of daily politics can long sustain itself without reaching up to the heights of philosophy, struggling as Socrates struggled to come to grips with the definition of justice, with its essential nature and justification.

A Platonic account of justice

For Plato and for Aristotle after him, justice, in its most general sense, was the *essential virtue*, the *virtue most important* for the "social animals" that we are, living together in ever-larger communities, cities, and nation-states. But even in the *Republic*, the answer to that question is at best controversial and provides no clear criteria for making the choices - just or unjust - that we make in everyday life. Socrates dispatches his various interlocutors and their proposed answers, such as "justice is giving and getting one's due," but it is not at all evident that, after rejecting such context-bound and merely conventional replies, Socrates is able to supply a single definition and provide a singular criterion that accounts for justice in its various contexts. He says in the *Republic* Book IV, that justice is "doing one's own" every person's performing his or her proper role in the community - but it is by no means obvious how we should translate this into concrete decisions and policies.

We do, however, become clear about what justice is not. In one of the classic early exchanges in the *Republic*, Thrasymachus argues the ultra cynical line that justice always serves the interests of the rulers of the society, "the advantage of the stronger." If you are an ordinary person, you are only hurting yourself by trying to live in accordance with justice. This shocking thesis is refuted by Socrates. Right is properly distinguished from mere might, and Thrasymachus walks off in a huff. In Thrasymachus' abandoned place, Glaucon suggests a more modest hypothesis, that justice is ultimately just a matter of self-interest, and people adhere to its conventions only to avoid punishment. Socrates takes this suggestion much more seriously, but he ultimately insists that justice is not merely a matter of convention and, in the vulgar sense intended, it is not a matter of self-interest either. But then Socrates spends the rest of the *Republic* taking us through a whirlwind of philosophical considerations as he speculates about metaphysics

and human nature, praises (some of) the political ideals of ancient Greece, and introduces his own rather radical republicanism to show that justice must be counted as desirable for its own sake, that justice is harmony in the soul as it is harmony in the state, that justice is the rule of reason and, finally, that justice even "pays off" in the end, for the just man can ultimately suffer no harm (to his soul, at least). But what we do not get - what we thought we would get - is anything like an adequate criterion concerning what sorts of considerations we should use in evaluating this or that social arrangement or rule. Plato does tell us that responsibility should be delegated in accordance with ability and "place," but what about the distribution of wealth in society? As a spokesman for the aristocracy, Plato was disdainful of money and markets and said very little about them. How should the goods of society get distributed? What should we do about the poor? How much should a doctor or a lawyer or a soldier or a tradesman be paid. What Socrates promises us is a standard of justice; what we get is an elaborate metaphor. But so it has been ever since, with the great discussions of justice.

Should we, for a moment, focus on certain aspects of Plato's conception of social justice as amplified in the *Republic*, certain interesting features present themselves. Having founded the perfect (good) city Socrates and his interlocutors hopefully look into it (427d ff) for the four social virtues: wisdom, courage, self-discipline and justice (*dikaiosune*). These virtues belong to the city because of the virtuous state of the several classes: the guardians are wise with good judgement, the military forces are courageous, i.e. safely preserve in all circumstances the opinion or power to judge, acquired by education - what aid, what sort of things are to be feared (this is a second order courage without full knowledge, which is also called "ordinary citizen's courage"). Third, we find that the city has self-discipline, i.e. the simple and moderate desires in the minority guide the desires of the less respectable majority. Government and subject agree who ought to rule, it is a kind of concord which stretches across the classes. Fourth and finally, justice, i.e. minding your own business and not interfering with the business of other people, a quality that involves also the right of property, will be a quality of each individual, child, woman, slave, free man, artisan, ruler or subject. Thus, although a quality shared by all members of society it is administered by the rulers only. Justice is really what contributes most to the goodness of the city in so far as it makes the other virtues possible and preserves them when they have come into being.

Turning to the individual it is assumed that the virtuous qualities will mean the same when applied to different objects (435ab). Hence just as justice in the state meant that its three natural constituents are doing their job and the other social virtues meant different states of the classes, so, the individual has the same three elements in his soul, we shall expect the same virtues in the individual. However, the assumption that the individual does contain the same three elements seems warranted first by the realisation that the state must take its elements from the individual, and second from an application of a version of the principle of non-contradiction. This leads to assuming the presence of three elements in the human soul: reason, irrational appetite and aggression (indignation) (435e44 1b).

Now individual justice turns out to be the mental state where each part of us performs its proper function, meaning that reason rules and spirit obeys and supports, while desire just obeys. This concord is effected by training in argument and (in the case of spirit) by harmony and rhythm. Courage is then spirit capable of holding fast to the orders of reason about the fearful or not fearful. Wisdom is the knowledge of reason; what is best for each part and the whole. Self-discipline finally is the friendly agreement of the three elements that reason shall rule. Justice in the individual is no different from social justice: each element performs its proper function. This produces men that do not embezzle money deposited, commit sacrilege or theft, betray friends or the country, break promises, commit adultery, dishonour parents or are irreligious. In other words, Platonic justice which is basically internal harmony secures ordinary justice and we may assume that ordinary just acts help to establish it as indeed ordinary unjust acts are destructive of it.

There is an exact analogy between the state of justice and injustice and bodily health and sickness. And just as healthy activities produce health and unhealthy ones produce sickness, so just actions produce justice and unjust ones produce injustice. Hence excellence is a kind of mental health, beauty or fitness (444de).

Justice and knowledge of the Good

Plato wants the philosophers after five years of intensive philosophical study (dialectic) and 15 (enforced) practical years in the Cave to have a vision of the Good and then spend the rest of

their lives philosophizing, interrupted by necessary duties in turn as rulers of society. The philosophers should take the Good itself as a pattern (*paradeigma*) for ordering the state, others and themselves (540ab). If it be asked what relevance the transcendent Good could have for us, Plato would reply that if you do not have knowledge of the Good itself you wouldn't know any good (534c) and thus be able to act rationally in public or privately (517c). This is the concise answer which we must face and try to explicate. In fact, the philosopher contemplates not only the Good, but also the forms, a realm without injustice, and imitates them and assimilates himself as far as possible. That is, he acquires the characteristics of order and divinity so far as a man may (500cd). In the *Timaeus* (90cd) we are recommended to model ourselves on the divine circles in the sense of making our own circles (reason) move in the same regular way as the heavenly circles. This is perhaps more intelligible than the advice to imitate the Good which may give the impression of being a remote abstract principle of no relevance for material existence. However, this is a misconception. The model of the Good appears to have much more content than the divine circles.

The question of the function of the Good in the overall strategy of the *Republic* is important: Why do the philosophers need to ascend to the transcendent Good in abstract thought, in order to order their souls? Or society? Not only does it not seem necessary but there seems to be the side-effect that the philosophers become absorbed in theoretical studies and have to be forced back into the Cave, being compelled to introduce the standards of justice, self-discipline, etc., to themselves and others (500d).

Unfortunately, Plato is not particularly clear about the Good. This is surprising as he suggests that we shall be in for the most exact account of morality, one that is more precise than the earlier sketch, i.e. the psychological definition the virtues given in Book 4 (504b-e). We expect then to be presented with a precise and 'clean' object of thought (504e1-2). Instead we get metaphysical indications (similes) in the *Sun* and the Cave and a hint in the *Line*. However, there are also some scattered remarks of value and of course the final discussion of dialectic in 532-4.

The goal of dialectic is the Good which is reached by pure reason, first getting at what each thing is in itself (532ab, 534b) and then from there by destruction of assumptions to the very first principle which gives the greatest clarity (533cd). One must be able to determine and distinguish (*aphelou*) the form of the Good from

everything else. Otherwise one cannot be said to know what the Good itself is, nor indeed any other good (534bc). The form of the Good is responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, and anyone who is going to act rationally either in public or private life must have sight of it (517c), the brightest of all realities (518c9). It helps one to distinguish shadows and know what they are shadows of because one has seen the truth about things admirable and just and good (520c). (Cf the internal standards, 591b ff.) The Good makes just actions *useful* (505a,e). This means that we may know "in what way (*hope*) the just admirable are good" (506a). It also means that the Good must be consulted in both politics and in private life. The link between the form of the Good and practical life and politics must be virtues in their more exact definition. Unfortunately, Plato again lets us down. We must speculate that they resemble abstract Socratic principles such as that one should never harm anybody. The just philosopher in any case has a bigger share in Justice (472c). It must remain speculation how this is to be spelled out. For instance, what is the relation of the Good to the Ideal City? The latter is a *paradeigma* laid up in heaven where he who wishes can see it and establish himself (as a citizen) (592b). It might be thought that the *Republic* is a written account of the political ethical part of the Good. However, the ideal city is not a form: though stable (422c-423a.d) and unified (422a-424b), it is merely a *paradeigma* in the sense of an art-object (472c-e, 500d, 592b), however divine. Furthermore, it is actually realisable, though with difficulty (502c, 540d), and its realisation is liable to destruction just as all other creations (546a). Hence, the most we can say is that the pattern of the ideal state is, of course, inspired by the Good but it is not identical with it, even in part.

Justice and reason

Reason is an organ with an innate capacity (518c,e) but this capacity must be activated by the Good just as sight needs light (507d ff). It is the part of soul with which it is proper that we touch the forms and having mixed with them, it generates intelligence and truth (490b). So the Good is good for reason. Is this reason then incomposite? It is difficult to believe that the immortal soul has parts that are badly fitted together. At present we see the soul as composite because it is influenced by the body. To know its true nature we must look to the soul's love of wisdom if that were allowed to lift it out of the sea of materiality; then it would appear whether it is composite or single (611b-612a). It seems as if Plato deliberately left

it an open question whether the immortal soul is composite or not. However, it cannot be concluded that it is incomposite; it is possible that it has parts that fit perfectly together. However, the monolithic philosophic urge toward the forms point to its unity. What does threaten that unity is its obligation to rule, or to put it differently, embodiment is the problem.

If this is so, we can ask why then are philosophers compelled to the vision of the Good (519c)? Because Plato's proposing a new elitist education based on a new psychology and metaphysics, and it is his job as a lawgiver to compel here. Compulsion is involved also in the return to the *Cave*, though persuasion plays a role in the latter case (520a-e). If philosophers are compelled to leave their paradise of contemplation (519c, 517de, 421c) it must have some effect on the unity of their souls. It is regarded as an 'unavoidable necessity' (520e) and considering the absolute difference of necessity and the Good (493e) we may feel that politics and philosophy must cause a split in the soul.

The reason for compulsion is that they owe their education and indeed their contemplation of the forms to the city that raised them, and Plato's intention with the city is not the happiness of one class solely, but of the city as a whole (cf420b-421c).

Hence it is a just demand of just men (519e ff). Is it then not at all in the interest of the philosophers to return to the *Cave*? Could they be just without entering politics? Assuming that they have occasion to devote their whole life to contemplation (which is likely), would they be able to acquire justice and be just as contemplators of the Forms and the Good? Aren't we told that the philosopher mixes with the truly real and begets intelligence and truth accompanied by virtue (490bc, 611c, cf *Sym* 212a)?

The answer of course depends on what true justice is: is it merely a state of mind, either moral (Book iv) or perhaps just intellectual (Books vi-vii), or is it also an active life (as we would be inclined to think). If it is a purely intellectual state then justice would be reduced to contemplation and there is no compelling evidence that Plato envisages this (the passages just referred to need not by themselves support such a view). Justice is viewed as a mental state in Book iv, but it requires just action to be established and maintained (443e-444e). However, this is a preliminary and imprecise account of justice, the philosopher needs to press forward to get an insight into the Good. When it is then asked whether the

philosopher at that advanced stage really needs the city to be just the answer must be Yes. He cannot just sit back in his armchair and be just. He must imitate the Good. What does this mean? True, if the philosopher is to act rationally publicly or privately, he needs to see the Good (517c4-5). But this implies surely that he is supposed to lead an active life. If he needs, as do all other humans, to act rationally publicly and privately he needs and has an interest in entering politics. However, one might object, if he has an interest why is he *compelled* to weave the standards he has seen into both himself and others (500d, 591b ff). One might argue that this is a sacrifice to the state. The reason, however, seems to be that he is not yet just while contemplating, and ruling is not his most obvious interest as a thinker. However, in the wider perspective as a *human being* ruling is necessary and therefore in his interest. Otherwise put, justice is in his interest and justice requires him to rule. But even the philosopher may be blind to his own interest. He needs Plato's guiding hand. He is the lawgiver (519cc) and, after all, the author of the *Republic*.

The relation between individual and social justice

We have seen that Plato is of the opinion that it is not possible to be just outside or apart from society. Further, one word more, justice must be part of the good life and that justice can only be realised with a just community of individuals. Why is this so?

According to Plato, individual justice at a certain level, was seen to be a kind of mental health, a harmonious state, brought about by intellectual and physical training (441e f). This is likely to occur only in the philosopher in whom reason is strong enough to impose itself. The other classes, and certainly the working class, would need external control of wisdom. When it comes to fully developed justice, ordinary people of ordinary intelligence of course cannot achieve justice without the guidance of philosophers (590cd), and thus they need society to secure their being just. Does this imply that the philosopher is self-sufficient and in no need of others (society)? It is certainly not implied that he does not need society to be just. On the contrary, we have already seen that he must decide and act rationally, both politically and privately, as do other human beings. Also, basically he needs 'public' education of his intellect and feelings (441ef;cf 410a-412a). Moreover, public opinion is clearly important for the education of the ruler (492e, cf 540e ff). The education here is of course to a great extent of the feelings (Aristotle's "ethical virtues"), in contrast to the higher education of

the intellect which is another matter certainly requiring other persons (for dialectical exercise), though not necessarily a city. However, education of the feelings is necessary to be just in any case. One passage, however, has been taken as implying that he does not need society (592ab). However, that passage says merely that the philosopher will not enter politics in the *present* society, not that he would not in the planned city. If this is so, then we may fairly assume that everybody would need society to be just.

At this stage we may ask whether the same dependence on the city hold for being mentally healthy, flourishing (*eudaimon*) and feeling pleasure? Do we as individuals need society for these purposes in the planned city? Again we must distinguish between the mental health, flourishing and pleasure of the members of the three classes.

Insofar as justice can be seen, at one level, as mental health, we can transfer to mental health the results above on justice and its dependence on society. All of us need society not only to develop a good mental constitution, but also to keep it up. As for flourishing it seems to follow on mental health (427d. 357e). Hence, if individual justice is identical with mental health then it means welfare too, and indeed the only way to fare well in so far as we cannot flourish without mental health. Furthermore, if we need the city to be healthy, it follows that we also need the city to flourish. The satisfaction of contemplation would depend on mental health. So although it may give us undeniable bliss, it depends on mental health which in turn is dependent on the city.

The flourishing and pleasure of the various constitutions and corresponding individuals are dealt with in detail in Book ix (576ff). We are given a series of arguments that the philosopher's pleasures are greater than those of others. (1) The philosopher king and monarchy or aristocracy are happiest, the tyrant and tyranny are unhappiest when judged in terms of fear and lack of freedom (577c-580c). (2) When we judge and compare the lives of those who strive for knowledge, success and gain in terms of pleasure we must use *experience, intelligence and reason* as standards. Now the philosopher is the one with the best experience, the only one with intelligence (*phronesis*) and reason (*logoi*). Hence the philosopher's preferences, philosophical pleasures, are most pleasant. (580d-583a) (3) Again, in terms of *truth* philosophic pleasures are genuine while the pleasures of gain and of ambition are unreal (cessation of pain or mixed with pain) unless guided by knowledge and reason, in

which case they may contain an element of truth. Hence each element may be just and happy in its own, and the corresponding constitutions may be happy in their way (583b-5S7b). This means that the military and the working class cannot flourish except in a sham way without the guidance of the philosophers. They need a perfect society for their genuine welfare. However, the reason for their need of society is different from the reason for philosophers needing society: as already mentioned, they need society as a formative environment in their primary education and later, when established philosophers, they obviously need a supportive society to feed and protect them.

A final question in this regard: Does a society need just, good and thriving citizens? The answer is: Yes. Society consists of individual lives and shares the duality of those lives in the sense that its qualities stem from their qualities (435e). So in an obvious sense the good society needs good people, and good people here means good philosophers, good military and good workers. Unless they are each 'doing their job' the city will fall apart. Can we then answer our initial question about the integration of individual and social order positively? I think we must. The two are truly integrated if the one presupposes the other and *vice versa*. Society cannot be just without the justice of its members and *vice versa*. Similarly, we cannot expect a fully thriving society without each and every of its members thriving in a way appropriate to their nature and place in society.

Concluding remarks

At this stage we look closer to the posed question: Can a Platonic form of justice suffice in the new millennium? Will a Platonic form of justice be more beneficial to mankind in the year 2000 and onwards - more than in the present millennium? This question immediately leads to other questions such as: What was the quality of justice employed and enforced by social and political structures throughout the world? Was/is justice part of a recognised value system? Or more specific, was/is justice accompanied by (or was/is it part of) recognised norms and values? Despite the non-agreement between Plato and Aristotle on the proper usage or interpretation of the concept justice - be it to *eson* or *isotes* meaning *equality* or *dikaiousune* meaning righteousness, we are entitled to ask: Did we and are we living in a world (e.g. in South Africa) where freedom, brotherhood, equality and righteousness existed/exist as *values* and thereby *ethical principles* as Plato intended to be?

Reading through those sections of the *Republic* which has bearing on the concept of justice, I often wondered who we are presently following: Socrates or Thrasymachus. After the impressive words of Socrates that justice is human excellence, that the Good and the Just are one, that justice is a value, we read the following:

Socrates: "Polemarchus and I were afraid and flustered as he (Thrasymachus) roared into the middle of our company."

Thrasymachus: "What nonsense have you been talking, Socrates? Why do you play the fool..."

Socrates: "His words startled me, and glancing at him I was afraid. I think if I had not looked at him before he looked at me, I should have been speechless. As it was that I has glanced at him first...I was able to answer him...trembling."

This conversation took place in ancient times but in my opinion we have many politicians and decision makers turning their backs on a value and normative founded interpretation of justice and thereby joining the company of Thrasymachus that justice must serve the interest of the rulers of society and thereby being to the *advantage of the stronger* - that you are only hurting yourself by trying to live in accordance with justice. Is this not happening at present in Cosovo - a war being raged in the name of justice but actually for own beneficial reasons - for self-interest and to the advantage of the stronger?

Over and against this rather cynical interpretation of justice by Thrasymachus, we hear what justice really is namely an *essential virtue* - a virtue *most important* for the citizens living together in ever-larger communities, cities, and nation-states. Justice is also an essential *social value* like wisdom, courage and self-discipline. It (justice) is *harmony in the soul* as it is *harmony in the state*, that justice is the *rule of reason*. Justice is really what contributes most to the *goodness of the city* in so far as *it makes the other virtues possible and preserves them when they have come into being*. It is not something in existence outside the human being. Rather it is part of him - it is a *state of mind*, either moral or perhaps just intellectual, or is it also an active life. Justice must create an *internal harmony* leading to the harmony of the soul.

The very general issues that faced Socrates in the *Republic* are still with us today. Are our standards of justice, ultimately, in the interest of the stronger, the more established and most powerful citizens? Is faithfully following the principles of justice in any sense in one's own interest and to one's own advantage? Is our concept of

justice really just a social convention, perhaps a matter of agreement among the members of this society but possibly quite different in others? Indeed, given the enormous amount of disagreement among us concerning the correct conception of justice, can we suppose with any confidence that there is, ultimately, some single standard or "definition" to be found? But in addition, there are all of those other, more specific and more urgent practical questions that need resolution, both ancient and very modern. How should we think of punishment, as retaliation or as retribution or as mere public revenge against those who have criminally assaulted us or violated our laws or as a more future-oriented attempt to deter future crime and reform wayward citizens? How should we understand that very modern sense in which everyone is "created equal"? How do we (or can we) justify - and from what perspective should we view the often enormous disparities between the rich and the poor? How do we weigh the importance of individual rights and liberties against the public good? And how much trust should we put in that peculiarly modern social institution - the free market - as a vehicle for assuring justice? Or is that the wrong way to look at the role of the marketplace in society? Perhaps the market defines its own conception of justice and should not be treated as a mere means to other, possibly archaic conceptions. Perhaps the market replaces or is incompatible with the concept of justice. All of this presumes, of course, that there is an adequate answer to the original question, "What is justice?" Is it fairness? Is it equal treatment? Is it desert? Is it "getting one's due"? And does this concept of justice depend on a particular context, a particular set of social goals and conventions, or is it something bigger and more universal than that, perhaps provided by God or in any case an intrinsic part of human nature?

Despite its obvious importance and eminent practicality, the question of justice seems to come and go as a central topic of concern, and by the beginning of this century it was eclipsed somewhere along the line and fell out of favour in contemporary philosophy. Perhaps the rather expansive question of justice was put aside to make room for other social and moral questions that seemed to have more precision. Perhaps the rather expansive question of justice was put aside because social and political philosophy had been eclipsed for such a long time by metaphysics and theology and, more recently, dismissed as tangential to "mainstream" interests in epistemology and the philosophy of language. Perhaps it was because the question of justice came to

seem too practical to philosophers concerned with much more abstract questions and too immense to philosophers focussed on seemingly much more manageable issues. Perhaps it was because the interest in human nature fell under the anthropologist's or the existentialist's axe or simply shifted into the social science departments. Perhaps it became too apparent that seemingly abstract theories of justice had long stood as facades for other more immediate concerns - to legitimize a revolution or a dictatorship, or to defend the status quo and the sanctity of private property, for example. But it is safe to say that the subject of justice, perhaps in somewhat altered form or as part of some related concern, perhaps in the guise of a shadow or even in its very absence, has been at the core of social thinking ever since Plato and Aristotle.

Today, however, it is clear that the question of justice has returned to centre stage in Anglo-American philosophy. In 1971, Harvard philosopher John Rawls, published his epochal book, *A Theory of Justice*, and the old Socratic question has never been more alive. Only three years later, Rawls' younger colleague, Robert Nozick published his own theory of justice, a very different sort of theory indeed and something of a rejoinder to Rawls. Between the two of them, quite a dialectic has been established (though the two of them have rarely responded in public to one another), and the ferocity of the debate has even spilled over into popular press (e.g., *Esquire* magazine (March 1983) "Robert Nozick vs. John Rawls"). The difference between the two might be (and is often) characterized as the difference between a "liberal" and a "libertarian" theory, but such politically loaded designations do little to help philosophical understanding. In a nutshell, Rawls tries to find a proper ordering between equality and liberty with particular concern for the needs of the "least advantaged" in society; Nozick is anxious to defend a particularly strong notion of "entitlement," such that a just world would be one in which everyone had just what they were entitled to, without reference to needs or inequalities. But the dispute is, for all of its current interest and importance only the most recent and rather narrow manifestation of a 3,000 (and more) year old debate. Rawls's concern for universal equality and individual liberty would not have been intelligible to Plato and Aristotle, and Nozick's exclusive insistence on private property rights and virtually total neglect of any concept of "community" would have horrified them (as it still does most cultures around the world). But what is particularly revealing is that neither Rawls nor Nozick adequately acknowledge what the ancients and many moderns would consider the heart of

justice, and that is the concept of desert. Moreover, both of them are concerned only tangentially with questions of punishment and with questions of social status and honours that cannot be "cashed out" in economic terms.

A final word: As in past and present times, we will, in the new millennium, hear the cries for justice. Many will probably lose their lives in the name of justice. Maybe we as philosophers will find it beneficial to become citizens of the Platonic Ideal State - to live in the world of what "ought to be" instead of participating in the world of the "here and now." To quote Cephalus:

"Whoever lives a just life:

Sweet is the hope that nurtures his heart,

companion and nurse to his old age,

a hope which governs the rapidly changing thoughts of mortals."