PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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1. Introduction

May I begin with a confession? I am neither a classical scholar nor a philosopher. Nor indeed have I any knowledge of Greek, ancient or modern. Law is my field. Yet here I stand, proposing to address you on the subject of Plato. The only excuse that I can offer for my presumption is my love of Plato, albeit that my only exposure to his work has been through translations. It is not strange that a lawyer should love Plato, for his teaching is full of law, both natural and man-made.

My subject today is perhaps the most famous and influential of the Platonic dialogues, the Republic. This immortal work, which may fairly be described as the founding charter of Western civilisation, deals with many questions of fundamental importance in the fields of philosophy, education, political science and economics. My concern, however, is the central theme of the dialogue; the inquiry into the nature and operation of justice. This quest is the subject of a mighty debate between Socrates and his associates. Reason is the golden thread which runs through this debate, as it does through the whole of Platonic teaching.

What is justice? Is justice more profitable than injustice? How does justice in the individual differ from justice in the State? What are the respective rewards of justice and injustice? These are but some of the questions, all of them of timeless importance to mankind, that are so vigorously and profoundly explored by Socrates and his companions.

Those who are looking for a critical analysis of the argument in the Republic will not find it here. My aim is simply to set forth a number
of principles that emerge from the inquiry into justice. On the strength of these principles, I shall conclude that the notion of justice championed by Socrates in the Republic is, at the most fundamental level, neither political, nor legal, nor social, nor even economic. Instead, Platonic justice is, in essence, a spiritual quality, a facet of absolute and unchanging truth. There is of course, nothing new in this assertion. But the spiritual character of Plato’s teaching is today so frequently overlooked, if not ignored, that a reminder may be timely.

In reducing Plato’s teaching on justice to a set of bare statements of principle, I skate on thin ice, for there are those who would reject any attempt to summarise or systematise his ideas. I have other confessions to make. Firstly, I rely largely on Benjamin Jowett’s translation, which is graceful and fluent, if somewhat dated. Jowett, of course, has always had his detractors, but can the same not be said of every other translator of Plato? Secondly, my practice of referring to the views of Socrates and Plato more or less interchangeably will be unacceptable to some. My defense is that in a paper which deals with the substance, not the provenance of the teaching on justice in the Republic, such an unscholarly practice does not result in material distortion. Moreover, a number of writers maintain that it is difficult to be sure where the thought of Socrates ends and that of Plato begins. Some go further: WKC Guthrie, for example, holds that Plato and Socrates are an inseparable unity. Finally, for the sake of brevity, I have done violence to the form of the Socratic dialogue by presenting Socrates’ views on justice as though they were his unilateral pronouncements. In fact, as every ready of Plato knows, each of these views represents, in form if not in substance, a consensus position arrived at by Socrates and his interlocutor through a bilateral process of question and answer. I believe, however, that I have done no violence to the substance, and it is the substance alone of the Socratic teaching in the Republic that this paper is concerned with.

2. A Synopsis of the Socratic Teaching on Justice in the Republic

In setting forth the key principles, I shall adhere to the sequence in the text of the dialogue, deviating only where this is unavoidable.
2.1. The injuring of another can never be just (335e).

At the start of the debate (331c & 332c), Socrates and his associates examine the proposition, attributed to the poet Simonides, that justice is to speak the truth and to give each what is proper to him.

Socrates neither accepts nor rejects that proposition. His own definition of justice, which I consider below, is arguably broad enough to embrace that of Simonides. The latter notion is essentially a legalistic one; giving to each his due is all about meting out punishments and rewards according to deserts. There is a proportionality, a balance, which satisfies one’s inherent sense of fairness. Simonides’ definition has exerted an immense influence on Western legal thought; it lies at the root of both major Western legal systems, the Roman and the English. It has been adopted by the leading institutional writers on the Roman-Dutch law.

What Socrates does reject is the way in which this definition is interpreted by his companion, Polemarchus, to mean that justice is the art of doing good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies. This, as Socrates shows (335e), cannot be true, not even when one’s friends are good and one’s enemies are evil. The truth is that the injuring of another can never be just. The rationale is that he who is injured is necessarily diminished in justice, that is, he is made unjust (335c). On the strength of this principle alone, a political system such as apartheid can be condemned as unjust.

Socrates is not suggesting here that wrongdoers ought to escape punishment; that would be a travesty of justice. It follows that when a court imposes an appropriate punishment on a wrongdoer, there is no injury and thus no injustice is done. On the contrary, such punishment is a necessary corrective which will ultimately redound to the benefit of the wrongdoer (591 b-c; see also Gorgias 476a, 478d, 479d). Socrates, in other words, holds that the aim of punishment is the rehabilitation or reformation of the wrongdoer. Not all modern criminologists would agree with him here.

2.2. A comparison of justice with injustice shows, firstly, that justice imparts harmony, while injustice creates divisions and discord (351 d); secondly, that injustice can never be more advantageous or profitable than justice (354a; 367b&e; 445a&b).

In establishing the first of these propositions, Socrates notes (352c) that a wholly unjust person, assuming that such exists, would be
incapable of action in concert with others. Thus, if a group of persons, be it the cabinet or a criminal gang, engage in a collaborative enterprise, they cannot succeed unless each of them possesses a minimal residue of justice. Justice, therefore, sets us free to act, while injustice inhibits action. This link between justice and collective action is as surprising as it is significant. Its significance is that it applies to all collaborative human activities; justice, undefined though it may be at this stage, according to Socrates, is essential to the success of such activities.

In arriving at the second principle, namely that justice is more advantageous than injustice, Socrates explains the function of justice in the human soul: Justice, he says (353d&e), is the characteristic or essential quality of the soul, which enables it to perform its proper function of superintending, commanding, deliberating and the like.

2.3. Justice is as much a virtue of the State as of the individual, and is more easily discernible in the State than in the individual (368e).

In each of us, says Socrates, there are the same principles and habits which exist in the State. From the individual they pass into the State. Since the State is larger than the individual, justice is likely to be more easily discernible in the State than in the individual. In the Republic, therefore, Socrates examines justice and injustice, first as they appear "writ large" in the State, and afterwards as they appear in the individual, proceeding from the greater to the lesser and comparing them (369a).

The question arises whether the modus operandi chosen by Socrates is sound. Is it in principle true that a quality such as justice is more easily discoverable in the large than in the small? Is not the opposite true? Socrates' companions do not challenge him on this point, but the import of the famous oracular injunction "know thyself is that self-knowledge precedes all other knowledge. It ought to follow that the practical operation of justice and injustice is best studied through one's own self-observation. Socrates, no doubt, would have had an answer to this challenge.

2.4 Justice is but one of the four virtues in the ideal State (427d). Moreover, justice (dikaiosynē) is the highest of these virtues, for it is the ultimate cause of the existence of the other three, which
are wisdom (*sophia*), courage (*andreia*) and temperance (*sōphrosynē*) (433b).

The exploration of the virtues other than justice falls beyond the scope of this paper, albeit that they are all closely interrelated.

2.5 Socrates defines justice as the principle that a man should do the one thing which is natural to him, do it at the right time, and leave other things (370c, 433a).

We come at last to the central principle in the *Republic*, the Socratic notion of justice. Here, in the words of Socrates, are some other formulations of this principle:

• "[O]ne man should practise one thing only, the thing to which his nature [is] best adapted; now justice is this principle or a part of it....[J]ustice [is] doing one's own business, and not being a busybody" (433a, d).

• "Justice is the having and doing what is a man's own and belongs to him" (434a).

• "[E]ach individual should be put to the use for which nature intended him, one to one work, and then every man would do his own business, and be one and not many; and so the whole city would be one and not many"(423d).

The essence of the concept, according to R M Hare, is "doing one's own duty."

Socratic justice, as portrayed in these statements, looks disarmingly simple. Simple it may be, but shallow it certainly is not; the notion is subtle and wide-ranging in its application both to the State and to the individual.

I turn now to consider the practical operation of Socratic justice, first in the State (that is, in the external world of day-to-day human activities), then in the individual (that is, internally or within man). This examination will shed more light on the essential nature of Socratic justice.

In the *Republic*, Socrates gives a number of examples of the operation of justice in relation to the State (346a&d; 370b&c; 373d & 374d; 394e & 398a; 434a&c). Let us now consider a few of these. In our first example, Socrates postulates the case of a warrior who tries
to perform the function of a legislator (434b). Or, he asks, what if "one man is trader, legislator and warrior all in one" (434b)? In such cases, a person assumes a function for which he is unsuited. For Socrates, this is not merely inefficient or impractical, as we might choose to describe it; it is unjust. Such confusion of one function with another is the ruin of the State, says Socrates (434b&c, 421a). Plato demonstrates here his power to surprise; many would hardly see injustice in conduct which appears on the face of it to be no worse than inefficient. By the same token, Socrates adds, when the trader, the warrior and the legislator each performs his own function, justice will prevail and will make the city just (434c).

Here is a second example. Socrates asks: "[W]ill you have a work better done when the workman has many occupations, or when he has only one?" (370b&c) The answer is obvious in the light of the definitions quoted earlier, but in giving it, Socrates brings to the fore an important element of his concept of justice. He says that all things are produced more plentifully and easily and of a better quality when "one man does one thing which is natural to him and does it at the right time, and leaves other things" (370c). This formulation of justice (which, needless to say, is not confined to the activity of producing goods), emphasises the crucial element of timing. It is not enough that a person performs the function to which she is best fitted: for justice to prevail, the function must be performed at the right time. Take the case of a builder: Socratic justice would require of him, first, an aptitude for and a lifelong dedication to his trade, to the exclusion of every other occupation. Secondly, the builder's skills have to be deployed in the service of his client, at the time when the client has need of them, and at no other time. This may sound trite, but the point here, as before, is that if the builder neglects the principle, his conduct is not merely wasteful or uneconomic, but unjust. Such a situation is a serious one: as we have seen, Socrates describes it (434c) as the "ruin of the state" (434c).

These first two examples are not intended to suggest that justice, as Socrates conceives it, is confined to the choice and exercise of an occupation. Nor is it confined to activities associated with ongoing relationships, for example, those between employer and employee, or those between members of a family. It operates equally in relation to single instances. Thus, the action of a pedestrian who prevents a small child from stepping off a sidewalk into heavy traffic is just; such an action is consonant with Socratic justice, for it is both natural and timely.
It should be clear by now that the essence of Socratic justice is simply to be in the present and to respond to the need before us, to the exclusion of all other considerations. Meeting the need of the present moment may require us to deviate from or abandon, instantly if necessary, our predetermined course of action, plan or agenda. Thus, the hallmarks of Socratic justice are flexibility, openness and responsiveness. This leaves no room for rigid, mechanical behaviour.

Consider now a third example of how Socratic justice operates in the State. Where one country covets the possessions of another, the latter will need to have a class of trained warriors in order to defend its territory in the event of an invasion. Would not an army of part-time soldiers drawn from the citizenry suffice for this purpose? No, says Socrates. He states the key principles that one man cannot practise many arts with success, and that every worker ought to be assigned one work for which he is by nature fitted (374a&b). To this work, and to no other, he is to devote himself throughout his life. Socrates adds (374c&d):

"Now nothing can be more important than that the work of a soldier should be well done. But is war an art so easily acquired that a man may be a warrior who is also a husbandman, or shoemaker, or other artisan? ...no one in the world would be a good dice or draught player who merely took up the game as a recreation, and had not from his earliest years devoted himself to this and nothing else. No tools will... be of any use to him who has not learned how to handle them, and has never bestowed any attention upon them. How then will he who takes up a shield or other implement of war become a good fighter all in a day...?"

This passage plainly spells out the consequence of ignoring the injunction to do one thing only. By trying to do many things, Socrates warns, we will do none of them well and will fail to gain a reputation in any of them (394e). Was Socrates not vindicated by the outcome of the Peloponnesian war? I shall leave you to ponder this interesting question.

These examples show that the concomitant human qualities of Socratic justice are attention, care, dedication and single-mindedness. This is how a contemporary South African judge applies the Socratic notion of justice to the work of his own profession:

"[A] judge who is dedicated to, and strives to achieve justice for all should appropriately apply the relevant law to the facts and
circumstances of each case being considered by him. He should do so with perspicuity and wisdom; he should exercise temperance and restraint; he should be fearlessly independent and at all times have the courage of his convictions. In this way, he would achieve not only the ideal of justice and fairness, but would also succeed in exposing the truth (aletheia) for the general benefit of the community which he serves" (Mr. Justice DH van Zyl in a letter to the author dated 29 December 1997).

2.6 Justice is most likely to be found in a State which is ordered with a view to the good of the whole, rather than of any particular class or person (420b).

A State of this kind, says Socrates, will grow up in a noble order, the several classes within it will enjoy the degree of happiness which nature assigns them, and its guardians will be the true saviours, not the destroyers of the State (421b&c). Socrates shows here that justice does not operate in isolation; it is closely linked to the wholeness, order and happiness of the State. (See further 462a-466d.)

2.7 Socratic justice requires that all the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women also (451c-457c).

Differences in strength and in nature notwithstanding, men and women both possess the qualities which make a guardian, a musician, a healer, a gymnast or a warrior (455c & 456b). Women should have the same education and way of life as men (451 d & 452a); there is to be full equality of the sexes. Plato holds that to enact that men and women should have all their pursuits in common would be in the highest degree beneficial to the State (456e & 457c).

Having completed his examination of justice in relation to the State, Socrates proceeds now to consider its operation in the individual.
2.8 In the same way that justice in the State consists in everyone doing his own work, so justice in the individual requires each of the three principles of reason (*logismos*), spiritedness or passion (*thymos*), and desire (*epithymia*) to do its own work without interfering in the operation of the others (441d). Conversely, any discord between these principles produces injustice (444b).

Socrates identifies three principles or qualities in the human soul. Reason, the first and highest of these, has the care of the whole soul and ought always to rule the others (441e). The term "spiritedness" embraces qualities and feelings ranging from anger to bravery to resolution to enthusiasm (441a&c). The examples of desire given by Socrates include the love of money, hunger and thirst, and the "fullness of bodily pleasures" (436a, 437b, 442a). The latter principle is also described as the "irrational or appetitive, the ally of sundry pleasures and satisfactions" (439d). Moreover, these principles, whose origin is in the individual, pass from the individual into the State, for, Socrates asks, how else can they come there? (435b&e) Thus, if a nation is composed of individuals in whom one of these three qualities - for instance, reason in the form of the love of knowledge, or desire in the form of the love of money - is predominant, then that same quality will be a characteristic feature of the nation as a whole. Socrates gives examples (435e & 436a).

In the same way that justice in the State consists in each class doing its own work, so justice in the individual requires each of the three principles to do its own work (441 d). Thus, when reason rules over passion and desire, harmony and justice prevail. Conversely, when desire, which "in each of us is the largest part of the soul and by nature most insatiable of gain", waxes great and strong, and, no longer confined to her own sphere, attempts to enslave and rule those, namely reason and spiritedness, who are not her natural-born subjects, then the whole life of man is overturned (442a&b; 587a). This all too familiar state is, of course, one of injustice. Socrates establishes here a direct connection between reason and justice: what is reasonable is just, what is unreasonable is not.

2.9 Of the Platonic virtues (2.4 above), justice is the key one, capable of engendering incorruptible character in individuals and states (443b):

The individual who is just, says Socrates, will not easily be corrupted. He is unlikely to commit acts of dishonesty, such as theft or fraud. He
will never be guilty of sacrilege, treason, treachery to his friends, or breach of faith. No one will be less likely to commit adultery or to dishonour his parents. And all this because each part of him is doing its own business, whether in ruling or being ruled. The key virtue, then, which is capable of producing individuals and states of this calibre is justice, and no other (443a&b). Conversely, the absence of justice in this sense produces disorder, both in the individual and in the State.

2.10 Justice originates in the individual and passes from the individual into the State (435e).

Socrates now puts all that has gone before into proper perspective: Justice as it appears in the State, that is, the doing by each of his own business, is no more than a shadow of real justice. In reality, justice is concerned, not with the outward life and activities of man, but with his inner being (443c & 444a).

The treatment of the nature and operation of justice in the individual is the core of the teaching in the Republic. All that went before, namely the study of justice in the context of the State, was primarily a means to an end, a device to facilitate the attainment of Socrates' real objective, knowledge of the nature of justice in the individual.

This is not to suggest that Socrates undervalues the social fabric. He appreciates only too well the importance of good government and of happiness in society. But he sees that everything begins with the nature and nurture of the individual. If men are just, their society will be just and will flourish. Thus, 'top down' governmental initiatives designed to cure our social and political ills can never produce a just, happy society. We have yet to learn this fundamental lesson, for we continue, in the face of the lessons of history, to place our trust in such initiatives. We persist in the belief that our political leaders are somehow to blame for our woes. We deplore the dishonesty and misconduct of those in power, but do not see that only by cultivating justice within ourselves will we promote justice in our State.

How are we to go about this? Socrates, we have seen, teaches that justice rules the individual when each of the three principles of reason, spiritedness and desire performs its proper function and is restrained within its own sphere of operation. Thus, the practical task, no easy one, which Socrates assigns to every one of us, is to ensure
through constant vigilance, that desire is subjected to the dominion of reason, reinforced by its ally spiritedness (441 e), in the form of will or determination. This is as far as Socrates goes, for his concept of justice, insofar as words are able to convey it. We have therefore arrived at the point where spiritual endeavour must part company with academic scholarship: armed with a theoretical grasp of the Socratic teaching, he who seeks to realise justice in his own life must now set aside intellectual debate and engage in direct practical work on his inner being. Detailed consideration of such work is beyond the scope of this paper.

The discourse on justice in the individual ends with a passage (443c & 444a) which lies at the very heart of the Socratic teaching:

"But in reality, justice...is concerned, ...not with the outward man, but with the inward, which is the true self and concernment of man: for the just man does not permit the several elements within him to interfere with one another, or any of them to do the work of others-he sets in order his own inner life, and is his own master and his own law, and at peace with himself; and when he has bound together the three principles within him. ...and is no longer many, but has become one entirely temperate and perfectly adjusted nature, then he proceeds to act, if he has to act, whether in a matter of property, or in the treatment of the body, or in some affair of politics or private business; always thinking and calling that which preserves and co-operates with this harmonious condition, just and good action, and the knowledge which presides over it, wisdom, and that which at any time impairs this condition, he will call unjust action, and the opinion which presides over it, ignorance."

This passage points to the ultimate source of justice, which is here related to the "true self, the spiritual essence of man. Thus the nature of Socratic justice is essentially spiritual.

2.11 Education in music and gymnastics promotes the movement from injustice to justice within the individual (441 e & 442a).

Plato's teaching on education in the Republic bears directly on his central theme of justice. How can education help to bring the rational and spirited principles of the soul into harmony, and so render them fit to rule the soul? Says Socrates (441 e & 442a):

"The united influence of music and gymnastic will bring them into accord, nerving and sustaining the reason with noble words and lessons, and moderating and civilising the wildness of passion by harmony and rhythm..."
Thus, the core elements of an education which promotes justice in the individual and consequently, in the State, are music and gymnastic. The reader who wishes to pursue this important subject is referred to Socrates' own treatment of it in the Republic (376eff, 521c ff).

2.12 The Socratic notions of justice and the just person provide a standard by which we may measure our own conduct. This would hold true even if these ideals were incapable of being realised in practice by human beings (472c).

Would the Socratic notion of justice be invalidated if it could be shown that, in practice, no-one is capable of attaining absolute justice? Not at all, replies Socrates (472c). According to GMA Grube (Cantor & Klein 166): "If the whole human race were senseless savages, the eternal form of justice would exist as fully in any case, though it would be even less perfectly realised in the world". All this does not, of course, amount to an admission by Socrates that the individual is incapable of realising justice in actual practice.

What Socrates requires is that inwardly and outwardly, we strive to act in accordance with this notion of justice. That, in his view, is the way to live a meaningful life.

2.13 Justice, like beauty, is but one facet of absolute truth. Those who are able to recognise a just person, but not absolute justice itself, are relegated to the relative world of opinion and, unlike the rare perceiver of justice itself, cannot aspire to absolute knowledge (506a, 479e).

In the Republic (476b&c), as in the Symposium, Socrates draws a fundamental distinction between the relative world of beautiful appearances and the realm of beauty itself, absolute and immutable. By exact analogy, he proceeds (479e) to apply this distinction to justice:

"... those who see the many beautiful, and who yet neither see absolute beauty, nor can follow any guide who points the way thither; who see the many just, and not absolute justice, and the like,- such persons may be said to have opinion but not knowledge .... But those who see the absolute and eternal and immutable may be said to know, and not to have opinion only...."
The analogy is sound, for as Socrates later points out (506a), justice, like beauty, is but a facet of absolute truth. Indeed, it has been well said (by Disraeli) that justice is truth in action.

While justice in the Socratic sense does not change, its application must, of course, be modified in order to meet the particular needs of every age and every society. Not all modern writers are in sympathy with the notion. Two who support it are John Wild and John H. Hallowell. Two who strongly oppose it are Karl Popper and R. H. S. Crossman. (For a conspectus of the views of these four writers, see Thomas L. Thorson (ed) Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat? (1963).)

2.14 The appearance of being just or a reputation for justice is no substitute for the reality (591 a&c).

Early on in the Republic (365b&c), Socrates is challenged to refute the following view, as popular then as it is now:

"...what men say is that, if I am really just and am not also thought just, profit there is none, but the pain and loss on the other hand are unmistakable. But if, though unjust, I acquire the reputation of justice, a heavenly life is promised to me. Since then, as philosophers prove, appearance tyrannises over truth and is lord of happiness, to appearance I must devote myself."

Now that the inquiry into the nature of justice and injustice has been completed, Socrates is in a position to refute this opinion. This he does (588b & 592b).

According to Socrates, a man can never be profited by injustice or intemperance or other baseness. These can only make him worse, even though he acquire money or power by his injustice (591a). Justice is so great a good that anyone who fully possesses it is better off, even in the midst of severe misfortune, than a consummately unjust person who enjoys the social rewards usually received by the just. Not everyone would agree with Socrates here.

Socrates expressly condemns the person who practices injustice under the guise of justice. Thus, he holds (451a) that an involuntary killing is a lesser crime than to be a deceiver about beauty or goodness or principles of justice or law. His conclusion (612b) is that "justice in her own nature has been shown to be best for the soul in her own nature." 3. Conclusion

The study of the Republic ought not to be confined to academic courses in education, philosophy, classical civilisation and political
science. The needs of our age require us to look afresh at the book, to treat it rather as a user's manual for personal and political transformation.

But is the Socratic teaching really practical? Is Socrates' vision of the ideal State and of absolute justice anything more than an Utopian dream? When Glaucon expresses the view (592b) that such a State exists in theory only and is nowhere to be found on earth, Socrates replies:

"In heaven ... there is laid up a pattern of it ... which he who desires may behold, and beholding, may set his own house in order. But whether such a one exists, or ever will exist in fact, is no matter; for he will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other."

The Socratic notion of absolute justice is not easy to realise in practice. Yet, for all that, we should make it our goal and strive to attain it, for relativistic ideas of truth and justice have failed us miserably. They are inherently incapable of bringing peace and unity to our troubled societies. We have the assurance of Socrates and Plato that the mere striving for absolute truth and justice, with or without actual attainment of that goal, is enough. This endeavour is in no sense intended for the private gratification or the personal glorification of the individual; the aim is to nourish, uplift and ennoble society. That is the point.

Across the long centuries, the voices of Socrates and Plato are calling us, inviting us to join them on the road to truth and justice.

Are we listening?
Notes
1. See, for example, Raphael Demos The Dialogues of Plato New York (1937) vol 1 viii.