

“Is Justice just too difficult to define?”

By Ashley Torrecillas



A Senior Essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Integral Curriculum of Liberal Arts.

Michael Riley, Advisor

Saint Mary's College of California

April 23, 2019

It seems to be the case, that when dealing with words of the intelligible realm, we have difficulty translating them into the visible realm.

The Principal Upanisads and *Parmenides* each employ the metaphor of the chariot to portray their views on morality. In the *Upanishads* the chariot is symbolic of the self. “Looking upon intelligence as the ruling power of the soul and aiming at the integration of the different elements of human nature” (*The Principal Upanisads*, S. Radhakrishnan). The parable serves as a guide on how one ought to live. In *The Proem*, Parmenides’ “chief purpose...is to lay claim to knowledge of a truth not attained by the ordinary run of mortals” (*Presocratic Philosophers, Parmenides*). Here, the image of the glorious chariot ride shows what happens when one lives the correct way.

The *Cratylus* examines, within rhetoric, the correctness of names. When a word or phrase correctly describes a thing, whether that be its essence or purpose, what is the source of this correctness? Socrates explores the two opposing positions of Hermogenes and Cratylus. Hermogenes defends the view that naming is by convention. Within a community, whatever is decided to be the name of a thing is correct within that community. Cratylus, however, defends the view that the name of a thing is the revelation of its nature. This means that regardless of the conventions within whatever community, each name, upon examination, can be reduced to a description that correctly reveals the nature of the thing named. In Socrates attempt to resolve the two, he concludes that, in fact, the knowledge of names is of know real importance. All etymology can do is reveal what those who first introduced words thought was the nature of reality, which could very well be incorrect. Because the nature of reality is thought to be in constant flux, to learn the truth about things we must go beyond words together and examine

with our minds the permanent and unchanging nature of things: the Platonic forms. Because justice is one of these Forms, we must try to grasp with our minds its unchanging nature in order to grasp its truth. Is this possible?

Gorgias explores the topic of oratory. What makes a good rhetorician? The dialogue opens with Socrates seeking clarification from Gorgias about the nature and skill of his craft: his ability to persuade through public speaking about what is good and just. Finding himself in a contradiction when he admits that the true orator must know what is right and wrong, just and unjust, Gorgias drops his argument. Picking up from where he leaves off, Polus tries to defend the argument, being infatuated with the idea that rhetoric gives one the ability to do what one pleases, even if that means being unjust. Against him, Socrates asserts that it is in fact better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice. Unable to deny this, Polus too falls to Socrates. Next up is Callicles. The remainder of the dialogue deals with a showdown between Callicles and Socrates about the best way of life. Callicles defends the argument that the selfish, pleasure-seeking, which he associates with his admiration for rhetoric, is the best way. Socrates re-asserts that the philosophical life, the one dedicated to the objective existence of justice as well as the other virtues, and strives to learn about and live by them. Socrates struggles to bring Callicles to concede to him and to agree

“That doing what’s unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that its not seeming...but being good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and private life; and that if a person proves to be bad in some respect, he’s to be disciplined, and that the second best thing after being just is to become just by paying one’s due, by being disciplined;...and that oratory and every other activity is always to be

used in support of what's just" (*Gorgias*, 527b-c).

The dialogue closes with Socrates' assertion that this argument alone withstands refutation, and remains.

The argument is revisited in the *Republic*. The dialogue opens with Socrates recalling a conversation he had at Polemarchus' house when he went to Piraeus. The entire dialogue revolves around the topic of justice. After examining and refuting the views of those in his company on the subject, he agrees to lay out his own account. Because those who are truly just live better and happier lives than those who are unjust, Socrates presents his view on the original purposes for which communities, cities, were founded, the principles by which they stand, and the education required based on those principles. He determines that a truly just community can only be led by philosopher kings. The need for such a ruler leads him to discuss the nature of human desires. He then continues on to discuss the exact nature of justice as well as of other virtues, and of their corresponding vices, both within the community at large and the individual. He explains the nature of knowledge and its relation to the world which we live in, and how, because the world within which we live is revealed to us by our senses, our knowledge is deficient. It depends on the realm of existing Forms, which cannot be fathomed by our senses, but only through meticulous thought and discussion can we attempt to grasp at an understanding. All of this is necessary, asserts Socrates, to answer the basic question about justice: why must it make a just person live a good and happy life?

Looking at *The Principal Upanishads* and the *Parmenides* proem, the *Cratylus*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Republic*, this paper will explore not only what justice is or how it is defined in relation to its name, but what is its purpose and how, as a Form, is it related to knowledge and

divinity? In addition it will also examine why it is, or better, whether it is, that words of this kind convey more than one interpretation of meaning. In other words, do these works aim at or toward the same kind of justice?

The Upanisads + Parmenides: Justice Deified

The metaphor of the chariot ride is rather well known. Typically portrayed as a struggle between good and bad or right and wrong, the charioteer is master over the horses which guide his chariot.

In *The Principal Upanisad*, the parable of the chariot is symbolic of self. Verses three and four explain the physical parts of the chariot. The Self (ātman) is the owner of the chariot, the body is the chariot, the intellect (buddhi) is the charioteer, the mind (manas) is the reins for the horses, and the horses are the senses. Thus, the intellect uses the mind to control the senses; over all of which the self is master. Verses five through nine then provide instruction, or at least, give direction on how to properly guide the horses while riding the chariot. He who has no understanding, who lacks control of his mind and of his senses, guides wicked horses, therefore not reaching the goal, and will be reborn into mundane life. On the other hand, he who has understanding, who possesses control of his mind and of his sense, guides good horses, therefore reaching the goal, and will not be born again into temporal life, but “reaches the end of the journey, that supreme abode of the all-pervading” (principle 9, *The Principal Upanisads*, S. Radhakrishnan).

In the *Parmenides* proem, Parmenides is riding the chariot guided by wise horses on the path “which bears the man who knows all cities” (*Parmenides*, p.243). Led by maidens, they travel on the road from Night to light. When they reach the great doors before the gates of the

paths of Night and Day, behind which avenging Justice holds guard, they persuade her to open the doors and let them through. Justice greets them kindly and says to Parmenides that because he is not brought onto the path by ill fate, “it is proper that [he] should learn all things, both the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, and the opinions of the mortals, in which there is no true reliance” (*Parmenides*, p.243).

Both the *Upanisads* and the poem serve as a metaphor for enlightenment. Here we get to see justice deified. The divide between possessing or lacking understanding, and between ignorance and knowledge, show why it is better to be just. Though understanding and knowledge are not to be equated, in some clear way morality and intellect relate through or with divinity. Attaining an end to temporal life and entering into the “supreme abode of the all-pervading” parallels Justice allowing Parmenides to enter the gates of Night and Day, thus allowing him to “learn all things.” The intellect must guard against lack of control of the mind and of the senses, as Justice guards against ignorance. Once this is achieved, one can then enter into the realm of enlightenment, of understanding and/or knowing.

Cratylus: Problem with Naming

In the *Cratylus*, the dialogue between Cratylus, Hermogenes, and Socrates revolves around the topic of names. As to the purpose of names, Socrates says that names are “a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being” (*Cratylus*, 388c). As to the correctness of names, Cratylus argues “that there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature” (*Cratylus*, 383a-b). Hermogenes argues,

“that the correctness of names is determined by...convention and agreement...any name you give a thing is its correct name. If you change its name and give it another, the new

one is as correct as the old” (*Cratylus*, 384d).

Both of these views about the correctness of names are problematic. Even if names belong to things by nature, who is to say that they are discoverable? And if names belong to things by convention, then there would be constant change and no universal structure to language.

These problems aside, there is yet another problem of interpretation when it comes to certain kinds of words such as ‘just’ (*dikaious sunesis*). Socrates goes through all the different interpretations that people have given for the word, and “it seems that many people agree with one another about it up to a point, but beyond that they disagree” (*Cratylus*, 412d). If we cannot definitively define words, then how do we properly divide beings? Socrates asks Hermogenes if he knows that names have two forms- true and false. He says,

“Since there is a civil war among names, with some claiming that they are like the truth and others claiming that they are, how then are we to judge between them, and what are we to start from?...its clear we’ll have to look for something other than names, something that will make plain to us without using names which of these two kinds of names are...the ones that express the truth about the things that are” (*Cratylus*, 438d-e).

The true form is that which is divine and exists with the gods, and the false form exists with humans. I take him to refer to the false as the likenesses, and the true as those which express the thing that the likeness is of, the Forms. The Forms have a being that we presume exists, but because of our mortality we cannot fathom things of a divine sort and thus resort to understanding them through images.

That being said, Socrates says,

“How to learn and make discoveries about the things that are is probably too large a

topic for you or me. But we should be content to have agreed that it is far better to investigate them and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names,” (*Cratylus*, 439b)

reminding Hermogenes and Cratylus that the aim of their investigation is only to understand the reason behind the name.

Gorgias: Problem with Persuading

Re-visiting the argument which Socrates asserts withstands refutation:

“that doing what’s unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that it’s not seeming to be good but being good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and his private life; and that if a person proves to be bad in some respect, he’s to be disciplined, and that the second best thing after being just is to become just by paying one’s due, by being disciplined; and that every form of flattery, both the form concerned with oneself and the form concerned with others, whether they’re few or many, is to be avoided, and that oratory and every other activity is always to be used in support of what’s just” (*Gorgias*, 527b-c).

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates suggests that these assertions, embracing the view that to do injustice is worse than to suffer it, and distinguishing seeming and being good, down to the view that oratory can be linked to the promotion of justice, belong to a single overall argument that to be fully human or to be well is to be just.

We must first examine the first assertion that to be unjust is worse than being unjustly acted upon. Socrates shows that there is a sort of proportion: what is admirable is also good, and what is bad is also shameful. Polus does not view that that which is admirable is also good, nor

that that which is shameful is also worse. So, using deductive reasoning, Socrates shows that admirable things do not fall outside of being pleasurable or beneficial, therefore they are the same, and one admirable thing can only be more so than another, either in pleasure or benefit. Similarly, that which is shameful can only be more so, either in pain or badness, and because to be unjust is not more painful than to suffer it, the latter (as in badness), makes being unjust worse than suffering it (*Gorgias*, 475a-d).

Socrates then compares pleasure to good, which shows that being good is better than seeming good. He introduces the topic by asking: “Is the pleasant to be done for the sake of the good, or the good for the sake of the pleasant?” (*Gorgias*, 506c) He replies to his own question, that the pleasant is done for the sake of the good, for pleasure is that which we feel, and good is a state of being. So that being good is better than feeling good. He then goes on to talk about the imitator and how his soul will be corrupt and unjust if the person he imitates is unjust, such as the case of the unjust king and his subjects. In in a city where the king is unjust, his manner appears good to his subjects, so to prevent unjust treatment, they will try to be as like the king as possible, thereby becoming unjust themselves.

Next, Socrates asserts that the only thing more just than being just, is to accept due punishment. He tells Polus,

“On my view of it,...a man who acts unjustly, a man who is unjust, is thoroughly miserable, the more so if he doesn’t get his due punishment for the wrongdoing he commits, the less so if he pays and receives what is due at the hands of both gods and men (*Gorgias*, 472e).

Socrates states that in whatever way “the thing acting upon something acts upon it, the thing acted upon is acted upon in a just way” (*Gorgias*, 476d). Therefore, because paying what is due is a case of being acted upon, and is acted upon by one who disciplines correctly and justly, the punishment is therefore just and admirable. And hence what is admirable is also good, so that he who is disciplined justly undergoes an improvement of the soul.

The final assertion is that justice is annexed by oratory.

“Isn’t a man who has learned a particular subject the sort of man his knowledge makes him?...And by that line of reasoning, isn’t a man who has learned what’s just a just man too?...And a just man does just things, I take it?...Now isn’t an orator necessarily just, and doesn’t a just man necessarily want to do just things?...Therefore an orator will never want to do what’s unjust” (*Gorgias*, 460b-c).

Socrates asks Polus this series of questions to get him to reach the same conclusion that an orator advocates justice.

The Republic: From Persuading to Knowing

The topic of justice is revisited in the *Republic*. Socrates does not want to merely persuade, but truly convince Glaucon, Adeimantus, Thrasymachus, and the others that justice is one of the highest goods. Like seeing, hearing, knowing, and being healthy, justice is one of those goods that are “fruitful by their own nature and not simply because of reputation” (*Republic*, Bk II, 367d). Socrates asserts that there is justice within a single person and justice within a whole city. He suggests that because it is perhaps easier to learn what justice is within a larger thing than within a smaller one, he begins his investigation by examining what justice is in within a city.

A just city is the healthy city, the one that is beneficial to all of its inhabitants. Each person practices one craft for which he is naturally suited. There is no wealth or poverty. The first two laws of the city guard against speaking ill of the gods. The first law: because gods are good, no one can say they are the cause of bad things. The second law: the gods are not sorcerers, nor are they deceitful in word or deed. Socrates argues that in establishing such a city, the group as a whole is outstandingly happy.

In the beginning of Book IV, Adeimantus questions one of the aspects of Socrates' just community.

"Socrates, he said, how would you meet the objection that you are not making these people [*sc.* the guardians] happy? It is their own fault, too, if they are not: for they are really masters of the state, and yet they get no good out of it as other rulers do, who own lands, build themselves fine houses with handsome furniture, offer private sacrifices to the gods, and entertain visitors from abroad; who possess in fact that gold and silver you spoke of, with everything else that is usually thought necessary for happiness" (*Republic*, Book IV, 419).

He asks a valid question. Why is it necessary for the guardians to be deprived? If they will be as well trained and virtuous as Socrates claims, then why should they not be allowed property and privacy without having to worry about them becoming abusive and corrupt?

Towards the end of Book III, Socrates poses a rhetorical question: "Isn't it necessary...to guard in every way against our auxiliaries doing anything like that [*sc.* sheep dogs becoming wolves] to the citizens because they are stronger, thereby becoming savage masters instead of

kindly allies?” (*Republic*, Book III, 416b). He then goes on to say that to prevent this from happening they must have a really good education, and in addition:

“they must also have the kind of housing and other property that will neither prevent them from being the best guardians nor encourage them to do evil to their citizens...First, none of them should possess any private property beyond what is wholly necessary. Second, none of them should have a house or storeroom that isn’t open for all to enter at will. Third, whatever sustenance moderate and courageous warrior-athletes require...they’ll receive by taxation on the other citizens...Fourth, they’ll have common messes and live together like soldiers in a camp...We’ll tell them that they always have...a divine sort in their souls as a gift from the gods and so have no further need for human gold” (*Republic*, Book III, 416e).

Socrates explains to Glaucon that to ensure that the people are pleased with how the guardians are chosen, they will “say to them in telling [their] story, ‘but the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are most valuable’” (Book III, 415a-b), one of the various “noble lies” that Socrates asserts are necessary. However, since they will in actuality be chosen by other guardians, then there is a certainty of some sort that the newly appointed guardians should behave just as justly and will not be corrupted by temptation to abuse power, especially since he mentions that the guardians will be those who do not wish to rule but will do so for the common good of the people.

Socrates “stories” are not just so that the ruled will be content, but so that the rulers will be content as well. He explains that in fulfilling their duty to the community, they will be happy. However, however happy they may be, Socrates makes clear at the beginning of Book IV that

“in establishing our city, we aren’t aiming to make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so” (*Republic*, Book IV, 420b-c). He uses the analogy of painting a statue: the goal of the painter is not to make any particular piece of the painting more beautiful than the others, but to make the painting as a whole, as beautiful as possible.

In addition, Socrates proves that the lack of property and privacy among the guardians is necessary for the common good of the community because there shall not be the extremities: wealth and poverty. In book IV he says that for the community to be just, one of the three characteristics that it must possess is moderation, unanimity and harmony among the people. Wealth and poverty must be eliminated because “the former makes for luxury, idleness, and revolution; the latter for slavishness, bad work, and revolution, as well” (*Republic*, Book IV, 442a). In regards to moderation, there is a harmony that is created by allotting the rulers power, but not property and privacy, and the ruled property and privacy, but not power, which further exemplifies unanimity.

Now, “let’s apply what has come to light in the city to an individual, and if it is accepted there, all will be well” (*Republic*, Bk IV, 434e). If the soul of the individual contains the same four parts as the city (moderation, courage, wisdom, and justice) then the individual can correctly be called by the same name as the city.

Socrates puts forth that an individual who:

“does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part...regulates well what is really his own and rules himself...puts himself in order...harmonizes the three parts of himself¹ like three limiting notes in a musical scale...binds together those parts and any

¹ The appetitive, the rational, and the spirited.

others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious,” (*Republic*, Bk IV, 443d-e)

is just. Only then will he act, and when doing so, will be just in his actions and do well to preserve the harmony within himself. Thus, doing one’s own work, provided that it be in this way, is justice.

Adeimantus asks Socrates if there is anything more important than the four virtues that make a city just. He responds that the good, being the highest of the Forms, is the most important. It is “by their relation to it...[that] just things and the others become useful and beneficial” (*Republic*, Bk VI, 505a). But what is the good? Some say that pleasure is the good, others say that knowledge is the good. Rather than say what the good is, Socrates explores what are apparent offspring of the good and most like it. To explain, he analogizes the good to the sun. Three things are need to be able to see the sun: sight, the visible sun, and light. And while the sun may be the cause of sight and seen by it, it itself is not sight. This is how we are too think of looking towards the good. “What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in the visible realm, in relation to sight and visible things” (*Republic*, Bk VI, 508c). Sight comes from the eyes, and the light provided by the sun illuminates it so that it can be seen. Socrates says to understand the soul in this way:

“When it focuses on something illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it opines and is dimmed, changes its opinions..., and seems bereft of understanding” (*Republic*, Bk VI, 508d).

Therefore, it is truth and knowledge that stem from the form of the good.

Thus comes the divided line. There are two kinds of thing: visible and intelligible. The line is divided into unequal parts. Within each section, the visible and the intelligible, the line is again divided in the same ratio as the first division. The section of the visible consists of images and the originals of the images, so that “as the opinable is to the knowable, so the likeness is to the thing it is like” (*Republic*, Bk VI, 510a). The first section of the intelligible consists of investigating hypotheses using that which is considered as original in the visible, as an image, to reach a conclusion. This is otherwise known as thought. The other section, proceeding from thought, makes its way to first principles, not by using the images from the other subsection, but the Forms themselves, “moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms” (*Republic*, Bk VI, 511c). And so,

“there are four such conditions in the soul, corresponding to the four subsections of our line: Understanding for the highest, thought for the second, belief for the third, and imaging for the last. Arrange them in a ratio, and consider that each shares in clarity to the degree that the subsection it is set over shares in truth” (*Republic*, Bk VI, 511d).

Socrates claims that that which is intelligible can only be properly attained by the power of dialectic.

All of these works seem to agree on one thing: that truly understand justice is an act that requires thought beyond our realm.

The *Upanisads* teaches that one who lives by the principles, can enter into divine life. In the *Parmenides* proem Parmenides being let into the gates by Justice can be taken as either being let into a divine afterlife, or being welcomed into a higher realm of understanding and knowing.

Regardless, both works demonstrate that one who lives a just life, that is, a life that does not succumb to human weakness, reaches a sort of divinity. The way in which justice is discussed within the *Cratylus* and the *Gorgias* also arrive at the conclusion that to understand what it is or means to be just, requires something more than merely studying etymology or seeming so.

This idea about the self in the *Republic* is echoed within each work:

“And in truth justice...isn’t concerned with someone’s doing externally, but with what is inside him...One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another...He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order,...and harmonizes the three parts of himself...he binds together those parts and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act. And when he does anything...he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it...and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions” (*Republic IV*, 443d-e).

For a city to be just, it must consist of just individuals. For an individual to be just, all of these works seem to agree, that it requires looking to some higher realm, whether it be divine or intelligible. Each work shows what it looks like to be just, but emphasize that being just is not seeming, but actually being, the understanding or knowing of which requires deeping intellect and discussion. That being said, any problems encountered in interpretation are the result of everyone trying to grasp at that intelligible Forms. Thus, it is safe to venture that the justice examined within each text, aim toward the same image of Justice.

Work Cited

1. "The Parable of the Chariot." *The Principal Upanisads*, by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Harper Collins Publishers India, 2010.
2. "Parmenides." *Presocratic Philosophers*.
3. "Cratylus." *Complete Works*, by Plato et al., Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, pp. 101-156.
4. "Gorgias." *Complete Works*, by Plato et al., Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, pp. 791-869.
5. "Republic." *Complete Works*, by Plato et al., Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, pp. 971-1223.