

Interpretation of Justice in Plato's the Republic in Ancient Greek Philosophy Course

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Keywords: Plato, The republic, Justice, Wisdom, Courage, Temperance

Abstract: The ideals of justice and the supreme goodness permeate Plato's entire book *The Republic*. Plato expounded his view of justice on the basis of refuting the customary view of justice. Plato's justice is the harmony of social order and all parts of the individual. The rulers, warriors, and laborers within the city-state perform their respective duties and responsibilities, corresponding to the three virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance of the country, and the three parts of reason, passion, and desire. These three parts are in harmony with each other, which is the justice of the country. The three virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance within the soul of an individual correspond to individual reason, passion, and desire. The harmony of these three parts is personal justice.

1. Introduction

Plato's *The Republic* can serve as a model for Plato's works. The ideas of justice and the supreme goodness that permeate this book become the core of Plato's thought. Plato's view of justice begins with refuting the justice view of conventionalism, and then explores the justice of the city-state and the justice of the individual. The rulers, warriors, and laborers within the city-state perform their respective duties and responsibilities, corresponding to the three virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance of the country, and the three parts of reason, passion, and desire. These three parts are in harmony with each other, which is the justice of the country. The three virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance within the soul of an individual correspond to individual reason, passion, and desire. The harmony of these three parts is personal justice.

2. Interpretation of the Original Meaning of Justice

The first volume of *The Republic* can be seen as the preface to the entire book. Socrates' discussion of justice with the speaker ends with the speaker's persistence and ignorance of the conventionalist view of justice. Due to the ignorance and confusion of Salasymachos, he was confused by the shallow political opinions and the vulgar and distorted view of justice that prevailed in the secular world, and insisted on his prejudice that "injustice is more beneficial than justice". Socrates did not refute his actual view of customary justice through the justice that should be. In order to solve the problem of the original definition and meaning of justice and lead the interlocutor to an understanding of the original natural justice, *The Republic*, starting from the second volume, starts from discussing the illusion and distorted concepts of justice, leading to a

discussion of the nature of justice in the soul, and then assumes an ideal city-state, from large to small, from analyzing the justice in the nation city-state to exploring the justice of the individual. From Volume 2 to Volume 9, the discussion focuses on the justice of the city-state and the justice of the individual. The cave metaphor in Volume 6 and Volume 7 elevate the justice of the city-state to the idea of supreme goodness, becoming the peak of justice in the entire book of *The Republic*. The description of Earls' return from the underworld in Volume 10 echoes that in Volume 1 about whether there is a retribution from hell after a person's death. Socrates, who led friends to discuss justice, and Earls, who were sent back by the judges of the underworld as "messengers of messages to humanity," refer to each other, indicating their intention to save the people.

The first and second volumes of *The Republic* revolve around the question of "what is justice". Socrates discussed justice with Bolemajos, Cephalos, Thrasymachus, Glaucon, Ademantos, and others. They discussed the following series of issues: "Borrowing money to repay debts is justice."^[1] "Justice is giving everyone a proper reward."^[2] "Justice is giving good to friends and evil to enemies."^[3] "Justice is the benefit of the strong." "Justice is good, injustice is evil." "A just person always suffers losses everywhere compared to an unjust person." And so on. In the debate, Socrates denied the respective definitions of justice given by the father and son of Cephalos and Bolemajos, refuted the definition of justice given by Thrasymachus, and thus demonstrated his own definition of justice, that is, justice is wisdom and good, and justice is happy and beneficial.

In Volume 1 of *The Republic*, there were neutral and negative views of justice, such as "justice is borrowing money to repay debts", "justice is the interests of the strong", "justice is helping friends and harming enemies", and "just people suffer losses". "Borrowing money to repay debts" is a necessary and legitimate thing, but treating it as justice means treating the neutral "must" as justice. The opposite of borrowing money to repay a debt is injustice, but borrowing money to repay a debt is only "necessary", not true justice. Taking the neutral "must do" as justice lowers the standard of the nobility and virtue of justice, which is the result of the justice view based on conventionalism. However, compared to injustice, this is still fair, so there is a factor of natural justice in it.

The mission of philosophy is to sublimate from "opinions" of city-states and society to "knowledge", and the examination and criticism of "opinions" is the work of philosophers. Bolemajos and Thrasymachus mentioned the definitions of justice such as "justice means paying debts", "justice means helping friends and harming enemies", "justice is the interests of the strong", and "just people suffer losses". This understanding of justice is a conventionalist view that regards customary matters such as religion, law, and folk custom as matters of value. Justice is originally a concept of virtue, ethics, and value, but from the perspective of personal self-interest, Polemarchos et al defined moral concepts as legal and customary matter, of course, could not obtain a legitimate definition of justice. Customerism is an ideology that is opposed to natural justice and occupies a dominant position in city-states. It is often associated with divine laws, ancient traditions, laws, and authority. Customerism contains elements of natural justice, but this needs to be discovered and explored, and more importantly, there needs to be sufficient rationality to break down customs and authority. Customerism believes that "paying debts" is justice. However, paying debts is a judgment of legal facts, at the level of opinion. Whether debts should be repaid or not is a value judgment of ethical and moral significance, and legal judgment cannot replace moral value judgment. Moral value judgment is an ethical issue, which should have moral value standards that conform to natural justice and belong to the level of truth. The customary view of justice, constrained by divine laws, laws, and customs, has lost the original natural morality of matter. Justice is not equal to legality, and what is lawful is not necessarily just. Hume has already pointed out that there is no communication between the judgment of moral value as it should be and the judgment of fact as it should be. Since Hume, the question of fact and the question of value have gradually been separated in modern philosophy, and people cannot draw a judgment of "should or should not" from "is or

not”.

Plato's *Gorgias* tells of the controversy between Socrates and the School of the Wise. The Wise School uses rhetoric to defend conventionalism and oppose the justice of natural and legitimate virtues. However, not all opinions of conventionalism are justified. The wise man Protagoras' "Man is the yardstick of all things" indicates the limitations and illegitimacy of the subjective truth theory of conventionalism. Plato's Socrates believes that the orderly state of society and individuals is justice. Customarism is based on the personal interests of individuals or rulers, and believes that justice is in line with their own interests. The true social significance of justice cannot be explored from the perspective of customary individual value judgments. To explore the true meaning of justice, it is necessary to break away from customs and authority and return to the original natural justice itself, that is, to pursue the "original state" of justice from the birth and development of the city-state. Thus, Plato's Socrates constructed a city-state of ideas in words.

3. Exploration of National and Individual Justice

The discussion of justice in Volume 1 and the first half of Volume 2 of *The Republic* revolves around the ethical significance of justice. Justice or injustice is good or evil, virtue and evil. Although there have also been inappropriate views among interlocutors regarding justice as "the just suffer losses", "justice is the interests of the strong", and "justice is helping friends and harming enemies", the understanding of justice is based on ethical virtue. However, in the second half of Volume 2 of *The Republic*, the discussion of justice begins to envisage a verbal city-state, with a slight deviation from the original meaning of the morality of justice. "Justice is that each person has his or her own duties, and cannot be arbitrarily overruled."^[4] Because Plato believed that the natural and orderly state of society and individuals was justice, in order to build his ideal country, Plato transformed the ethical nature of justice into a neutral meaning, so that justice had a nature of beyond good and evil. In Volume 2, when discussing the social division of labor and the cultivation of state administrators, it is said that "arranging occupations according to talent and performing their respective duties is justice".

The discussion between Socrates and the interlocutor in Volume 1 and the first half of Volume 2 of *The Republic* is based on the discussion of the concept of customary justice. The justice discussed is an illusion of justice, based on the vulgar view of justice in the customs of the real city-state, which does not lead to a true definition of justice. In order to make the conversation object realize that justice is the orderly state of society and individuals, Socrates turned the conversation to the discussion of the "original state" of natural justice in the city-state. Socrates pointed out that there are individual justice as well as the justice of a city-state. We should first explore what justice is in a city-state, and then examine it in individuals from large to small. Inspired by Socrates, they envisioned a primary city-state composed of social divisions of different skills - the "pig city-state" named by Glaucon, and then talked about what Socrates called a "healthy country --prosperous city-state". Socrates arranged artists, doctors, and armies for their healthy city-states, which is a social division of labor, that is, "each performing his own duties and doing his best".

After mentioning the ideal city-state in Volume 2 of *The Republic*, the issue of social division of labor for justice is mentioned, and this is described in detail in Volume 4. Plato said that justice include national justice and individual justice. The justice of a country is manifested in the division of labor among all social strata of the country according to their nature and the performance of their respective duties. Individual justice is manifested in the coordination of various parts of the individual's mind. Plato mentioned the four virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, and justice is a synthesis of the first three virtues. The country is mainly divided into three classes:

rulers, warriors, and laborers. For a country, wisdom, courage, and temperance correspond respectively to the rationality of the ruler, the passion of the warrior, and the desire of the laborer. For individuals, wisdom, courage, and temperance correspond to the rational, passionate, and desire parts of the individual's soul. Regardless of the country or individual, these three parts must be harmonious and moderate, and excessive use of certain parts will lead to loss of control and disharmony. The justice of a country is that the corresponding rationality, passion, and desire of the three strata within the country are restricted by the three virtues of wisdom, courage, and moderation, and are coordinated with each other, in harmony and order. The three strata perform their respective duties according to their natural instincts, without arrogating to each other. The justice of a country is consistent with the justice of individuals. Similarly, rationality, passion, and desire within an individual's soul should be restricted by the corresponding three virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance, so as to make the three parts of the soul harmonious and orderly, which is personal justice. Plato believes that among the factors of national justice, wisdom is paramount. A country has wisdom because it has good planning, knowledge rather than ignorance, and is not dominated by opinions.

Plato divided justice into national justice and individual justice. Justice is the division of all classes. "Everyone does his own work without interfering in the work of others."^[5] The justice of an individual is the coordination of the three parts of rationality, passion, and desire within the individual. Reason commands passion and desire, enabling the wavering passion to overcome desire and achieve wisdom. The three virtues within the individual and the country are harmonious and consistent, coordinating the rationality corresponding to wisdom, the passion corresponding to courage, and the desire corresponding to temperance, so as to achieve a harmonious unity of the four main virtues. This is justice. In Volume 3 of *The Republic*, Plato also created the myths of gold, silver, copper, and iron, corresponding to the rulers, warriors, laborers, and the corresponding wisdom and reason, courage and passion, moderation and desire. It can be seen that Plato's view of justice, in addition to the original meaning of goodness and virtue, has another meaning, that is, justice is the moderation of human nature in hierarchy. Justice is the obedience to the natural order, and people of different classes have their own division of labor according to their natural talents.

In the sixth and seventh volumes of *The Republic*, Plato conceived the metaphors of the sun, the line, and the cave. He believed that only by cultivating a philosophical king and combining philosophy with politics can a country be well governed and become a just country. The ideal state conceived by Plato is a state of aristocratic and elite system of government. Plato believed that such a country was a just and supreme goodness country. *The Republic* explores five regimes and their advantages and disadvantages in Volume 8 and Volume 9. The five regimes are: aristocratic regime, honorary regime, oligarchic regime, democratic regime, and tyrannical regime. Plato believed that aristocracy regime was the most just and best regime, while tyranny regime was the most unjust and worst regime.

4. Evaluation of Plato's View of Justice

In the second half of Volume 2 of *The Republic*, the discussion of the original meaning of justice leads to the justice of the city-state, with the purpose of leading to the discussion of the ideal city-state in the later volumes. In Volume 2, the discussion of justice turned to the division of labor and the performance of their respective duties in the city-state society, with the aim of breaking away from conventionalism and seeking the original natural justice from the origin of the city-state. However, this view of justice tends to the social attribute of justice and deviates from the moral attribute of justice. Plato's definition of justice in a city-state is clearly not purely an ethical explanation, but rather a regulation of a certain social order in the city-state, and considers this state

of “each person doing his or her own duty within the country according to his or her nature”^[4] to be just. This view of justice is not aimed at a single individual or class, but at the entire city-state. Socrates' justice in Volume 2 of *The Republic* began with a discussion of ethical and moral propositions, and turned to defining justice as the harmony of social order. Due to the social attributes of human beings, the harmony of a city-state naturally requires that all social strata perform their respective duties according to their natural talents, in order to ensure the harmony of social order. Plato's theory of justice is based on the purpose of political philosophy, with the starting point of breaking away from the shackles of conventionalism and exploring the original natural and legitimate meaning of justice, and with the goal of establishing an ideal city-state. This requires returning to the original city-state to explore. The integrity of a city-state requires the social attributes of righteousness, so the definition of justice is defined as each class performing its own duties, ensuring its own division, and ensuring social harmony and order. Individual justice is the harmonious and orderly state within an individual's soul. This slightly deviates from the moral attribute of justice, but is a reasonable result of exploring the natural origin of justice.

From Plato's perspective, the rational, passionate, and desire parts of a country and individual must be reasonable and orderly. All levels of the country and individuals' souls should not be allowed to cause partial excess of passion due to the uncontrolled virtue of courage, nor should they be allowed to cause excess of desire due to the uncontrolled virtue of moderation. Instead, they should be guided by the rationality of the soul corresponding to wisdom, so that the courageous virtue constrains the inner passion of the soul, and the restrained virtue constrains the desires of the individual soul, so that they are moderate and harmonious with each other, without causing chaos. There are better parts and worse parts in a person's heart, and it is necessary to be the “master of oneself”, so that the better parts within the heart control the worse parts. Such individuals are intelligent, courageous, and temperate, and they are just people. Similarly, in a country, it is also necessary for a few outstanding wise and philosophical kings to lead and educate the majority of ordinary people with strong passion and desire. Rulers, warriors, and laborers at all levels should perform their respective duties and responsibilities, and should not overstep their boundaries. Such a country is a just country.

Plato's justice is a virtue that includes wisdom, courage, moderation, and other virtues. Although the meaning of Plato's justice about “performing one's duties” deviates from ethical principles, the three virtues it contains are real virtues. As a virtue, Plato's justice has a natural and legitimate moral significance. Although the ideal country built by Plato has been criticized and distorted in its original meaning by later generations, its original natural virtue is still indispensable for maintaining social order and purifying the individual's soul today. Plato believes that the true master and cause is the goodness of its internal purpose. The true object of philosophy is not nature but man's own goodness. Although wise men pay attention to social and life issues and pull philosophy from nature to the world, they advocate personal subjectivism, which leads to the denial of true justice and goodness, and becomes a sophistry of conventionalism, skepticism, and relativism, making it impossible to obtain true knowledge. The subjectification of truth led to the prevalence of historicism and conventionalism later on. The theory of justice based on classical natural rights is a holistic concept, in which individuals should fulfill their obligations for the harmony of the city-state and their interests should be based on the harmony of the city-state.

Many later philosophers such as Aristotle, Russell criticized Plato's utopian communism as a typical example of autocratic politics. However, the modern philosopher Strauss believed in his work *Cities and Men* that Plato's “Republic” was not about beautifying a single city-state communist system, but rather an ironic dialogue conducted by Socrates along the political enthusiasm of Glaucon and other interlocutors, which ultimately deconstructed the city-state. Of course, the ideal regime depicted in *The Republic* is characterized by simplification and integration,

especially the inappropriate arrangement of women and children, which destroys the family and human relations and suppresses human nature. This is indeed a great flaw in Plato's utopian project. However, the ideal city-state in *The Republic* envisions a national model under the aristocratic elite system, and the views of defining justice, attaching importance to education, attaching importance to virtue, and pursuing the supreme goodness and justice have important reference significance for today's society.

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