

B. A. Part III Pol. Sc. (II)  
 Paper - VII - Western Political Thought.

### Platonic Concept of Justice

Plato was a great philosopher of ancient Greece and he was a disciple of Socrates and a teacher of Aristotle. Whatever little material is available with us, it throws light on his philosophy, works and time. He adopted the method of lectures and dialogues to propound his philosophy. He was a great logician and dialectician, who presented the truth before the people by refuting the arguments of his opponents. Platonic thoughts are reflected mainly in three of his books, namely - Republic, Statesman and Laws. His concept of justice is propounded in the book 'Republic'.

The prominence of his concept of justice can be gauged from the fact that he had subtitled his book 'justice' as 'concerning justice'. In fact, the discovery of the nature and habitation of justice is the fundamental issue of Republic. Plato starts by explaining the various prevailing theories of justice and after rejecting them, puts forward his own views on it. Hence, it would be better to present the various prevailing theories of justice and rejection of them by Plato on the basis of his arguments -

(1) Traditional Theory - The traditional theory, propounded by Cephalus and his son, Polemarchus, defined justice as

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speaking the truth and saying what was due to gods and men. It also contended that justice should be so administered that good is done to the friends and harm to the enemies. It considered justice as an art.

Plato rejects this theory by pleading that true justice means doing good to all and harm to none since it is very difficult to distinguish between friends and enemies as the appearances are often deceptive. Another defect of this theory is that it treats justice as an individualistic rather than a social concept. Finally, this theory, by treating justice as an art, makes it a handmaid of those in power and leaves much scope for its misuse.

(2) Radicalist theory - The radicalist theory, associated with Sophists and propounded by Thrasymachus, treated justice as the interest of the stronger. As the government is the strongest, it makes laws according to the convenience of the rulers and justice for the people consists in seeking the interest of the ruler rather than pursue their own interests. But, as every person would like to promote his own interests, there is every possibility that he would go against justice, viz. the interests of the ruler. It was, therefore, proper to be unjust to satisfy all rather than become just to satisfy the ruler alone. Therefore, Thrasymachus argues that injustice is better than justice and the unjust man is wiser than the just.

Plato rejects this concept of justice on various grounds. First, justice can never be the interest of the stronger. The government is an art and it must aim at the perfection

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of the material viz- the subjects rather than its own perfection. Secondly, justice is always better than injustice because a just man is wiser, stronger and happier than an unjust man and knows his limitation. Thirdly, Plato also condemns the extreme individualism of the Sophists and holds that individual is not an independent ~~unit~~ unit but a part of an order. Fourthly, Thrasymachus does not give any rational justification for two standards of justice - one for the ruler and the other for the subject.

(3) Pragmatic theory - The pragmatic theory of justice is stated by Glaucon. He treats justice as an artificial thing, a product of the social convention. Justice is the child of fear and is based on the necessity of the weak. Plato criticizes this theory because it assumes that justice is something external or an importation. He, on the other hand, holds that justice is rooted in human mind. It is an intrinsic virtue which does not depend for its origin upon a chance convention.

#### Platonic viewpoints on justice.

Plato believes that justice resides both in the individual as well as the society. According to Plato, like human mind, the state has three ingredients namely reason, spirit and appetite which are represented by the rulers, soldiers and farmers respectively. Justice for the society can be realised if each group performs the function which it is best suited to perform without interfering in the sphere of the others. Thus, justice implies a sort of specialization and the principle of non-interference and

harmony. ~~John~~ Hobbes, in his book 'A History of Political Theory' says, "Justice is the bond which holds a society together, a harmonious union of individuals, each of whom has found his life-work in accordance with his natural fitness and his training. It is both a public and private virtue because the highest good both of the state and its members is thereby conserved."

Thus, Plato's concept of justice is based on three principles. First, it implies functional specialization, viz - allotment of a specific function to each according to his merit and capacity. Second, it implies non-interference by various classes in each other's sphere of duty and concentration on their own duties. Third, it implies harmony between the three classes representing wisdom, courage and temperance respectively.

Accordingly, justice, with regard to the individual, implies harmonious operation of each part of the individual, viz - reason, spirit and appetite. This makes the individual virtuous and social.

Criticisms of Platonic concept of justice:  
Various criticisms have been levelled against Plato's concept of justice -

Firstly, Plato's concept of justice is based on moral principles and lacks legal sanction in so far as it is not enforceable. It is based on self-control and self-abnegation in the interest of the society. It does not envisage any clash of individual wills and conflict between various interests.

Secondly, his theory of justice could be possible only in the city-state. In the present context, when the population of the state has increased so much, the three fold class -

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division of society is not possible nor can fixed functions be assigned to members of each class.

Thirdly, Plato concedes that each individual possesses three qualities viz- reason, spirit and appetite, but he wants that each individual should devote to the development of only one faculty. Thus, Plato wants the individual to live by one-third of his personality and abandon the other two-thirds of his personality. This can hardly be justified.

Fourthly, Plato's justice assigns absolute ruling power to one class viz- the philosophers because they are the reservoirs of wisdom. However, Plato failed to realise that grant of absolute power in the hands of any person or class of persons, however morally and spiritually trained, was bound to lead to degeneration and corruption.

Lastly, according to Prof Popper, Plato's concept of justice gives rise to totalitarianism and completely ignores the humanitarian principles like equality, individualism and freedom.

Conclusion — Much of the criticism levelled against Platonic concept of justice is unjustified and shall fall flat if we remember that Platonic justice is not a legal matter, nor is it concerned with any external scheme of legal rights and duties. Plato considered justice as the root of well-ordered society and regarded it as the harmony <sup>between</sup> men and men, the orderly organisations of relationships. If all the inhabitants of his ideal state could be imbued with this sense of justice, universal happiness could be achieved.