

Plato's theory of Justice

Justice has been one of the important issues in the history of philosophy. To both Plato and Aristotle, justice meant goodness as well as willingness to obey laws. To Plato, "justice was one of the highest of virtues."

Plato (428/27-348/47 BC), was a Greek philosopher, is one of the most creative influential thinkers in political philosophy. Plato of Athens born of a noble family, and was a pupil of Socrates. The chief source of inspiration for Plato was Socrates. One of the most important questions of Socrates was about the nature of justice. After Socrates, Plato, regarded justice as the true principle of social life. And he has named his most important work, 'Republic', as a discussion on justice.

Plato gives a prominent place to the idea of justice. 'Justice' according to Plato was doing one's job for which one was naturally fitted without interfering with other people.

In his contemporary world Plato saw cities so divided that their citizens stood against one another. Thinking mainly of the Athenian democracy in which he lived and at the hands of which Socrates had been killed, he found the contemporary politics of his day dominated by two things: One was the ignorance and the other was a political selfishness. Plato found in justice the remedy for curing these evils.

According to Plato, justice is that in individual life, and in social life, means placing each individual and each class in its proper place. And each class according to prevalence of one of its capacities, places in the social and moral hierarchy. Justice is a quality – an indispensable quality of moral life. It is condition of the individual and of the state and the ideal state is the visible embodiment of justice. The state is the reality of which justice is the idea.

In the theory of justice Plato said that every individual was a functional unit, assigned a particular task with clear-cut obligations and privileges, which one was expected to perform diligently and meticulously.

Plato explained his arguments for differing individual capacities with the help of the theory of three classes and three souls, an idea borrowed from Pythagoras. He pointed out that every human soul had three qualities: rational, spirit and appetite, with justice as the fourth virtue,

balancing and harmonizing the other three qualities. In each soul, one of these qualities would be the predominant faculty.

Individuals in whom the rational faculty was predominant would constitute the ruling class. Those in whom spirit was the predominant quality were the warriors. Together, the rulers and soldiers would constitute the guardian class. Individuals whose souls were appetitive exhibited a fondness for material things. These were the artisans, the producing class.

| Soul | Class |
|-------------|--------------|
| Rational | Rulers |
| Spirited | Soldiers |
| Appetitive | Artisans |

Plato understood injustice to mean interference and meddlesomeness. Any interchange in jobs between the three social classes would bring harm to the state and was the worst evil. On the contrary, if the rulers, warriors and artisans performed their respective tasks, then such a state would be just.

Plato also said that human faculties were not hereditary. An individual's functional role in society was determined by his own natural aptitudes, and not by parental lineage. To ensure that the parents did not manipulate to get the best for their child, they were made to give up their child to the state, which in turn would categorize and educate him in the appropriate faculty that he was endowed with.

Hence the three classes identified by Plato working in proper correlation, will insure the maximum of well-being throughout the state. Every member of the community must be assigned to the class for which he proves himself best fitted.

Hence Justice is a principle of non-interference, which keeps within proper bounds the various classes of society, various individuals of each class and various elements in an individual's soul. It is a principle of functional specialization, which moves everyone to make a specialized contribution to society. Specialization according to Plato leads to efficiency. Each class and each individual will do their duty and none will interfere with other's activities.

This constitutes the central idea of justice. When this is achieved, Plato says, justice in the society will start to reside. Like individuals, classes will also not interfere with each other. He thought that if each class were engaged in performing its own duty ordained by nature, then there should not arise any ground for dissatisfaction. Plato's theory of justice rules also out the possibility of interference of law.

Conclusion

Critics have also criticised Plato's theory of justice. They stated that Plato did not state about the conflict or disagreement among the members of the same class or among the different classes.

Plato's concept of justice also has another drawback. The guardian class endowed with wisdom will eventually predominate over the entire society. It is a very common experience that the persons or class controlling the administrative affairs of the state will ultimately establish hegemony over the entire society.

Despite these drawbacks Plato was considered one of the outstanding Greek philosophers and has left behind many important works, out of which 'The Republic' is still of great interest to all those interested in the history of political ideas. Plato has also been credited for laying the foundations of the Greek political theory, and he also explored, analyzed and covered a wide range of philosophical perspectives and issues.

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