Justice as a Virtue of the Soul

Marzieh Sadeqi[1]

Translated by Mahboobeh Morshedian

ABSTRACT: This article explains the idea of justice as a virtue of the soul and as the supreme virtue in ethics, as opposed to justice as a mere social action. Individual justice takes precedence over social justice since, through training man, the society will naturally include trained individuals; as a result, society will have a healthy political structure. This is discussed in virtue ethics in which virtues are held to have inherent value. Virtue ethics also discusses the ethical characteristics and habits, emphasizing the intrinsic characteristics of the agent of the action. According to the individual justice, justice as a virtue guides us to living a proper life. This paper investigates, explains and compares the theories of Plato, Aristotle and Muslim philosophers including Khajeh Nasir-ul-Din Tusi, Ibn Miskawayh, and the late Naraqi.

---

[1] Assistant Professor at the University of Qum.

Justice as a Virtue of the Soul

Virtue ethics consists of justice as a virtue of soul and it dates back to the ancient Greece and the writings of Plato and Aristotle. The answer to the following questions ought to be sought in virtue ethics: What is the good life? What role does virtue play in it? How are ethical requirements binding? Are ethical rationales independent of the factors, particularly of the interests?

The adherents of the modern virtue ethics often consider Aristotle their forefather, who adopted his plan from Plato and Socrates. The main question of Socrates on Greek ethics related to how man must live. All three above-mentioned philosophers contended that man must live an ethical life; thus, they undertook the task of demonstrating how an ethical life is better for mankind.

Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of ethics dealt with fostering the habits and characteristics of conduct. They spoke mainly based on virtues. Accordingly, in response to Trasymachus and in his own book, Plato maintained that wise men seek to attain the pleasure of respect and power. He argued that in a broad sense, justice must integrate with some kind of rational order. When man sees that he is integrated with his reason, he finds out that being just is, in fact, better for him.

Also, Aristotle held that man's happiness in action is the virtue, and not merely enjoying them. His main argument was to raise the idea that the nature of man is perfected through virtue. He brought up many issues in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* and presented the virtuous man as aspiring to make others' lives similar to his own.

Among the propagators of the virtue ethics in the Middle Ages, we can name Augustine and Aquinas. Adding religious virtues such as faith, affection and hope, Aquinas emphasized on the divinity of ethics. In 1985, the article *Modern Moral Philosophy* by Anscombe revived virtue ethics in the second half of the 20th century after a long decline. He maintained that it is absolutely wrong to search for

a foundation for ethics in such legal concepts as commitment or duty, when one does not believe in a divine legislator as a source of such commitment. According to him, the terms *right*, *wrong*, and *ethical obligation* do not have any meaning per se. Thus, with the decline of religious belief, the ethical force relying on responsibility and duty could not survive. Later in 1981, McIntyre made great efforts to explain the virtue ethics in his book *After Virtue*.

It is worth noting that ethical theories are understood not on the basis of the actions they require, but on the basis of the rationales they provide for action. The question that arises here is, According to virtue ethics, what characteristics drive us to take action? Virtue ethics emphasizes on an agent and his ethical conduct in such a way that ethical action is the one taken by the virtuous agent. According to this viewpoint, virtuousness of ethics rests on the internal transformations of man.

In this paper, the author provides explanations for justice developed in various systems but are not dissimilar to one another. The views of Plato, Aristotle, and Muslim philosophers are compared using a set of relatively similar criteria for comparison.

Platonic View on Justice

In Plato's view, justice does not mean a virtue which influences the individual, for instance, self-esteem and farsightedness. In *Republic*, Plato gave a definition of "justice in one's soul", which is compared to and assessed by social justice. Similar to a man's soul, in society, justice consists of a permanent order of different human classes (Plato: 229). The Platonic conception of "justice in one's soul" is pictured as similar to that of social justice and is related to some kind of order, namely a harmonious order in various parts of soul. Similarly, to Plato, social justice is the very harmonious order in various social classes.

Dealing with the nature of justice in *Republic*, Plato presented various forms of it such as the idea of justice as settling the debts or

interests of the powerful. After rejecting these definitions of justice, he concluded that justice means order and harmony; in other words, the equilibrium of parts. After explaining social justice as an outcome of three groups of tradesmen, soldiers, and statesmen working in harmony with one another, he also generalized this division as the parts of the soul (Plato: 300). Moreover, Plato considered social justice a means of explaining individual justice.

Thus, it can be said that Plato posed and answered two questions at the same time: What kind of person is the just man? How can a just government come into existence? Furthermore, when he addressed the corruption of a country and the soul, he deemed them connected. In addition, he held that the just man could seldom be found except in a just country. However, the just country cannot be realized except in placec where just men live.

Nonetheless, it must be said that Plato really limited the content of this virtue, since he viewed justice merely as the harmony of social classes. He considered it an image and reflection of the harmony of the individual soul. He proved that personal interests of the just one necessitate justice. Indeed, his motto was, "O' man! Act justly or else your peace of mind and inner serenity will be at risk."

Can Plato's comparison of the individual and society corroborate his reference to an aristocratic government? If so, is the Platonic view on justice an aristocratic one? Also, can it be concluded that to Plato, there is no such thing as individual justice? When the concept of justice is connected to the individual, his relations with other individuals or with a group, including government, are explained. In other words, individual rights, which include justice, are others' rights as well (Raphael: 117). But to Plato, the benchmark of man's just action is knowledge about the images i.e., knowledge of eternal ideas, which is provided through the thinking of a good idea and toward which every virtuous person is moving. Unfortunately, only a few people can recognize the images (Becker, 1992: 44). Therefore, few are able to justify justice.

Moreover, this justification is comprehensible only to them. Of course, in the first place it must be proved that images exist.

Taking account of the faculties and parts of soul, Plato investigated four main virtues, namely wisdom, bravery, moderation, and justice in *Republic*. According to him, the soul has three faculties: reasoning faculty, faculty of will, and faculty of appetites. Whenever the faculties of will and appetites perform their tasks under the reasoning faculty, the virtues of bravery and self-control are obtained, respectively. Using the balance of the reasoning faculty, there emerges the virtue of wisdom. The virtue of justice is developed when all three faculties perform their tasks in harmony with one another. Hence, justice means harmony of parts of the soul. In the Platonic system, bravery and virtue are included in one's willpower, and wisdom is a virtue included in the reasoning part of the soul. Also, self-control is related to the faculty of desire. However, justice is a general virtue, that is, all parts of the soul should carry out their specific tasks appropriately.

It seems that Plato took this point into account that although each individual part might carry out its task well by itself, the outcome may not be desirable. Therefore, we need another virtue, namely, harmony of the parts of soul. Based on the Platonic view, the function of each individual part is the necessary but not the sufficient condition for the desired function of the whole. Rather, they must be in cooperation with one another.

According to Plato, compared to the rest of virtues, justice is the whole goodness, like the art of an architect compared to that of his subordinates in such a way that his work does not only belong to himself; it is his duty to guide others. Thus, justice is the condition for the existence of all other virtues because it causes other virtues to emerge in the society.

Aristotle's View of Justice

In the 5th book of Nicomachean Ethics, the virtue of ethics and the following issues are discussed: What kind of mean (or middle)

justice is? or Which two extremes does justice stand in between as a mean? Unlike Plato, Aristotle did not speak based on the faculties of the soul. Instead, he believed in the mean. In other words, in each case he deemed the two extremes as vices though the mean is desired. Of course, what is meant by mean is that any natural desire of man should be neither unrestrained nor suppressed. By mean, he did not intend mean per se but mean as related to man. In fact, it is the duty of reason to determine mean regarding the man (Ross, 1980: 397). Of course, there are two main problems with the issue of mean. First, for some things such as telling the truth, we cannot determine two extremes in order to find the mean. Second, in some ethical issues such as servitude to God, if one does it to excess, it is still desirable; however much we worship God, it is not excessive. About the virtue of justice, Aristotle said, "In a general sense, justice means moral virtue and injustice means moral vice." Of course, it does not mean that these terms are synonymous. Instead, he meant that when he addressed the issue of agent, he talked using the language of moral vice and virtue. Likewise, when he dealt with the way an agent's actions influenced people, he talked using the language of justice and injustice. Of course, it is worthy to note that most of Aristotelian discussions were about justice in a particular sense, namely the just distribution of individuals' shares to them. In other words, they came under the heading of social justice. However, in Greece, only if scholars of ethics were able to relate an action - becoming a habit due to its durability and stability - to a characteristic of agent, they took interest in that action. Hence, as long as Greek thought lasted, the issues of vice and virtue were the priorities in ethics. But Aristotle discussed justice differently from other virtues not only in that justice was oddly detailed but also in that justice represented a turning point in Greek ethics. Here, altruism appeared for the first time. Aristotle considered justice a virtue, whose end is the well-being of others, since it is related to others and its effect benefits them. He specified that there is a virtue whose end is not merely the happiness of its agent (Aristotle: 378).

In Aristotelian discussion of justice, insufficiency of the mean theory is the most noticeable. Here, it is expected that he explained justice the same way he talked about other particular virtues; in other words, he demonstrated the two extremes in which justice lies in between. Unlike other virtues, Aristotle, however, did not believe in mean as regards justice. Instead, he believed in a mean between the two extremes as the subject of the just action. That is, he viewed justice as the mean between just action and suffering from injustice. In this form of thought, justice can be considered the mean, but not like other virtues; rather, in a way that justice aims at the mean and injustice aims for the two extremes. Thus, justice does not resemble other virtues in this respect, since both extremes of justice are oppression and injustice, while in no other virtue both extremes are vices (Tusi, 1373: 147).

Nonetheless, sometimes Aristotle discussed justice in such a way that its difference still remains hidden. Perhaps, his words in this regard can be deemed meaningless, since when he said that justice is the mean between committing and suffering from injustice, that is justice is the mean between unjust action (oppression) and being treated unjustly (being oppressed), it can be understood that this definition is given only to make justice accord with other virtues. Looking at it carefully, we can see that his definition means the just transactional conduct is the mean between deceiving and being deceived; something which is absolutely rare. However, it must be said that the right basis for the mean theory is that there are desires in human nature which should be satisfied, although man should stop them from entering the realm of other desires. That is why moderation is recommended.

To Aristotle, in a general sense justice - defined as the entirety of virtue - means respecting the law and obeying it. Thus, all actions in conformity with law are just in a general sense. Aristotle considered the general virtue of justice the perfect virtue. That is, justice is a perfect virtue that includes all virtues. It is called “the mother of all virtues” (ibid: 370), since practicing justice requires using all virtues. Moreover, the one having this trait can use his

virtue (ibid: 378) not only for himself but also for others insofar as all of his actions are directly for the benefit of the public and in their interests. Therefore, among all virtues, justice is the only virtue which is good for others. It justice implies a social characteristic which includes all virtues, while justice in particular sense (distributive justice) is merely a part of moral virtue and only a particular virtue.

Another difference between justice and other virtues is that brave and chaste actions are taken only by the adventurous or moderate man, respectively. On the other hand, the just action can be taken by both the just man and the unjust one the same way.

Justice from Muslim Philosophers' Perspectives

Taking the faculties of soul into account, Muslim philosophers defined justice as the virtue of soul (individual justice). Khajeh Nasir-ul-Din Tusi and Ibn Miskawayh (Ibn Miskawayh: 37) regarded justice as a virtue that came into existence through integration of the three faculties of soul and the harmony of virtues of wisdom, bravery, and chastity:

> Justice consists in the integration of all faculties and their unanimity to obey reason so that virtue specific to each can be attained.[1]

According to this definition, the actions of the faculties of soul, namely reasoning faculty, acting faculty, and the faculties of appetite and anger reach equilibrium. The last three faculties are obedient to the first one. This way, the virtues of wisdom, bravery, and chastity are obtained. Also, through the existence of these virtues, as a result of obeying reason, there appears a state which is called justice, which is the perfection of all four faculties. In addition, according to this definition, the integration of faculties is not a single form occurring to three habits. Hence, justice is not

[1] Naraqi, p. 52.

considered an independent virtue; rather, it is the essence of the very habits.

After defining justice, the late Muhammad Mahdi Naraqi pointed out that practical reason follows theatrical reason:

> Rational soul has two faculties; faculty of perception and faculty of stimulation. Every faculty is also of two kinds; the first kind of faculty of perception is the theoretical reason, which receives scientific images from the transcendent principle. The second kind is the practical reason, which is the root of bodily movement in insignificant actions. Likewise, the first kind of faculty of stimulation is the faculty of anger, which is the source of repulsing the unpleasant, and the second is the faculty of desire, which is the source of attracting the pleasant. Hence, if the faculty of perception dominates other faculties and they are subject to it, action of each faculty will be taken moderately and as a result, man's faculties and forces will be in harmony with one another.[1]

Thus, man will enjoy the required virtue. This means that justice results from purification of the acting faculty, and science or wisdom comes from purification of the reasoning faculty. Furthermore, purification of the faculty of anger leads to forbearance and bravery; likewise, purification of faculty of appetite results in chastity and self-control. Accordingly, justice is the perfection of faculty of practical reason. Based on the late Naraqi's view, justice requires that faculties of soul work in harmony, since their harmony follows from the surrender of practical reason to theoretical reason (ibid). Put another way, we can say that justice is the cause and the three habits are the effects.

---

[1] *Ibid*.

In response to the question as to why is justice is the noblest virtue, the late Naraqi answered:

> Because justice includes all virtues or is inseparable from them. In addition, a quality of justice is that it is the closest trait to unity. It is to draw unity from plurality, to integrate and harmonize the heterogeneous things, to make the different things cooperate, and to alter things from deficiency and excess to the mean, which is the very unity. Also, it somehow unites the opposite things at this level. However, without justice there will be a multitude of the two extremes and no doubt unity is nobler that plurality.[1]

Indeed, this means that justice is some state of soul which results in adjusting all traits and actions as well as changing excess to moderation. Moreover, justice harmonizes all faculties; the corollary to this is that a single virtue is developed in the soul.

Therefore, according to the late Naraqi, the truth of justice is only the surrender of the acting faculty to the reasoning faculty and this surrender entails keeping the two faculties of anger and appetite under the control of reason. Thus, control is indispensable to it; that is, other virtues are prerequisites for justice.

Here, there are three relations: When just action is attributed to its agent, it is called virtue. When it is assessed in connection with the one who is treated justly, it is justice. If it is considered by itself and independently, it is called a habit of soul.

Conclusion

Platonic view (division of faculties of soul) is different from Aristotelian idea (the mean theory). However, perspectives of such

[1] *Ibid.* p. 124.

people as the late Naraqi, Ibn Miskawayh, and Khajeh Nasir are more consistent with that of Plato, who explained justice based on faculties of soul. Of course, Muslim philosophers interpreted moral concepts in light of the Shariah. As the late Naraqi said after defining justice, "The virtue of justice enables man to take his actions divinely. Thus, the one adhering to Shariah is considered just. Hence, justice is the epithet of the one adhering to Shariah" (ibid: 119). Nevertheless, the two explanations in Muslim philosophers' judgments tell us that wisdom, chastity, and bravery all have the same meaning. According to the first explanation, justice means all faculties obey the reasoning faculty and work in harmony. Based on the second explanation, justice means that practical reason follows the reasoning faculty (innate reasoning) and takes control of anger and desire.

Additionally, on the basis of the first explanation, which views justice as the integration of all three virtues of wisdom, bravery, and chastity, realizing justice is dependent on these three virtues because if all virtues are integrated and developed and if reason is obeyed, the result is a quality called justice. Hence, achieving justice depends on the existence of other virtues and their integration. In fact, they are parts of justice and also prerequisites to it. However, according to the second explanation, justice is the cause and the three habits are the effects. Moreover, in the words of Muslim philosophers, justice is presented as the most important moral virtue.

Bibligraphy

Anscombe, G.E.M. (1958). *Modern Moral Philosophy*.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Great Books, vol. 8.

Beker, Lowrence, C. (1992), *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, New York and London.

Crisp, Roger, "Aristotle and Ancient Virtue Ethics" in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Ibn Miskawayh, A. *Tahdhib-al- Akhlaq wa Tathir-al- A'raq.* Bidar Publishing Co.

Naraqi. *Jāmi'al-Sa'ādāt*, 4th ed., vol. 1. Lebanon: Scientific Publishing Co.,

Plato. *Republic*, in Great Books. vol. 6.

Raphael, D. D. *Justice: A Complex in Problems of Political Philosophy.* 2nd ed.

Ross, D. *Aristotle* (1980). Revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. Ourmson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tusi, K. N. *Naseri Ethics*. Revised & expurgated M. Minavi and A. Heidari. 5th ed.