

An Insight into the Notion of Social Justice Following Plato and Rawls

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B.A Philosophy

Abstract Justice as a concept is replete in our daily discussions and we talk about it in almost all spheres of human endeavour. It has been viewed in diverse ways by different people from the early days of man to this present age and, since then; no common notion of it has been arrived at. This goes further to confirm it as an issue of philosophical discourse. From antiquity, people have been concerned with the issue of justice, but it became a topic of rational discourse from the time of the Sophists and Socrates. From that point, philosophers henceforth have not failed to either substantiate already existing views or posit novel ones. This work is out to analyse the views of Plato and Rawls on social justice. Plato sees justice as faithfulness to the order in the soul, the microcosm, which is a small picture of the order in the society, the macrocosm. Thus, by understanding the nature of the soul and justice therein, one can better appreciate justice in the society, thereby having a social justice theory. John Rawls conceives of justice as fairness and defines fairness to be dictates that reasonable and free human beings will accent to on a neutral position with a view of advancing their interests. After highlighting the tenets of social justice in the light of the above-mentioned philosophers, this work shall present a succinct critique of social justice in the author's view.

Keywords Social Justice, Plato, John Rawls

1. Introduction

The question of what justice is and the best way to explain or define it has always proved a debatable issue from the ancient days of philosophy. The problem has spanned through the ancient and medieval ages when Socrates, Plato, the Sophists and their likes discussed it, to the modern and contemporary ages when philosophers like Russell, Rawls and many others are still commenting on it. Justice according *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is defined as *the fair treatment of people or the quality of being fair or reasonable*. Thomas Aquinas in (Aquinas, 1948), defined justice as *the strong and firm will to give to each his due*. Russell in (Russell, 1945), commenting on the possibility of addressing the notion of justice, avers:

A question such as *what is justice?* is eminently suited for discussion in a Platonic dialogue. We all freely use the words *just* and *unjust*, and, by examining the ways in which we use them, we can arrive inductively at the definition that will best suit with usage. All that is needed is knowledge of how the words in question are used. But when our inquiry is concluded, we have made only a linguistic discovery, not a discovery in ethics.

John Macquarie in (Macquarie, 1991), asserts that several meanings can actually be given to justice, namely: justice in the widest sense, justice in the narrow sense, and justice in the proper sense. In the widest sense, which corresponds to its general meaning, in the Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature and Old Testament, justice means moral righteousness, rectitude or moral excellence or perfection. In the narrow sense, justice means conformity to/with the law. In the third sense, which is in the proper sense, justice is understood as the *harmonious functioning of the constituent parts in the individual, or, in the state*.

Social justice, which is the aspect of justice this work shall focus on, as a concept, is often acknowledged to have been coined by the Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli (1793-1862) (Luigi Taparelli, 2017), and it became popularized through the instrumentality of Anthonio Rosmini-Serbati (1797-1855) (Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, 2017). Taparelli and Rosmini both conceived of social justice as a mere formal concept rather than a material and real concept, that is, social justice was originally taken by them to mean just an aspect of justice like commutative justice and did not have any depth or philosophical undertone. Therefore, the concept of social justice at the outset was simply an extension of the existing, traditional idea of justice into a new area, which is society as a whole.

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2. Development

2.1. Plato on Social Justice

Plato, through the voice of Socrates in (Plato, 1991), has made clear the nature of human psychology and the effects that justice and injustice have on our inner selves. Justice constitutes the healthy well-being of the soul. Much like physical health, justice is a condition in which all the various elements of the person are balanced and in the right order. In contrast, wickedness or injustice is like a cancer of the soul. At the beginning, the question *why be just or morally good?* seemed like a serious question. But after Socrates has laid out the options, it became like asking *why be in control of my life instead of being a slave? Why be healthy instead of diseased?*

After criticizing the conventional theories of justice presented differently by Cephalus, Polemarchus and Thrasymachus in (Plato, 1991), Plato gives us his own theory of justice according to which, individually, justice is a *human virtue* that makes a person self-consistent and good and, socially, justice is a social consciousness that makes a society internally harmonious and good. Justice is a sort of specialization. It is, therefore, not born of fear of the weak but of the longing of the human soul to do a duty according to its nature.

Plato (Plato, 1991) is convinced that social justice is directly related to individual justice such that an understanding of justice in the social dimension simply entails understanding it in the individual sense. In (Plato, 1991), Glaucon challenges Socrates to define justice and to show why acting justly should be thought to be in anyone's self-interest. They offer a threefold classification of goods viz: (i) intrinsic good (e.g. harmless good); (ii) intrinsic and instrumental good (e.g. health and knowledge); and (iii) instrumental good (e.g. medicine and exercise). Glaucon and Adeimantus (Plato, 1991) claim that most people rightly regard justice as a type iii good and they want Socrates to show that it is type ii good. They argue thus:

1. Justice arises as a sort of social contract
2. Hence, people have a reason to seem just, but no reason to be just.
3. Moreover, if justice is type ii good, then, the just person must always be happier than the unjust person –even when the just person is *on a rack* and the unjust person is at liberty.

Plato (Plato, 1991) through Socrates proposes to meet their challenge by considering justice in a macrocosm; hence, he proposes to construct a city –*The Republic* –as a heuristic device designed to help determine what justice is in the individual case, the microcosm of the soul.

The republic must contain 3 classes: the guardian or ruler, the auxiliaries or soldiers, and the productive class or workers. Justice turns out to be a relation between these classes, each doing what befits it (Plato, 1991). Socrates (Plato, 1991) argues that the individual soul is indeed analogous to the republic: The republic and the soul are isomorphic.

Plato's social justice theory (Plato, 1991) focuses on the need for every man to carry out his duty effectively and efficiently. This, in his view, will simply bring order and, by extension, justice. One can, by inference, therefore, posit that subsidiarity and division of labour is paramount to attaining justice in a society in the Platonic worldview. In this assertion, one can argue that Plato is not mistaken. The principles of subsidiarity alongside solidarity are basic to the attainment and maintenance of justice in the society. He also emphasizes on the need for the agents to be the guardians, the soldiers, and the labourers to possess their qualities in significantly defined proportions. This means that social justice is attainable.

Social justice seems very easy and attainable from Plato's explanation. Once the three classes of people in the society are able to keep to their task faithfully, then the society will be just. Justice becomes so simplistic and readily attainable. However, Plato's account (Plato, 1991) of the formation of a state implicitly suggests a different idea of social justice and morality. The state is formed because it is better for individuals if they band together so as to benefit from a division of labour and the excellence which accrues to everyone when each does that and only that, which he is very good at doing. Thus, the basis for state formation is not that individual interests are served by social arrangements that protect us from domination by the strong, but rather that individual benefits accrue more to those who form cultures of mutual dependency and support than to individuals in isolation or those who do not cooperate through a system of divided labour. Glaucon's picture of human nature in (Plato, 1991) makes self-interest and mutual interest appear incompatible. Plato corrects this. Hence, what distinguishes Plato's theory of justice from Glaucon's implicit view as contained in (Plato, 1991), is not that Plato's is inner directed, but rather, that it is based on a different view of why human beings band together. For Plato (Plato, 1991), we band together largely for mutual benefit, not simply to avoid personal harm.

In other words, the principles of psychology and political science are the same. The soul of the individual person is a miniature version of the structure of society and society could be viewed as the individual person projected on a large screen. However, the relationship between the two is deeper than that of simply having a parallel structure. The relation between the individual and the State now becomes plain, for the three classes in the State is an extension of the three parts of the soul.

2.2. Rawls on Social Justice

Rawls (Rawls, 1971) proposes to develop a theory of justice by revising the social contract tradition of theorizing about justice associated with the 17th and 18th century writers, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes in (Locke,

1823), (Rousseau, 1762) and (Hobbes, 16510) respectively. According to Rawls (Rawls, 1971), justice is what *free and equal persons* would agree to as basic terms of social cooperation in conditions that are fair for this purpose. This idea he calls *justice as fairness*. Explicating further on the concept of justice as fairness, Rawls in (Rawls, 1971) asserts:

...the guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational person concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established. This way of regarding the principle of justice I shall call justice as fairness.

It seems, therefore, that Rawls' use of *fairness* is basically, methodological. Rawls begins his work (Rawls, 1971) with the idea of justice as fairness. He identifies the basic structure of society as the primary subject of justice and identifies justice as the first virtue of social institutions. He considers justice a matter of the organization and internal divisions of a society. The main idea of a theory of social justice asks: what kind of organization of society would rational persons choose if they were in an initial position of independence and equality and were setting up a system of cooperation? This is what Rawls sees as a *hypothetical original position*: The state in which no one knows what place he or she would occupy in the society to be created.

John Rawls (Rawls, 1971) develops a conception of justice from the perspective that persons are free and equal. Their freedom consists in their possession of the two moral powers, *a capacity for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good* (Rawls, 1971). Insofar as they have these to the degree necessary to be *fully cooperating members of society*, they are equal and the society is just. A sense of justice is *the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from the public conception of justice which characterizes the fair terms of cooperation*. This sense expresses *a willingness...to act in relation to others on terms that they also can publicly endorse* (Rawls, 1971).

Rawls' theory of justice urges us in (Rawls, 1971), to conceive of society *as a fair system of cooperation over time, from one generation to the next*. It revolves around the adaptation of two fundamental principles of justice, which would, in turn, guarantee a just and morally acceptable society. The first principle guarantees the right of each person to have the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the liberty of others. The second principle states that social and economic positions are to be (a) to everyone's advantage and (b) open to all. Commenting on the idea of social justice, Rawls in (Rawls, 1971) opines:

A conception of social justice, then, is to be regarded as providing in the first instance a standard whereby the distributive aspects of the basic structure of society are to be assessed. This standard, however, is not to be confused with the principles defining the other virtues, for the basic structure, and social arrangements generally, may be efficient or inefficient, liberal or illiberal, and many other things, as well as just or unjust.

Rawls (Rawls, 1971) proposes that the most reasonable principles of justice for a society are those that individuals would themselves agree to behind the *veil of ignorance*, in circumstances in which each is represented as a moral person and endowed with the basic moral powers. What this position supports is that while each person has different ends and goals, different backgrounds and talents, each ought to have a fair chance to develop his or her talents and to pursue those goals – fair equality for opportunity. It is not a race or contest where the talented or gifted prevail; it should be complete cooperation among all so that there may be reasonable life for all.

One of the most discussed elements of Rawls' view of justice as fairness is his *modelling* device known as the Original Position. The Original Position has often been compared to the *state of nature* found in the philosophies of early modern social contract theorists (Hobbes, 16510), (Rousseau, 1762) and (Locke, 1823). Speaking on this, Rawls (Rawls, 1971) says:

Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favour his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain. For given the circumstances of the original position, the symmetry of everyone's relations to each other, this initial situation is fair between individuals as moral persons, that is, as rational beings with their own ends and capable, I shall assume, of a sense of justice. The original position is, one might say, the appropriate initial status quo, and thus the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair. This explains the property of the name *justice as fairness*: it conveys the idea that the principles of justice are agreed to in an initial situation that is fair. The name does not mean that the concept of justice and fairness are the same....

Rawls (Rawls, 1971) identifies two principles of social justice. One, that each person should have equal rights to the most extensive liberties consistent with other people enjoying the same liberties; and two, that inequalities should be arranged so that they would be to everyone's advantage and arranged so that no one person would be blocked from occupying any position. From these two social principles Rawls derives an egalitarian conception of justice that would allow the inequality of conditions implied by equality of opportunity but would also give more attention to those born with fewer assets and into less favourable social positions.

3. Evaluation

The two authors, Plato (Plato, 1991) and Rawls (Rawls, 1971), whose social justice theories were exposed above, both, have presented appealing arguments to substantiate their individual convictions with regards to the concept in view. However, their theories are both utopic and unrealizable. This is because justice, as it were, is not a universal concept in that it has no complete definition. It cannot be achieved solely by any given method or criterion. The concept of social justice is fluid. It can take any shape and form at different instances. What social justice meant for a white man living in apartheid South Africa is not what it means for the same white man living presently in South Africa. While in the former time, social justice could be taken to be giving the whites everything good as they were perceived to be superior and subjugating and demeaning the blacks; in the latter time, social justice implies equal rights and privileges for both white and black. Also, what social justice currently means in Saudi Arabia is not what it means in Britain or Switzerland. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are living in subjugation and are almost not free. A woman cannot obtain a passport, marry, travel or obtain higher education without the approval of a male guardian like a father, son, husband or brother. People are not allowed to speak up or hold any view opposed to the official government views. And these phenomena are accepted. It goes to present their view of equality and social justice. Whereas in Switzerland men and women are free to travel, marry, and go to school without seeking special approval from any individual. Freedom of speech is guaranteed and protected by the constitution. The social justice lived in Saudi Arabia and Switzerland is obviously different. In India, also, the existence of the caste system makes the meaning of social justice different from its meaning in Norway where there exists no caste. In the Republic of North Korea, what social justice means is certainly not what it means in a place like Canada or France. This is what is meant by the fluidity of the concept of social justice.

More so, a critical look at the present day societal situation negates Plato's position that the three pillars of a society (republic) are the guardians, the soldiers and the craftsmen. The teacher who teaches the soldier the art of war is not considered a major stakeholder in the republic as Plato gave teachers no place therein. Even if teachers were given no special place in the republic and they have to teach from having learned how to do themselves, say by observing others, yet, just the guardian, soldier and craftsman cannot even make up a republic. A republic here indicates a sovereign state, which is an independently existing nation. Any nation, say Britain, Brazil, China or Nigeria, that claims that it can survive with just the leaders and soldiers and craftsmen as its basic structures will sooner fail than it existed. This is because to a larger extent, professionals like doctors, economists, lawyers etc. are major pillars of modern society too. They heal the sick, maintain the economy at equilibrium and maintain law and order among others things. And the above duties are such that can be taken care of neither by the rulers, soldiers nor craftsmen. One may want to argue that the rulers could as well be economists or doctors or lawyers as the case may be; yet, it cannot be proved that Plato had this category of people in consideration in propounding his theory of the state (republic). Plato himself stated that it were best for philosophers to rule. This is a pointer to the fact that he had a particular group of people in mind when he speaks of rulers and one cannot conveniently argue the inclusion of doctors, economists and lawyers in the platonic category of rulers. Moreso, Plato existed in a largely religious society Athens and yet he failed to see the religious leaders as major stakeholders in the republic. Recent events in the West and the East have come to show that religious leaders cannot be entirely pushed to the rear in matters of statehood. This is as a result of the fact that man is largely, as some scholars will claim, and originally, religious. Man has a natural inclination to God and this makes him listen to, respect, and sometimes fear the leaders of religion which he many times conceives as the mouth piece of a supreme being who made him (man). If religion were this fundamental to man, and religious leaders thus revered, then Plato's republic could not have existed peaceful without due cognizance and space given to religious leaders. The point therefore is that Plato's republic is utopic and inexistent. A republic, being an independent state, as Plato tried to portray it, cannot stand on just three pillars, not to think of the pillars mentioned by Plato.

For Rawls also, social justice is definable and attainable by a certain definite means. But this is not the case because defining justice and giving it a definite form strips it of its fluidity. No two societies are exactly the same and thus, what constitutes justice in one society may amount to injustice in another. Social justice, therefore, is relative to societies. What works for one may not go for the other and vice versa.

Plato's notion of social justice distinguishes from Rawls' in the sense that Plato sees justice as harmony and subsidiarity based on the divergent stratification of the society which he correlated to the divergent elements found in individuals; while Rawls conceives of justice as fairness which stresses the fact that the principle of justice must be chosen behind a *veil of ignorance* so as to ensure that no one is disadvantaged and no one is advantaged over the other.

Rawls considers the implications of his view of justice for social institutions. He discusses in detail equal liberty, economic distribution, and duties and obligations as well as the main characteristics of each that would make up a just society. He does not, however, identify any particular type of social system that would be consistent with his theory. He deals only with the demands that his version of justice places on institutions.

The table below shall be used to present, in clear terms, the take of the two philosophers in view on social justice, their basic arguments to back their position and the corresponding criticism from the author.

AUTHOR	TAKE ON SOCIAL JUSTICE	ARGUMENT	CRITICISM
PLATO	Social justice is attainable. A republic is made up of rulers, soldiers and craftsmen. When they carry out their duties effectively and efficiently, there is harmony. There is justice.	The republic and the soul are isomorphic and analogous. The republic is a large picture of the soul and harmony in the soul comes about by a union of the three components of the soul, which are analogous also to the three components of the republic viz: rulers, soldiers and craftsmen. Justice in the microcosm, soul is equivalent to justice in the macrocosm, the republic.	A critical look at the present day societal situation negates Plato's position that the three pillars of a society (republic) are the guardians, the soldiers and the craftsmen. It is too simplistic and neglects other major stakeholders in the sustenance of a state like lawyers, economists, doctors, etc.
RAWLS	Social justice is attainable. Social justice is the standard whereby the distributive aspects of the basic structure of society are to be assessed. It is fairness.	The principles of social justice are those that individuals would themselves agree to behind the veil of ignorance, in circumstances in which each is represented as a moral person, endowed with the basic moral powers. Persons are free and equal. Freedom consists in possessing two moral powers, the power of justice and good. Once persons in a society have the relevant capacity to be fully cooperating members of society, they are equal and the society is just.	The concept of social justice is fluid. Defining social justice and giving it a definite form strips it of its fluidity. No two societies are exactly the same and thus, what constitutes justice in one society may amount to injustice in another. Social justice, therefore, is relative to societies. What works for one may not go for the other and vice versa.

At the end, the theories of Plato and Rawls are insufficient to varying degrees. This is because of the fluidity of the nature of social justice. Any good social justice theory must take into consideration the existing situation of a particular area, that is, it must be centred on a particular society, like Saudi Arabia, France etc. A claim to provide a universal social justice theory that will cut across all regions will only be a false claim: Social justice is context and place oriented.

4. Conclusions

Plato sees social justice as when the three classes or structures that exist in the society viz: rulers, soldiers and craftsmen all become faithful and committed to their individual duties. This however, is later shown to be too simplistic and, to say the least, utopic as the three structures of rulers, soldiers and craftsmen cannot make up a republic which, by Plato's implication, designates an independent society. Plato however, rightly emphasizes the need for the principles of subsidiarity/division of labour commenting that this is a prerequisite for the attainment of justice in the society. He comments further that the basis of formation of the state is that individual benefits accrue more to those who form cultures of mutual dependency and support rather than that individual interests are served by social arrangements that protect us from domination by the strong.

The reluctance of Rawls to identify any particular type of society as just, especially in the second part of (Rawls, 1971), dealing with institutions, may leave Rawls open to the charge that he offers no guidance for the actual content of justice. Because no one can know—behind a veil of ignorance—which system would lead to the best possible lives for the poor, there can be no way of deciding what kind of society should be preferred. Rawls emphasized the need for persons to be free and equal as prerequisites for the development of justice, noting that freedom consists in the possession of two moral powers which are the capacity for a sense of justice and the capacity for a conception of the good. Social justice exhorts that society be conceived as a fair system of cooperation over time from one generation to the other. Social justice also is supposed to avail a standard for assessing the distributive aspects of the basic structures of society. The two principles of social justice in Rawls estimation are that each person has equal rights to the most extensive liberties consistent with other people enjoying the same liberties; and that inequalities be arranged so that they are to everyone's advantage in such a way that no one person is blocked from occupying any position.

A universal conception of social justice, as Plato and Rawls will have it, is however unrealizable and utopic due to the fact that social justice, as it were, is fluid. It practically means different things in different states and regions. Hence arriving at a general conception of it is problematic. Any good definition or theorization on social justice would have to take into consideration the existing conditions and factors in any state it wants to understudy. This solely can give a clear meaning to social justice.

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