

PLATO ON JUSTICE

Adapted from Web Source: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.2.i.html> and
<http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2g.htm>

The elderly, wealthy Cephalus suggests that justice involves nothing more than telling the truth and repaying one's debts. But Socrates points out that in certain (admittedly unusual) circumstances, following these simple rules without exception could produce disastrous results. (*Republic 331c*) Returning a borrowed weapon to an insane friend, for example, would be an instance of following the rule but would not seem to be an instance of just action. The presentation of a [counter-example](#) of this sort tends to show that the proposed definition of justice is incorrect, since its application does not correspond with our ordinary notion of justice.

In an effort to avoid such difficulties, Polemarchus offers a refinement of the definition by proposing that justice means "giving to each what is owed." The new definition codifies formally our deeply-entrenched practice of seeking always to help our friends and harm our enemies. This evades the earlier counter-example, since the just act of refusing to return the borrowed weapon would clearly benefit one's friend. But Socrates points out that harsh treatment of our enemies is only likely to render them even more unjust than they already are. (*Republic 335d*) Keep in mind when you read this that the production of injustice could never be an element within the character of true justice; so this definition, too, must be mistaken.

Plato and Cephalus attempt to define justice.

Well said, Cephalus, I replied; but as concerning justice, what is it? --to speak the truth and to pay your debts --no more than this? And even to this are there not exceptions? Suppose that a friend when in his right mind has deposited arms with me and he asks for them when he is not in his right mind, ought I to give them back to him? No one would say that I ought or that I should be right in doing so, any more than they would say that I ought always to speak the truth to one who is in his condition.

You are quite right, he replied.

But then, I said, speaking the truth and paying your debts is not a correct definition of justice.

Cephalus - SOCRATES - POLEMARCHUS

Quite correct, Socrates, if Simonides is to be believed, said Polemarchus interposing.

I fear, said Cephalus, that I must go now, for I have to look after the sacrifices, and I hand over the argument to Polemarchus and the company.

Is not Polemarchus your heir? I said.

To be sure, he answered, and went away laughing to the sacrifices.

Socrates - POLEMARCHUS

Tell me then, O thou heir of the argument, what did Simonides say, and according to you truly say, about justice?

He said that the repayment of a debt is just, and in saying so he appears to me to be right.

I should be sorry to doubt the word of such a wise and inspired man, but his meaning, though probably clear to you, is the reverse of clear to me. For he certainly does not mean, as we were now saying that I ought to return a deposit of arms or of anything else to one who asks for it when he is not in his right senses; and yet a deposit cannot be denied to be a debt.

True.

Then when the person who asks me is not in his right mind I am by no means to make the return?

Certainly not.

When Simonides said that the repayment of a debt was justice, he did not mean to include that case?

Certainly not; for he thinks that a friend ought always to do good to a friend and never evil.

You mean that the return of a deposit of gold which is to the injury of the receiver, if the two parties are friends, is not the repayment of a debt, --that is what you would imagine him to say?

Yes.

And are enemies also to receive what we owe to them?

To be sure, he said, they are to receive what we owe them, and an enemy, as I take it, owes to an enemy that which is due or proper to him --that is to say, evil.

Simonides, then, after the manner of poets, would seem to have spoken darkly of the nature of justice; for he really meant to say that justice is the giving to each man what is proper to him, and this he termed a debt.