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Justice as Aletheia

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*... speaking of that thing itself, justice,
are we to say it is simply speaking the truth
(aletheia) ...?*

Plato, *Republic*, Book I¹

Reflections on justice are a discourse that began with the birth of the philosophy of politics. At its beginning justice was designated the condition for the permanence and stability of the *polis* (political community), that is, a principle that guarantees members the chance to attain the “good life.” Thus, we have been forever discussing the same thing, though we obviously understand the “good life” differently. Bearing this in mind, I would like to discuss the relation between justice and truth indicated by Plato in Book 1 of *Republic*, as it seems to me that it may introduce certain new facets into this discussion. In my reflections I will not refer to the vast recent literature on Plato’s political philosophy (Graham D. Vlastos’s works and the related discussions). I am not interested here in historical research, though I do appreciate it. On the basis of an immanent analysis of certain excerpts from Plato’s work, I would like to consider the political meaning of justice combined with *aletheia*, that is, the truth understood as revealing, disclosing, and unconcealment.

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¹ Plato: *Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company 2004. All citations from *Republic* come from this translation.

Let us recall then that Socrates equals justice (*dikoiosynt*) with the truth (*aletheia*) in the opening conversation with Cephalus – “quite an old” man.² According to historians, Cephalus may have been about fifty at that time. While reading this fragment, I have always found it astonishing that in Plato’s dialogues there could be someone older than Socrates. I think Plato needed to diversify the age of the protagonists for formal reasons: as the point of departure he reflected upon old age, or, more generally, on the end of life. To achieve this, Socrates had to have an adequate, that is, an old interlocutor, or at least someone older than he was. It is good to remember that as far as the composition of *Republic* is concerned, these initial reflections on the end of life correspond to the final story about the fate of the soul after death. In Socrates’s conversation with Cephalus, old age appears as the sum of knowledge and experience gathered during one’s lifetime, as the capital that enables a free and sensible attitude toward the world and people. At this stage of life, man does not have to search and conquer constantly. Nor does he have to process his knowledge and skills into new goods, knowledge or success, but may calmly use what he has already attained.

Plato considers old age as a period of becoming subdued – especially in the biological sense – that is, freeing oneself from the pressure of passions and drives: “Old age brings peace and freedom from all such things.” Thus, man may more easily show self-control, which Plato conceives to be the basic condition for political freedom. Only he who controls himself, that is, he who can recognize his needs and submit them to the power of reason, may rule over others. Consequently, controlling oneself is the expression of knowledge of oneself which may be useful as a measure for evaluating other people, while at the same time

² In this excerpt the Greek *aletheia* is rendered as *speaking the truth*, though it is often translated as *the truth*. “Speaking the truth” is closer to the meaning of *aletheia* that Heidegger pointed at, its meaning is better rendered as “disclosing, emerging, revealing.” I think that in this context the pre-philosophical meaning of the word *aletheia* also matters, the meaning that Heidegger indicates, that is, what is “understood by itself.”

shaping our relations with them. In the earlier stages of life this evaluation depends to a large degree on our own benefits (what others owe us). In old age this degree levels off, we may evaluate what we owe to others. This is possible because old age, while placing man before death, also makes it easier for him to free himself from financial dependencies; it discloses the horizon of eternity and transcendence before him. It is in the face of death that man feels the need to realize, to learn whether he has hurt someone, whether he has given what he owes to everyone – whether he has been just. Thus, old age becomes a model of knowledge of justice which in the earlier periods of life may be attained only through civic education and philosophical training.

That is why in Plato the conversation on justice begins by meeting a man who is “quite old.”

I find two elements of this initial reconstruction important: first, indicating the connection between justice and knowledge; second, the relation of this knowledge to the existential experience of old age and death. Thus, in Plato the question of justice is not a technical issue, a question of good or bad ruling over the *polis*, a good or bad law. It concerns matters of much greater significance: existential issues. That is why justice is more important than wealth, both to a man and to a political community. For if wealth is unjustly distributed it may lead to quarrels, discord or even to a catastrophe in one’s life or in politics. As Plato states, justice is “a thing more honorable than a large quantity of gold.”

I think that another explanation – this time methodological in character – will be useful here. Plato’s initial reflections on justice pertain to an individual man. It is with reference to a single man that justice emerges as “a way of life – the one that would make living life that way most profitable for each of us.” Plato is interested above all in the just man. It is because he wants to investigate this issue thoroughly that he deliberates on justice in the *polis*, as “there will be more justice in the larger thing, and it will be easier to discern.” That is why, according to him,

we should “first find out what sort of thing justice is in cities, and afterward look for it in the individual, to see if the larger entity is similar in form to the smaller one.” It is also on account of research that he considers the concept of justice as more than something that is, but in its process of shaping, “from the beginning,” which translates into “building in thoughts” a just, or ideal political community. Thus, in order to understand what “a just man” means, Plato begins to construct the *polis* in which justice will reign.

In analyzing the above excerpts from *Republic*, Karl Popper draws the conclusion that they confirm Plato’s whole doctrine, according to which “the individual is lower than the state, and a kind of imperfect copy of it.” I do not agree with Popper that the aim of this analogy is to depreciate an individual as opposed to the state, though I do accept his statement that “Plato [...] does not offer so much a biological theory of the state as a political theory of the human individual.”³ However, with this reservation: that Plato’s state is above all a *koinonia politike*, that is, a political community, a community of the free and equal. For it seems to me that ultimately, according to Plato, a man may only be just in a justly established community. The community creates the possibility for him to show himself as a just person.

Methodological efforts that Plato undertakes convince us that the idea of justice has a different structure than, for example, the ideas of Good or Beauty. One cannot simply relate justice as a virtue to man as such. For a man is not just in the same way that he is good. One can call a man just only when one has examined his relations with other people, when one has revealed how he relates to them and what he expects from them, when one has discovered his obligations and dues. That is why it is easier to examine justice when the object of research is these relations, that is, a justly established political community.

³ K. Popper: *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Princeton University Press 1971, p. 79. The above deliberations also demonstrate why I cannot agree with Popper when he says that Plato understood justice as what is in the interests of the ideal state.

In Book II of *Republic*, Plato states – while wondering on the origin of justice in the *polis* – that its origin is an agreement between people “neither to do injustice, nor to suffer it.” Only this kind of agreement, which is another version of the formula “to give everyone what they deserve,” may bind people together and be the basis for their mutual obligations. As Ryszard Legutko rightly observes, this is the first outline of the social contract theory.⁴ However, in his most interesting text, Legutko does not note the fact that, according to Plato, the grounds for such an agreement can only be “speaking the truth,” that is, the ability of people to properly articulate knowledge about themselves and their relations with other people. Only when this knowledge corresponds to other people’s knowledge and agrees with it, when it is general, can it be true. A political community based on such knowledge becomes a just community. In this sense it is also a true community. Only then can it also generate general notions and care for their “generality” (their absolute value). The lack of such notions – which Ryszard Legutko indicates in his work, and what seems to me especially interesting and important as regards the field of politics – poses a threat to the political order itself, and thus to the political community.

What then must a man know about himself, and what must he tell others to be able to call himself just? What must be revealed among people so that their mutual relations create a just political community? The most important thing in politics – as Plato states in *Laws* while discussing the benefit for knowing oneself and others that comes from drinking wine and celebrating – is taking care of “man’s character and soul.” A well and justly established political community must create conditions in which a man may acquire knowledge about himself (his nature) that will enable him to find the right place in the community. Only when this knowledge is true, can he “mind his own business”

⁴ R. Legutko: *Spór o Platona* [A Dispute over Plato], in: *Etyka absolutna i społeczeństwo otwarte* [Absolute Ethics and the Open Society], Kraków 1994, p. 80.

– that is, act in accordance with his nature in the community – and “manage.” Therefore, knowledge about ourselves sets off the achievement of internal identity that binds our inborn character, our predispositions – what we are by nature – and what others expect from us, what is needed to live together and what may also be called the social division of labor.

According to Popper, the essence of Plato’s totalitarianism is his idea that in a just community everyone should be occupied with the “one thing for which he is naturally suited,” and that is why everyone should “mind his own business.” This is a proclamation of the violence of the state’s power upon an individual. However, it seems to me that Plato’s political community does not impose class membership as Popper thinks it does. If it is a true, that is, a just community, then it should create conditions in which we ourselves learn what place in the community is most adequate for us. I think that what irritates Popper is above all the acknowledgement that this choice is determined by our inborn abilities. However, working on this assumption enabled Plato to discover that we gain knowledge about ourselves, its extent, through adapting to the preexisting order, to other people, through taking them into account.

Only through other people, in a political community, is man capable of acquiring an identity, a unity between what he is by nature and what he becomes through education, during the process of adapting to a community to which he belongs. If we succeed in creating such a structure (system) of a political community in which people recognize their proper place and can identify with it, then they will be able to identify with the whole political community. That is why, according to Plato, “every other citizen, too, must be assigned to what naturally suits him, with one person assigned to one job so that, practicing his own pursuit, each of them will become not many but one.” Only a political community thus united can be true, that is, just.

Internal unity, which is an expression of justice, is the source of a political community's power, for – as I have been trying to show – it is the basis for coexistence and cooperation. That is why, according to Plato, no community, not even a criminal gang, can exist without justice. When there is no justice, bonds among people die out. Through injustice they become above all incapable of cooperating: “For those who are wholly bad and completely unjust are also completely incapable of acting.” Injustice is a power destructive to that within which it appears, whether to a man and a community: “it makes that thing, first of all, incapable of acting in concert with itself, because of the faction and difference it creates; and, second of all, an enemy to itself, and to what is in every way its opposite; namely, justice.” Leading to rifts and internal conflicts, it prevents the achievement of true knowledge of both a man, and his relations with others. That is why injustice leads to rifts, hatred, and internal conflicts, while justice breeds agreement and friendship.

As I have already mentioned, the idea of justice has a different structure than other Plato's ideas, such as the Good and Beauty. We may determine its essence only through examining the relations between people, the way they coexist, cooperate and deal with each other. Thus it is the most important civic virtue. That is why it also shows the truthfulness or untruthfulness of bonds that unite people in a political community. If this is so, then a problem arises which Plato does not take up, yet which seems significant: Where to locate the idea of justice? To put it otherwise: in order to learn it, should one leave the cave, or rather remain in it and look for this idea on the level of *doxa* (common beliefs). And if so, then how can we acknowledge that it is equivalent to the truth? I treated the story of Gyges's ring as an attempt to answer this question. The ring enabled its owner to become invisible to others. According to Plato, most people – when they succeed in escaping from others' gazes – feel audacious, free to overstep the commonly accepted bounds and norms between people: they appropriate

others' property, violate others' security. When people are not being observed by others, they feel exempt from the need to cooperate, they withdraw from the community, thus becoming unjust.

People in the cave are doomed to know no more than the reflections of eternal and unchanging ideas because they lack the strength and determination to look at the ideas themselves. Only a few make the effort to take up the lonely journey toward the Truth. But the people in the cave observe others, and they themselves are observed as well. Out of this mutual observation comes the knowledge that I mentioned at the beginning: the knowledge of one's own abilities and adequate relations with others. Even if it never reaches the clarity and regularity characteristic of the knowledge of ideas, by enabling the disclosure of relations between people, it enables people to reflect on these relations and discuss them. Then they may be evaluated and measured: examined as to what extent they are proper, i.e. just. A philosopher will evaluate them according to an ideal measure, but the people from the cave will judge them by their own measure, the measure of the good life. That is why I am inclined to think that the idea of justice is only where it can reveal itself, that is, in a human community. The condition for its disclosure is a true political community. Therefore, justice may serve as a measure, a criterion of a well established *polis*, a good political system.

Thus another interesting issue arises. If only a just community is a true political community, can we assert that an unjust community is untrue? Or, to borrow Plato's terms, that it is a pseudo-community, a sham community. If we were to apply this reasoning to concepts from modern political philosophy, this question would acquire a different shape, and a different meaning as well: Is an unjust state only a sham state, a pseudo-state? Does it at all make sense to use such notions as "truth," "sham," and "falsehood" with reference to the notion of "state"?

In order to explain these doubts at least partly, I would like to refer to Izydora Dąmbska's text on the notion of *pseudos* in

Plato's works.⁵ She focuses on the relation between the notion of the truth (*aletheia*) and falsehood (*pseudos*) in their axiological and anthropological connotations. The studies themselves concentrate on semiotics: on the logical and epistemological meaning of the notions of *pseudos* and *pseudes*.

Dąbbska indicates three basic meanings that the notion of *pseudos* has in Plato. In the first, it has an ontological character and means a lack of real existence or an incomplete existence. As such, it is typical of the empirical world and works of culture (a work of art, literary text). In the second case, the notion of *pseudos* assumes an epistemological character and concerns products made by man. Among these, a special role is ascribed to false judgments: "Falsehood in a judgment, unconscious and accepted as the truth, is a mistake, 'an essential falsehood', assessed by Plato as the primordial evil of man's soul." In the third meaning, which Dąbbska calls pragmatic, falsehood is also transmitted by words, but they serve as a means of communication, of the influence exerted on people or as information in a literary text. This "secondary falsehood," although it is a lie as well, is permissible if it is "a form of just conduct." That is, if it enables the truth to be revealed. Dąbbska thinks that the notion of *pseudos* is then of axiological character, "as an evil or imperfection which a sensible man should either remove or consciously involve in positive values: the truth, justice and beauty."

The author especially underscores that Plato attaches great significance to the possibility of becoming aware of falsehood, of knowledge of it. That is why, if we find in him the distinction between "being wrong," i.e. unconscious falsehood, and conscious false thinking and acting, then he deems absolute evil to be "only unconscious falsehood – a false judgment considered by someone as truth. For the awareness of falsehood is a necessary condition

⁵ I. Dąbbska: *Wprowadzenie do starożytnej semiotyki greckiej. Studia i teksty*. [An Introduction to Ancient Greek Semiotics. Studies and Texts], Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź 1984.

for removing it, and as such it is the condition for man's approaching the truth, which is the basic aim of his life."

According to Dąbbska, the notion *pseudos* appears in the field of Plato's political philosophy above all in the pragmatic sense, as a useful, political lie. It is permissible, though it may only be used by rulers. "They, if anybody at all, have a right to lie to their enemies for the sake of public well-being; they can also, like a wise doctor, use falsehood toward the citizens." However, citizens do not have this authorization. They mustn't mislead their rulers, just as one mustn't lie, for example, to a doctor or a helmsman.

Her argument thus demonstrates that in antiquity the notion *psuedes*, or "false," had an especially broad meaning: "Both a conscious and unconscious being may be false (*psuedes*), actions and works of man (opinions, feelings, language, works of art) may be false, consciously or unconsciously false, unintended or taken up with the purpose of achieving certain aim."

Therefore, it seems justified to treat an unjust political community as a false community. If people remain in such a community without realizing or striving to know what its character is, then the evil which is thus borne, is their work too, even if they themselves fall victim to it. Only cognition, whose aim is revealing or disclosing the character of a political community, can make it a true community: a just community. While trying to answer whether the terms "true" and "false" may be attributed to the modern state, one should first of all consider in what sense it remains a political community. However, such reflections greatly exceed the horizons drawn by Plato in *Republic*.

Translated by Paulina Chołda

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