Justice In The Republic Essay, Research Paper

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote One man s justice is another s injustice. This statement quite adequately describes the relation between definitions of justice presented by Polemarchus and Thrasymachus in Book I of the Republic. Polemarchus initially asserts that justice is to give to each what is owed (Republic 331d), a definition he picked up from Simonides. Then, through the unrelenting questioning of Socrates, Polemarchus definition evolves into doing good to friends and harm to enemies (Republic 332d), but this definition proves insufficient to Socrates also. Eventually, the two agree that it is never just to harm anyone (Republic 335d). This definition is fundamental to the idea of a common good, for harming people according to Socrates, only makes them worse with respect to human virtue (Republic 335 C). Polemarchus also allows for the possibility of common good through his insistence on helping friends. To Polemarchus nothing is more important than his circle of friends, and through their benefit he benefits, what makes them happy pleases him.

Upon the summation of the debate between Polemarchus and Socrates, Thrasymachus enters into the fray. He states that justice is nothing other than advantage of the stronger (Republic 338c), and also that the greatest life is that of perfect injustice, to be found in the life of a tyrant. This definition leaves no room for the common good because it creates a life of competition and materialism, where only the strong survive. Group endeavors are not possible according to Thrasymachus s definition for there can be only one person who comes out on top. Although he leaves no room for the common good in his definition, his life seems to allow for some common good. This is based on his profession as an educator, whose job it is to share knowledge with others and on his willingness to remain a contributing part of the discussion going on at the house of Polemarchus

To determine which of these two definitions gives a better account of the good life it is necessary to establish what this good life is. According to Socrates in the Apology it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day for the unexamined life is not worth living (38d). What this statement implies is that to live a good life we must first question and ponder our own ideas of a good life and then do the same with other peoples ideas. In this sense Polemarchus s definition of justice most closely fits the good life because he allows for a common good that would result from examining the ideas of others and the sharing of information.

To further display that Polemarchus definition of justice gives a better account of the good life I put forth my own definition of the good life . I have come to conclude through the lessons life has taught me thus far that the good life is one composed of love and understanding. Love of one s self because with this I can maintain a sound mind and body, but without it I cannot love others. Love of family because they gave me the gift of life and I know I will share my greatest and lowest moments with them and they will still love me. Love of friends because they are my support group and are ready and willing to do for me what I would do for them. Finally, understanding of basic human nature that as humans we all make mistakes because recognizing this allows us the chance to reconcile our problems and not perpetuate a cycle of wrongdoing. My idea of the good life does not perfectly coincide with that of Polemarchus, but we share the need to have others around us who care about us. The only thing my good life has in common with that of Thrasymachus is love for one s self, but for him that is all there is to life as seen through is belief that the greatest life is that of perfect injustice, the life of a tyrant (Republic 344a).

The portrait of Socrates provided by Plato in the Apology leads me to believe Socrates worked for a collective good. Although I believe I could argue he lived for himself, my heart tells me that Socrates lived for a shared good because he believed that, what was good for the community was good for him. While considering Socrates comparison of himself to a gadfly this becomes clear, for the gadfly maintains itself by means of the horse, but it also inspires action in the horse. One might accuse Socrates of self-serving motives by saying he lived his life to belittle others, but throughout his life Socrates goes around questioning people not to make them feel stupid, not because the gods ordered him to, but because he wanted people to live life to its fullest.

Another claim may be that Socrates was selfish for neglecting his family, but this may be his greatest sacrifice to the community of Athens. For like many other revolutionary thinkers, Socrates too had to make sacrifices in order to get his message of philosophy across, but near the end his love for his family and for philosophy come out simultaneously when he asks the jury to Reproach them [his sons] as I reproach you that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also (Apology 41e-42). Although his greatest sacrifice my have been time spent with his family, the fact he never sought wealth or power (both at which with his intellectual capacity could have been easily gained) further adds to my belief he lived a community-serving way of life.

The greatest testimony in favor of Socrates living for a common good is the fact that, thousands of years after his death he still inspires thought on what is the good life .