

The Philosopher and The Rebel

Britton A. Watson

Indiana University-Purdue University

September 2020

## The Philosopher

Justice is the ultimate ethical ideal within human existence. Every human action can be just or unjust. Our conception of justice underlies every social, political, and economic choice we make. For Aristotle, “justice [is] that kind of state of character which makes people disposed to do what is just and makes them act justly and wish for what is just; and similarly by injustice that state which makes them act unjustly and wish for what is unjust” (Aristotle 1129a). Aristotle argues that politics is the highest state of human affairs because it is the system that defines everything from social order to the study of medicine. The virtuous person is the ideal character, and the state is constructed of these virtuous characters at all levels of society. Justice itself is this completion of virtue. When this virtue is achieved, the just society is achieved.

The Aristotelian political system defines the just as being lawful and the unjust being unlawful with just acts producing and preserving “happiness and its components for the political society” (1129b). The individuals making up the city should live just lives guided by moderation. This society will have a variety of individuals making up its democracy living in harmony with the right oligarchs and aristocrats in their proper places. These social levels all act accordingly within the laws the society has defined. Lawful acts are rewarded, and unlawful acts are punished. Within this society, it is important to note that Aristotle does not strictly mean following the law as an act of justice nor rebelling against the law as an act of injustice. In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, the laws of justice

bids us do both the acts of a brave man (e.g. not to desert our post nor take to flight nor throw away our arms), and those of a temperate man (e.g. not to commit adultery nor to gratify one’s lust), and those of a good-tempered man (e.g. not to strike another nor to speak evil), and similarly with regard to the other virtues and forms of wickedness,

commanding some acts and forbidding others; and the rightly-framed law does this rightly, and the hastily conceived one less well (1129b).

In this society “justice is every virtue comprehended”. Justice is courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, greatness of soul, honorable, even-tempered, truthful, witty, and friendly among other virtues and “the best man is not he who exercises his virtue towards himself but he who exercises it towards another” (1130a). The just state is achieved with virtue emanating from top-to-bottom and from bottom-to-top simultaneously.

### **The Rebel**

The virtue Aristotle focuses on builds a strong, functioning, and productive society. The virtues Aristotle espouses are at home with the 21<sup>st</sup> century focus on socially conscious health, well-being, and productivity. Do such virtues allow a society to be free of injustice? Can law be virtuous? Yes. Laws can be composed that reduce violence, enhance economic equality, and be the basis for a happy and fruitful society. However, there is justice and injustice in the real world. Achieving justice in Aristotle’s world is built upon completing the virtues—all moderations between the extremes of human behavior. Logically, it follows that the mean between justice and injustice cannot logically be a just society—it has to be somewhere between extremes. Just as courage is not born from rashness overcoming cowardliness, justice is not born simply from overcoming injustice. Overcoming injustice is escaping the moderate Aristotelian system altogether.

Escaping injustice is not simply making the unjust just once again. Escaping injustice is a virtuous form of liberty. Why is liberty the superior means of overcoming injustice? Albert Camus asserts that

even if justice is not realized, liberty maintains the power of protest against injustice and keeps communication open. Justice in a silent world, the justice of mute men, destroys complicity, negates revolt, and restores consent, but in the lowest possible form. That’s

where one sees the priority gradually go to the value of liberty...Liberty is the ability to defend what I do not think, even in a regime or a world that I approve. It is the ability to admit that the adversary is right (Camus 104-105).

By definition, this concept of liberty is beyond traditional political or social mechanics—one cannot believe in this liberty and commit an act of injustice. This notion of liberty allows one to rebel against injustice even if justice remains unrealized. Camus' concept of liberty allows humans to exist in a world where they are neither victim nor executioner—this escapes the problem of the mean. One cannot act liberally while simultaneously acting unjust—their actions are just and liberal. For Camus, liberty remains by the very act of revolting against injustice, even if we fail to overcome such injustice.

The Aristotelian can argue that such a conception of liberty is unvirtuous because it neglects the health of the state and that there it does nothing to prevent further injustice. However, Aristotle makes the bizarre claim that “a man may be voluntarily harmed and voluntarily suffer what is unjust” (Aristotle 1136b). Aristotle also makes the claim that all men committing acts of injustice believe that they are committing just acts and that “no one wishes for what he does not think to be good, but the incontinent man does do things that he does not think he ought to do” (1136b). Aristotle appears to believe that it is irrational for anyone to consciously choose to do unjust acts since a just person cannot choose to act unjustly. His claim that no person would voluntarily choose to suffer unjust action is equally strange. Without a doubt, unjust action occurred in Aristotle's time, just as it occurred in Nazi-occupied France where Camus wrote his preference for liberty over justice, and it still does today in everything from life-long prison sentences for misdemeanors in the United States to the status of Uighars in western China.

In a world where multiple lenses of subjective reality appear to dominate any notion of an underlying objective reality, how can Aristotle's notion of justice possibly reside with its reliance on

virtue? It appears that only a concept of liberty that transcends the mean of justice will allow us to escape injustice.

Works Cited

Aristotle, W D. Ross, and Lesley Brown. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Camus, Albert. *Notebooks 1942-1951*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. Chicago: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.