

On Justice

ΠΕΡΙ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ

Plato

translated by George Burges

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Can you tell us what is justice? or does it seem to you not worth entering into a discourse about it? To me at least (it seems) very much so. What is it then? What else than the things considered *just*. Do not (speak)' to me in this way; but, as if you had asked me — What is the eye? I should have said to you — It is that, by which we see; and if you should bid me to prove it, I would prove it. And if you should ask — To what is given the name of soul? I would say — To that, by which we know (something). And if again — What is the voice? I would answer — That, by which we converse. In this way then do you tell me that justice is that, which we use for something, as are the things, of which I was just now asking. I have it not in my power to reply in this way at all. But, since such is the case, perhaps we shall discover it more easily in this way. Come then, (say,) by what do we, on consideration, distinguish the greater and the less? Is it not by a measure? Yes. And together with a measure by what art? Is it not by that of measurement? Yes. And how things light and heavy? Is it not by weight? Yes. And together with a weight by what art? Is it not that of weighing? Certainly. Well then, by what instrument do we, on consideration, distinguish what is just and unjust? and together with the instrument, by what art previously? Is it not somehow manifest to you thus? No. But (let us consider it) again in this way. When we are disputing about things greater and less, who decides between us? Is it not the measurers? Yes. And when about things many and few, who are the persons to decide? Is it not the numberers? But what, when we are disputing with each other about things just and unjust, to whom do we come? and who are the persons to decide on each occasion between us? Say. Do you not, Socrates, mean the judges? You have correctly made the discovery. Come then and try to tell this likewise. By doing what do the measurers decide respecting things large and small? Is it not by measuring? Yes. And respecting things heavy and light? Is it not by weighing? Yes. And respecting things many and few? Is it not by numbering? Yes. But how, respecting things just and unjust? Answer me. I cannot say. Say, by speaking. Yes. By speaking then do judges decide between us, when they are forming a judgment respecting things just and unjust. Yes. And by measuring, those skilled in measuring things small and great? for a measure is that, by which these things are judged. It is so. And by weighing, those skilled in weighing things heavy and light? for a weight is that, by which these things are

judged. Yes, it is. And again by numbering, those skilled in numbering things many and few? for number is that by which these things are judged. It is so. But by speaking, as we just now agreed, the judges decide respecting things just and unjust. You speak correctly, Socrates. It is true then; and speech is that, it seems, by which things just and unjust are judged. What then are things just and unjust? As if a person had asked us — Since a measure, and the measuring art, and the person skilled in measuring, decide which is the greater and the less, what is the greater and the less? Shall we say to him that the greater exceeds, and the less is exceeded? and since a weight and the weighing art and the person skilled in weighing decide the heavy and the light, shall we say to him, that the thing going downwards in the scales is heavy, but the thing (going) upwards is light? In like manner if he should ask us — Since speech and the art of judging and the judge is the party who decides what is just and unjust,—what is the just and unjust? “What answer shall we have to give him? Or have we not a single word to say? We have not. Whether willingly or unwillingly do men, think you, have this injustice? I mean in this way. Think you that they do injustice [and are unjust] willingly or unwillingly? Willingly, I imagine, Socrates; for they are wicked. You conceive then that men are willingly wicked and unjust. I So; and do not you? No; at least if we are to be persuaded by the poet. What kind of poet? He who said —

Not one is wicked willingly, nor blest Unwillingly.

But still on the other hand, Socrates, well is the old proverb, that Poets do many falsehoods sing. But I should marvel, if this poet has told a falsehood. Come then, if you are at leisure, let us consider, whether he is saying what is false or true. Nay, I am at leisure. Come then, (say,) do you deem it just to tell a falsehood, or to tell the truth? To tell the truth. To tell a falsehood then is unjust? Yes. But whether to deceive or to not deceive? To not deceive, assuredly. To deceive then is unjust? Yes. But what, is it just to hurt, or to benefit? To benefit. To hurt then is unjust? Yes. It is just then to tell the truth, and to not deceive, and to benefit; but to tell a falsehood, and to hurt, and to deceive, unjust. Yes, by Zeus, and greatly so. What, to do so to enemies? By no means. But it is just to do a hurt to enemies, but to do a benefit, unjust. Yes. It is then just by deceiving enemies to do them a hurt? How not? Well then, to tell a falsehood in order that we may deceive and do a hurt to enemies,

is it not just? It is. But what, do you not say that it is just to do a benefit to friends? I do. Whether by not deceiving or by deceiving for their benefit? By deceiving even, by Zeus. But is it just to do a benefit by deceiving, and yet not by telling a falsehood? or by telling a falsehood? It is just by telling even a falsehood. To tell a falsehood and to tell the truth is, as it seems, both just and unjust. Yes. And to not deceive and to deceive is both just and unjust. So it seems. And to do a hurt and to do a benefit is just and unjust. Yes. All things of this kind are it seems the same, both just and unjust. To me at least they appear so. Hear then. I have, like other men, a right eye and a left. Yes. And a right nostril and a left. Certainly. And a right hand and a left. Yes. Hence, since after giving the same name, you say that some of my (members) are on the right side, and others on the left, would you not be able to say, if I asked you, on which side they were, that some on one side are the right, and others on the other side the left? Yes. Come then, likewise, to that point, since after giving the same name, you say that some acts are just, and some unjust, can you tell which are the just, and which the unjust? To me then it now appears that each of these acts, taking place at a proper time, are just; but at not a proper one, unjust. And correctly does it appear to you. He then, who does each of these acts at a proper time, does what is just; but he, who does not at a proper time, (does) what is unjust. Yes. He then, who does what is just, is just; but he who does what is unjust, is unjust. It is so. Who then at a proper time is able to cut and burn and to make lean? The medical man. Because he knows, or for some other reason? Because he knows. And who (is able) at a proper time to dig, and to plough, and to plant? The land-tiller. Because he knows, or because he does not? Because he knows. And in this way as regards other matters, he who knows, is able to do what is proper at a proper time; but he who does not know, is not. Thus it is. And he who knows how to tell falsehoods, and to deceive, and to do a benefit, is able to do each of these things at a proper time; but he who does not know, is not. You say what is true. And he who does these acts at a fitting time is just. Yes. He does them then through knowledge. How not? The just man then is just through knowledge. Yes. The unjust man then is unjust through what is opposite to what is just. It appears so. Now the just man is just through wisdom. Yes. And the unjust man is unjust through the want of instruction. It seems so. That,

which our ancestors left us, as wisdom, seems near to being justice; but that, which (they left) as want of instruction, to be injustice. It is likely. Are men uninstructed willingly, or unwillingly? Unwillingly. Unwillingly then they are unjust. It appears so. But the unjust are wicked. Yes. Unwillingly then persons are wicked and unjust. By all means. But they act unjustly through there being the unjust. Yes. Through an act of unwillingness. Certainly. But that, which is willing, does not take place through what is unwilling. It does not. But the doing of injustice takes place through the existence of injustice. Yes. Now injustice is an involuntary act. Involuntary. Unwillingly then persons do an injustice, and are unjust and wicked. Unwillingly, as it appears. The poet then did not in this case tell a falsehood. It seems not.