

Chapter Four

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Like Aristotle, Plato also contributed a lot in developing traditional virtue ethics. Plato in his celebrated book *Republic* outlines his own idea of virtue ethics in a precise manner. He at the outset proposes four cardinal qualities, such as, wisdom, courage, temperance and justice, as the fundamental qualities of virtue ethics. According to Plato an ideal state is a kind of state where justice can be exemplified not in terms of individual, but in terms of a larger scale. According to Plato these cardinal qualities actually make up the whole of virtue. Assuming that the four cardinal qualities make up the whole of virtue, Plato now asks wherein consist the wisdom, courage, temperance and justice of the state, or, in other words, of the individuals composing the state in their public capacity as citizens. According to Plato wisdom in the conduct of state affairs will be practical prudence or good counsel of the deliberative body. In this regard, Plato gives importance to the philosophers as he seems to have conceived that only the philosophic rulers will accomplish the necessary insight into what is good for the community as a whole. Philosophic rulers unlike other intellectuals have right belief grounded on immediate knowledge of the meaning of goodness in all its forms. In this regard, Plato gives a pivotal privilege to the philosophic rulers. For Plato the philosophic rulers will act as executive, but in no way deliberative and the auxiliaries will have only a right belief accepted on the authority of the rulers.

According to Plato a virtuous individual must be a courageous one. He has the mental strength to rationalize himself. The cardinal property 'courage' of the state will obviously be manifested in the fighting force. According to Socrates, courage is a sort of knowledge of what really is, or is not, to be feared. For Socrates courage is an inevitable part of all virtues which consists in knowing what things are really good or

evil. Plato says, "If the only real evil is moral evil, then poverty, suffering, and all the so-called evils that others can inflict on us, including death itself, are not to be feared, since, if they are met in the right spirit, they cannot make us worse men. This knowledge only the philosophic Rulers will possess to the full. The courage of the Auxiliaries will consist in the power of holding fast to the conviction implanted by their education."⁴⁸

Many would like to say that temperance is not an essential quality of virtuous being or individual. Plato, however, thinks the other way round. For him temperance is not the peculiar virtue of the lowest order in the state. According to Plato for self-mastery, it means the sub-ordination of the lower elements to the higher, but 'government must be with the willing consent of the governed and temperance will include the unanimous agreement of all classes as to who should rule and who obey.'⁴⁹ Accordingly, it can be said that temperance is just like a harmony pervading which attempts to unite all parts of the whole. In the sense it can be designated as a principle of solidarity which stresses the harmonious union of different and complementary elements. That is why Plato at times contends that temperance as a moral virtue overshadows even justice. Here we can foresee a simile between Plato and Aristotle as like Plato, Aristotle, we observed, admits the relevance of emotion in virtue ethics. We think when Plato considers temperance as a virtue, it somehow or other is related to emotion.

Justice means what is just. It stands in favour of equality. In this regard it can be said that justice is the complementary principle of differentiation. According to Plato the concept of justice at first appears to us through the construction of the state and its relevance first appeared in the economic level. The class conflict of Marx is a case in point. So, one can seek justice from the state which has been empowered by the

⁴⁸ *The Republic of Plato*, translated by Francis Macdonald Cornford, Oxford University Press, 1945, p.119.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 120.

people of the state. In the case of class conflict, one class exploits other in terms of their wages. Therefore, the exploited class seeks justice from the state which looks after the interest of all. Therefore, it can be said that justice appears on the economic level as the division of labour based on natural aptitudes. Therefore, doing one's own work now has the larger sense of a concentration on one's peculiar duty or function in the community. Plato says, "This conception of 'doing and possessing what properly belongs to one' is wide enough to cover the justice of the law-courts, assuring to each man his due rights. Injustice will mean invasion and encroachment upon the rights and duties of others."⁵⁰

In the *Republic*, Plato envisages civic or popular virtue which is not directly based on that ultimate knowledge of good and evil which is wisdom except in the Rulers. According to Plato the first quality to come into view in our state seems to be its wisdom. The state has wisdom as it would be prudent in counsel which is clearly a form of knowledge. Plato advocates good counsel, because good counsel cannot be due to ignorance and stupidity. However, Plato anticipates various kinds of knowledge in our commonwealth, i.e. state. For example, the knowledge of carpenters, the knowledge of Smiths. Can we then say that the state is wise for having all different sorts of knowledge? Certainly, it would not be the case. However, some among the citizens of our new-formed commonwealth will enable to have the best possible conduct of the state as a whole in its internal and external relations. Such citizens have earned the art of guardianship which resides in those Rulers whom we just now called Guardians in the full state. According to Plato, citizens having this art of guardianship would be prudent and truly wise. Such citizens, according to Plato, are not many and therefore the wisdom it possesses as a whole will be due to the knowledge residing in the smallest part. Such knowledge, according to Plato, is the only kind that deserves the name of wisdom. It appears to

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.120.

be ordained by nature that the class privilege to possess it should be the smallest of all.

According to Plato the guardians of the state must be courageous. Courage is a quality of virtue and those who acquire it would be designated as brave. However, Plato does not think that the character of the state is determined neither by the bravery or cowardice. Courage, for Plato, is another quality which a community owes to a certain part of itself and its being brave will mean that it possesses the power of preserving something. Plato says, ".....courage means preserving something."⁵¹ . According to Plato courage means preserving something in all circumstances and never abandoning it by any means, i.e. whether under the influence of pain or of pleasure, of desire or of fear. Plato gives the following illustration to make his point clear. Here we quote from Plato's Republic: " You know how dyers who want wool to take a purple dye, first select the white wool from among all the other colours, next treat it very carefully to make it take the dye in its full brilliance, and only then dip it in the vat. Dyed in that way, wool gets a fast colour, which no washing, even with soap, will rob of its brilliance; whereas if they choose wool of any colour but white, or if they neglect to prepare it, you know what happens."⁵² This remark indicates that courage is a power which never to be washed out by pleasure and pain, desire and fear. The right conviction about the things which ought or ought not to be feared is what Plato calls courage.

As far as temperance is concerned, Plato seems more like some sort of concord or harmony. According to Plato temperance surely means a kind of orderliness, a control of certain pleasures and appetites. People use the expression, 'master of oneself', whatever that means, and various other phrases that point the same way. A man who was master of himself would presumably be also subject to himself. That

⁵¹ Ibid. p.123.

⁵² Ibid. p. 123.

means that within the man himself, in his soul, there is a better part and a worse and that he is his own master when the part which is better by nature has the worse under its control. A man in that condition is called a slave to himself and intemperate. Hence, if any society can be called master of itself and in control of pleasures and desires, it will be ours. Therefore, we were not wrong in dividing a resemblance between temperance and some kind of harmony. Temperance is not like courage and wisdom, which made the state wise and brave by residing each in one particular part. Unlike courage and wisdom, temperance works in a different way. It extends throughout the whole gamut of the state, producing a consonance of all its elements from the weakest to the strongest as measured by the standard, such as, wisdom, bodily strength, numbers or wealth. So we are entirely justified in identifying with temperance with unanimity or harmonious agreement between the naturally superior and inferior elements on the question.

We have outlined three cardinal properties out of four and the remaining one is justice. According to Plato, justice means minding of one's own business, when it takes a certain form. If we had to decide which of the four cardinal property contributes most to the excellence of our commonwealth, it would very difficult to say whether it was the unanimity of rulers and subjects, or the soldier's fidelity to the established conviction about what is, or is not, to be feared, or the watchful intelligence of the Rulers; or whether its excellence were not above all due to the observance by everyone, child or women, slave or freeman or artisan, ruler or ruled, of this principle that each one should do his own proper work without interfering with others. In fact the excellence of a state requires all these qualities. Justice ensures that neither party shall have what belongs to another or be deprived of what is his own. Furthermore, justice admittedly means that a man should possess and concern himself with what property belongs to him. The genesis of the principle of justice is

that when everyone keeps to his own proper business in the commonwealth and does its own work that is justice. Justice, according to Plato, makes a just society.

According to Plato one should try to do right thing or be good because it is his own self-interest. This is for several reasons. Plato thought that good people had a much more pleasant time in the after-life than bad-people. Another reason is that being good is good, i.e. intrinsically valuable and finally Plato argues that being good is a matter not of doing this or that, but of having a well-ordered soul. The well-ordered soul is ruled by reason in conjunction with spirit which together dominates the bodily appetites. Plato suggests to think that such a soul is good for two reasons: one is that it will get you whatever you want more effectively than a soul that is, say, dominated by animal desires, and the other order is that a well-ordered soul is harmonious or beautiful, 'right' in some sense. So goodness has both prudential and intrinsic value. Goodness, Plato says, is useful and beautiful.

Socrates' greatest disciple, Plato, accepted the key Socratic beliefs in the subjectivity of goodness and in the link between knowing what is good and doing it. He also took over the Socrates method of conducting philosophy. According to Plato true knowledge consists not in knowing particular things, but in knowing something general that is common to all the particular cases. Plato says one does not know what goodness is, unless one can give such a general account. The question then arises: what is it that one knows when one knows this general idea of goodness? Plato's reply is that one knows the *Form* of the good, a perfect, eternal and changeless entity existing outside space and time in which particular good things share or 'participate' insofar as they are good.

According to Plato justice exists in the individual when the three elements of the soul – intellect, emotion and desire act in harmony with each other. The unjust person lives in an unsatisfactory state of internal dissonance, trying always to overcome the discomfort of unsatisfied desire, but never achieving anything better than the mere

absence of want. The soul of the just person, on the other hand, is harmoniously ordered under the governance of reason and the just person derives truly satisfying enjoyment from the pursuit of knowledge. Plato remarks that the highest pleasure, in fact, comes from intellectual speculation. To him, human soul is immortal, and therefore, even if a just individual lives in poverty or suffers from illness, the gods will not neglect him in the next life, where he will have the rewards of all. Plato therefore suggests that we should act justly because in doing so, we are act once with ourselves and with the gods.

Plato, however, does not recommend justice for its own sake. Independent of any personal gains one might obtain from being a just person. This is characteristics of Greek virtue ethics which refuse to recognize that there could be an irresolvable conflict between the interest of the individual and the good of the community. Plato did not hold that the motivation of each and every just act is some personal gain. On the contrary, the person who takes up justice will do what is just because it is just. Nevertheless, he accepted the assumption of his opponents that one could not recommend taking up justice in the first place unless doing so could be shown to be advantageous for oneself as well as for others. Plato attempts to argue that those who are just are in the long run happier than those who are unjust.

According to Plato pleasure is good for life. Russell narrates Plato's view. Russell swiftly moves from pleasure to emotion to value to ethics. He distinguishes pleasure as sensation from pleasure as emotion. For him pleasure as emotion is a content-full intentional state. Pleasures of emotions entail attitudes, priorities and values. Humans always seek integrated lives, pleasure related to happiness, life's telos. That is why Plato at times says that pleasure matters most in human life. Precisely, what place pleasure should have a good life is an important ethical question. Russell

writes, "Plato has much to offer us that is new, both for understanding fresh possibilities for thinking of pleasure as part of the good life." ⁵³

What place, then, does pleasure have in Plato's good life? In brief, it is virtue which is identical to wisdom or practical reason. It is the only unconditional good. Pleasure, among other things, is a conditional good that the virtuous person rationally incorporates into his life. In Russell own words, "To put things more succinctly...Plato regards pleasure as a conditional good, the goodness of which depends on, and is given by, the role that pleasure takes on in a virtuous character under the leadership of practical intelligence."⁵⁴

⁵³ Daniel, G.Russell. *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.13.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.9.