

The Problem of Justice in Homer and Plato

In the Fall 2023 term, the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI) organized a ten-part series on ancient Greek political thought centering on the central question or problem of justice in human and divine relations. Cognizant of the need to pose big and basic questions to our students, we chose to go back to the beginnings of Western civilization and look there for inspiration and wisdom.

Our journey started with the cold military-political calculus of peoples at war, vividly captured in what is referred to as the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Is this to be our guide for practicing international relations? After this initial foray into the problems of collective justice, we encountered examples of a different kind of justice, manifested in the souls of Homer's exceptional individuals. Our first case study was the shrewd and calculating eponymous survivor-hero of the *Odyssey*, and his complicated relationship with men and Gods alike. The second case study featured the more traditional ancient Greek hero, Achilles, and the struggle in his soul between honor, glory, *philia*, and justice, memorably dramatized in his encounter with the Trojan King Priam near the end of the *Iliad*.

The second half of the seminar turned to the most famous Platonic dialogue, the *Republic*. The shift from the poetic to philosophical mode of thought was striking as we were removed from the enchanted world of dactylic hexameter and thrown into the rationalist grind of the famous Socratic dialectic. As our instructor kept reminding us, the dialogue form that Plato used did not do away completely with poetry, so we had to keep an eye out on the literary dimension of the action. Nevertheless, the texture of our conversation had changed as we were carefully dissecting critical turning points in Socrates' dialogues with Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, in particular. Professor Mariana Beatriz Noe from Harvard's Philosophy Department graced us with a special talk on the notion of angry justice, skillfully captured in Book I of the *Republic*. Can a philosopher be rightfully angry? Or is anger incompatible with a philosophical nature?

After a fast and shallow dive into the Platonic cave—we dedicated only one session to this most significant allegory—we fittingly concluded the seminar by returning to the question of justice in the regime. The Athenian democracy, seen in the beginning of this seminar as a merciless imperial force, comes to be dissected masterfully from within by a peculiar new hero of the *Republic*, the always probing Socrates.

I am personally grateful to everyone who made the Homer and Plato seminar an intellectually intense and wholesome learning experience: our competent and engaging staff at the Abigail Adams Institute, the young people who keep returning to seek wisdom in and from classic works, various professors and scholars at Harvard who occasionally take part in our philosophical adventures, and above all our Senior Fellow, Manuel Lopez, for his determination to make these books come alive and to immerse us into the strange and wonderful world of the Achaeans.

Danilo Petranovich
Director, The Abigail Adams Institute

Liberal education today is usually taken to mean learning about diverse cultures, faiths, worldviews, and ways of life, with the hope that this will make us more tolerant and compassionate, and perhaps more sensitive to the injustices of our own society. And liberal education, so understood, still does make students less narrow and parochial in certain ways. But if there is even the slightest challenge to our own existing beliefs in this sort of education, it is only in the direction of political and moral views *already* dominant in our society. For example, no major liberal arts college offers a course in say, Islam, with the demand, or even the expectation, that students should openly and seriously consider traditional Islamic teachings concerning the relations of the sexes. On the contrary, all manner of questions relating to sexual equality and the family that were matters of serious discussion in Western thought from Aristotle to Rousseau, are now shut down, even in classes by professors of philosophy on these very philosophers, as “toxic.”

We turn to Homer and Plato in our seminar to find the education that we so sorely lack: the original or most demanding meaning of *liberal* education, education that *liberates* us from the *cave* of our society’s prejudices and blinkers, so that we might come to see ourselves as we really are. But *what* are these prejudices and blinkers, such that the greatest and most distinctive achievement of the West should be precisely this liberal education? Why is this education so difficult and rare, such as to be the primary legacy of the philosophers to us? I believe the answer is Justice. Our prejudices run so deep because they have their root in our attachment to justice; and the hopes arising from that same attachment prevent us from seeing justice itself, and morality generally, with the clarity with which we see, say, rocks and trees. The book that guides our seminar is the most careful examination of *justice*, and is, therefore, also even more fundamentally the book on genuine *education*, education that frees us from the cave: Plato’s *Republic*.

We start with a very accessible presentation of the question, a section of Thucydides called the Melian Dialogue. The situation is extreme and clear: The Athenians have landed a vastly superior military force on a small, weak island nation, Melos, and tell the inhabitants to submit to them—or *else!* They say to them, don’t you talk about justice—you should be thinking only about saving your necks. But *even in this case*, where you would think justice is at its weakest, Thucydides makes us wonder whether the Athenians are as beyond considerations of justice as they think. For he also takes great care to show us their belief in the nobility of their empire, their pride in their own manliness, bravery, and worthiness, and their contempt for Spartan caution and selfishness. Perhaps even the (imprudent) frankness of the Athenians about their own injustice is a kind of attachment to justice. (But the Melians are slaughtered.)

This demand for a deep psychological analysis of our attachment to justice, that we see so clearly in the Melian dialogue, runs throughout Homer and Plato. In our examination of Homer’s *Iliad*, we focus on Achilles. Why is he so angry at being dishonored? What does he—and what do we—hope for from receiving justice, and a just recognition, for what we do? Isn’t virtue its own reward (“be good for goodness’ sake”)? Homer presents not only the doubts of an Achilles about justice, with his lion-hearted and self-sacrificial devotion, but also those of an Odysseus, with his cunning tricks to get ahead, even by “playing” the gods. Homer invites us to travel down both high road and low in our search for justice.

This dual psychological examination of justice reaches its culmination in our examination of Plato’s *Republic*, with which we close the seminar. By showing us Socrates’ examination of the beliefs in justice held by the earnest Polemarchus (the high road) and the “amoral” sophist Thrasymachus (the low road), by showing us justice in the law-abiding and moderate man, in the erotic and lawless man, and even in the tyrant, he brings to the surface our buried opinions about justice and by doing so, shows how surprisingly radical and extreme our expectations from it are—that at bottom we are, most of all, believers and creatures of hope. In this sense, Plato liberates us by showing us the “god” Homer taught us was concealed in the heart of each man; liberal education, in its truest sense, is very different from today’s merely secular education.

Mannuel Lopez ‘90

In the minds of most Americans, the pursuit of justice is at the core of our politics and the way we structure our society. But do we really know what justice is, or what we are aiming to achieve when we set out to shape and maintain a “just” society? In our recent ten-week AAI seminar, “The Problem of Justice in Homer and Plato,” we dove into the world of Ancient Greece to dissect the meaning and value of justice on individual and societal levels.

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer examines justice through the medium of poetic narrative. Full of mythical and religious themes and subjects, Homer’s epics paint a vivid landscape of a warrior society that values *kleos* and honor as integral components of justice. In the context of a post-Christian world that discourages martial virtues, many of us in the seminar struggled to understand how *kleos* and justice could be so intertwined in the minds of Homer and his contemporaries. However, our discussions led us to realize that ideas of honor and glory still linger beneath the surface of how we perceive individuals to be “just” in the present day.

Plato’s exploration of justice in the *Republic* proceeds through dialectics. From the idea that justice punishes enemies and rewards friends to a “might makes right” theory, Socrates rigorously questions the underlying assumptions of his challengers in Plato’s most influential work. Rather than laying out his own comprehensive theory of justice, Socrates uses the dialectical (or “Socratic”) method to force his listeners (and modern-day readers) to assess the logical conclusions of their own conceptions of justice. His conversations with Polemarchus and Thrasymachus indicate that justice, while difficult to define, is perhaps an art—the art of being a good human being.

At the end of the seminar, I was left to grapple with complex questions instead of embracing simple answers. Is honor truly still a necessary component of justice? Does justice have a fixed value, or does it change with the ages and the needs of the people? What does it mean to excel at being human, both as an individual and as a leader or member of society? But, as Socrates shows us, the beginning of wisdom is acknowledging how few answers you really have. In the allegory of the cave, Plato lays out a schema of hidden truths that we are only able to reach with great difficulty as we claw our way up out of a dark, firelit ignorance. Throughout the course of this ten-week seminar, we were privileged to have Manuel as our instructor and guide. Instead of grasping at shadows, we were able to begin the ascent towards the light. No matter how arduous the journey, our deep dive into Homer and Plato brought us a few steps closer to the unsullied realities and truths beyond the Cave.

Maura Cabill

Beyond the famed and debated—and certainly worthwhile—project of defining justice in itself, perhaps the greatest challenge justice poses is determining how to apply that definition, that principle, to particular circumstances. Justice is a moral virtue, not merely an abstract principle, so questions of justice are ultimately questions of how to act. Literature, history, spoken tales—stories of any kind—are fertile ground sprouting with questions of how somebody ought to act, of what is the just thing to do. The *Iliad*, one of the oldest and most influential stories of the West, is worth considering through the lens of justice.

In the opening book, we find ourselves party to an argument between Agamemnon and Achilles. Their comrades are suffering a plague sent by Apollo in recompense for Agamemnon’s dishonor of Chryses, a priest of Apollo who sought the ransom of his daughter, Chryseis, whom Agamemnon took as spoils of war. Calchas explained to Agamemnon, Achilles, and the rest of the Danaans that Agamemnon’s mistreatment of Chryses was the reason for the plague, and Achilles demanded that Agamemnon return Chryseis. Agamemnon resisted, but ultimately conceded, though only after threatening, and eventually deciding, to take Briseis, whom Achilles himself had taken as spoils of war, as a replacement. Read it for yourself; Homer is a far better storyteller than I am. I only summarize to scrape together the clay out of which we’ll try to craft models of justice for us to emulate.

Is Chryseis due her freedom here? If so, is this on account of her personhood, or on account of her father's demand? If she's due her freedom on account of her personhood, is Achilles worthy of our support, seeing as he argues so primarily, and maybe only, to stop the suffering of his men rather than for her own sake? Is he worthy of our support, seeing as he himself seeks to keep Briseis, who he seized just as Agamemnon seized Chryseis? Do the injustice of a leader's actions, the imperfection of his intention, and his hypocrisy in a related case make him unworthy of obedience? If so, is it better to refuse our support to Achilles if in so doing we guarantee Agamemnon will have his way?

There are numerous other questions to ask, and clarifying the right thing to do, if not easy to determine, would almost certainly be difficult to live out if we stood alongside as soldiers of Achilles and Agamemnon rather than as imagined spectators. I won't say here which course is just. I don't stay silent on account of the inability to determine what's just. Rather, I hope to point out that, if we believe speech and persuasion are an important part of our politics, and if justice is a matter on which to speak and persuade, then these are the kinds of questions we need to answer to decide how to act, and we can only answer them if we're willing to ask them in the first place.

Mathieu Ronayne

Ironically enough, the first session of the Abigail Adams Institute's seminar on "Justice in Homer and Plato" did not focus on a reading from either Homer or Plato. Rather, we discussed the Melian Dialogue from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, looking at the question of justice between unequal parties. The dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians focused on the power imbalance between the two parties, with the Athenians, by far the stronger of the two parties, alleging that in such matters, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." To the Athenians, justice as a concept belonged solely in discourse between equal powers, which they and the Melians most certainly were not.

Having never read, or even heard of, the Melian Dialogue before, I found myself struck by the relevance of such claims to modern times. Interestingly, though, modern thinkers seem to invert the Athenians' conception of justice, creating a new system in which historically oppressed groups are elevated through the abandonment of genuine moral justice while historically stronger groups "suffer what they must." Of course, the Athenian system has not truly been inverted, for the enforcement of the policies that create such a system is done by the most powerful institutions in the country, including, at times, the government itself. To both the Athenians and to many political theorists nowadays, it seems as if morality is not an objective, universal truth, but rather one that is constructed solely for the intercourse of perfectly equal parties, and which is to be forsaken should any imbalance exist.

The historical outcome of the interaction between the Melians and the Athenians speaks volumes about how such a system ultimately fails, as the Athenians, unable to convince the Melians to surrender, perpetrated a horrific genocide against them. While they were successful in military terms, they were driven by their distaste for universal conceptions of justice to such an immoral act, and it seems that this is where any abandonment of objective morality will inevitably lead. It is certainly the case that any group asked to "suffer what" it "must" will either silently accept gross injustices, or else resist them and be destroyed.

Overall, every session of the seminar, beginning with this first one, forced us to consider some of the most important questions in ethical and political philosophy, and our discussions all feel extremely pertinent in the modern world.

Gabriel Margolies

I think that the Abigail Adams Institute fulfills a very decent task: it gives a free opportunity for everyone to learn and to be introduced to a great selection of important philosophical and political texts. Yesterday, even if I did not participate actively in the discussion on Plato, I enjoyed watching how people gathered together in the evening simply to discuss Plato's *Republic*. And Manuel was speaking so passionately about Plato! I find fascinating that, in the twenty-first century, there is a community of, predominantly, young people who simply want to read and discuss philosophy for personal development and education. And it is wonderful that the Institute gives them this opportunity. I am happy I came to the Abigail Adams Institute half a year ago.

Dr. Iryna Mykhalova

This seminar allowed us to wrestle with what some would call “natural justice,” or the idea that the strong not only can, but *should* dominate the weak.

We first encountered the idea in Thucydides' Melian dialogue. The exchange between the Athenian empire and the island of Melos is often presented as a classic case of *realpolitik*. Unbothered by morality or justice, the Athenians simply claim that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”—or so conventional readers tell us. Beneath the surface, however, the Athenians are not cold-blooded realists; they believe that they *deserve* to rule because they are superior not merely in might, but in everything that matters: in science, in philosophy, in the arts, and in politics. Their military superiority justifies their rule because it *reflects* their superiority in other, more fundamental realms. Seen through this lens, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” no longer seems like a banal, if memorable formulation of realism. Rather, the Athenians stand for a substantive conception of justice: excellence requires rule by the strong, while conventional justice, which masquerades as morality, denies the truth of nature by empowering the weak. This thought, which we now associate with Nietzsche, is a momentous challenge to more familiar conceptions of justice.

We encountered natural justice again in the *Iliad*. The fundamental issue of Achilles, whose anger structures the epic, lies in the simple fact that Agamemnon rules despite being the weaker soldier. As Achilles knows, and as the others come to learn, the Greeks cannot win the war without Achilles. He far surpasses all others on the battlefield. Why would a society of soldiers at war, then, refuse to give him the supreme honour? Odysseus attempts to convince Achilles to tame his fury by offering him prizes and apologies. Yet he fails, mostly because he embodies everything that Achilles detests: Odysseus is an unexceptional soldier who wields words to trick others into submission. He personifies the artifice of convention, which Achilles disdains. Worse still, Odysseus offers a *material* remedy, mere prizes, as compensation for dishonour, as if money, not glory, mattered most to Achilles. The scene captures the dichotomy between conventional justice—a society of words, lies, and material interests—and natural justice—a world of deeds, raw power, and *kleos*. At war, more than in any other context, the appeal of natural justice is evident.

Plato's *Republic*, our final encounter, offers the best response to those tempted by natural justice. First, Socrates shows that the thirst for tyrannical control is futile: attempting to charm their way to power, wannabe heroes turn into orators who submit themselves to the whims of the *demos*. In the end, far from absolute rulers who dominate the masses, they become the servants of the populace, modelling their desires after those of the many, forgetting their higher aspirations. Put simply, Socrates teaches that politics corrupts. Second, no one can stand above convention in the way that Achilles or Nietzsche envision. The character of Thrasymachus believes that he stands above convention, but is shown to care more about the opinion of others than anyone else in the dialogue. Plato shows us that the Nietzschean life is an *inhuman* life, one that makes a mockery of our natural orientation towards the good. Virtue, and virtue alone, brings happiness. The tyrant might relish in his power, wandering in his palace, entertaining himself with jesters, but he cannot, no matter how strong his army, no matter how absolute his power, be happy.

In this respect, and in many others, this seminar forced us to wrestle with some of the most important and neglected questions of philosophy.

Mathis Bitton