

NEUTRALIZING THE APPLICATION OF THRASYMACHUS' IDEA OF JUSTICE IN NIGERIA  
AND ITS EFFECTS

**Uduagwu, Chukwueloka. S**  
University of Calabar, Nigeria

**Abstract**

This paper is mainly concerned with the problem of social injustice in Nigeria that stems from the disregard for the rule of law by political leaders and wealthy individuals. It is fundamentally analytic and prescriptive. The paper argues that the major factor responsible for the seemingly incessant abuse of the rule of law in Nigeria is the subtle acceptance and application of the idea of Thrasymachus that "Might is Right." In this regard, it x-rays and juxtaposes the basic imports of Thrasymachus' idea and the effects of its application in Nigeria before and after independence. The paper concludes with a call to curb the flagrant abuse of the rule of law in Nigeria through public sensitization by public pressure groups, media houses civil societies and religious organizations.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the history of Nigeria before and after independence, one of the difficult issues to tackle is the problem of social injustice. This has kept the society in hostage for years now. This is because people interpret social justice the way it suit them. From the ancient to contemporary philosophy and within the ambit of the society many political leaders, wealthy individuals and philosophers have attempted to unwrap the meaning of justice in a subjective manner. But my interest in this paper is the idea of justice as espoused by Thrasymachus. Form him "Might is Right" justice is the interest of the strong" explained that man gain nothing for being just, that justice is not worthy practicing because justice does not pay. Reflecting on the history of Nigerian before and after independence, I observe that this Thrasymachus idea of justice have been in practice right from the colonial era. This is because before 1960, Nigeria was a colonial property.

Between 1884 to 1885, when the Berlin conference took place, African countries were partition to different group in the west. The colonial master being more powerful and wealthy than Nigeria decided to overpower Nigeria by displaying that "Might is Right" which is Thrasymachus idea of justice. The colonial masters applied this dictum of Thrasymachus by dividing Nigerian into three territories without her consent, namely the colony of Lagos, Southern protectorate and Northern protectorate. Each of these territories was administered by an administrator that was answerable to the colonial authority. In 1914, the colony and two protectorates were amalgamated into a single political unit known as the colony and protectorate of Nigeria with its headquarter in Lagos. Where, Sir Fredick Lugard was the new Governor General. On this account Nigeria became a subject, of great Britain and the British laws were forcefully impose on Nigerians in line with the dictum "might is right, justice is the interest of the stronger". This British, selfish act was in line with Thrasymachus dictum which has kept Nigeria in discord and ill-will since then.

This dictum has reflected in Nigeria since then till the present administration. For instance, during Babangida's era in August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1985 it was observe that in 1990 alone, there were several confirmed cases of use of torture of innocent people in police custody as a tool of interrogation,

resulting in killing at the police station and check-points. Ogbu reported that the massacres of the villagers by police at Umuechem in River State and Agbe in Benue have not been explained by the leaders since then (346). He further explained that this “Might is Right” was showcased in June 12, 1993 presidential election. Where, police cells and prisons became the permanent home for those who raise their voice against the unjust actions of the military Head of the state. Whoever attempts to oppose the unjust actions of political leaders or wealthy individuals in Nigeria may either be killed or go into force exile even when the unjust actions are illegal. Another example was, during Abacha’s era M.K.O Abiola the widely acclaimed winner of June 12, 1993 presidential election was a prominent detainee till he died in prison 1998, Shehu Yaradua, former chief of staff during Obasanjo’s regime as military Head of state was detained and died in prison in 1998. Zaki Biam massacre in Benue was another example of social injustice in Nigeria during Obasanjo’s era. Where, Nigerian army killed hundreds of civilians over killing of nine soldiers and properties worth of billions destroyed. All these have not been able to solve the problem of poverty, underdevelopment, insecurity, corruption, unemployment and quality education to the citizen. Rather it leads to conflict, violence, and political unrest in the society. This is why this paper calls to neutralize the application of this idea of Thrasymachus and its effect in Nigeria through public sensitization by public pressure groups, media houses, civil societies and religious organization.

#### **AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE IN PHILOSOPHY**

To the common man, justice is the right and fair behavior or treatment. That is equal treatment to all. Justice is a moral rightness based on ethics, rationality, law, natural law, religion, equity and fairness (online Wikipedia 2014). Justice is the action in accordance with the requirement of the law. These rules and laws should be grounded in human consensus or societal norms. It ensures that all members of the society receive fair treatment. This concept “justice” raises issues in several sphere of life and plays a significant role in addressing conflict. Justice takes into account the inalienable and inborn right of all human beings. It seeks equal protection of all before the law without discrimination on the basis of race and gender. The word “justice” may be used to refer to “just conduct” or “the quality of being right and fair”. “Justice” may mean, “treat fairly”. This is why people say “do justice to” hence “justice” is often seen as fair treatment with fair treatment. For Hornby “justice is refers to as the law and its administration”.

In the ancient period of philosophy, justice is of one of the issues that troubled Greek philosophers. This concepts “justice” was found in the early writings of the Pythagoreans. They view justice as a square number, a number multiplied into itself. (Mahajan 402) From the Ancient to contemporary era, it has been argued that in moral philosophy the concept of “justice” has been a problem thus Plato attempt addressing the question of what is justice? Plato in his Republic identifies four moral virtues and they are: justice, courage, or fortitude, reason and temperance. Aristotle distinguished between particular justice and universal justice, which mean justice at the individual level and justice at the societal level. At the individual level he argues that a just human being is one who is law- abiding and, or fair; one who will not take more than his or her share of goods. For Aristotle, the words “justice” means “lawful and fair”. On the other hand societal justice means the production or conversation of the happiness and constituents of the happiness of a political

association. He further explained that justice is the only virtue that is regarded as someone else's good, because it secures advantage for another person, either an official or a partner. In the view of John Hospers "justice" can be taken to mean "equal treatment" and or treatment in accord with desert". In the opinion of Adaramola "justice" is the legal equality of all citizens or their equal treatment by law. Olayinka modified it by saying that "justice" is equal and fair treatment of all citizens by the law. According to Ozumba justice is defined as the harmonious co-existence of the different people that constitute the society (99).

According, justice in the history of philosophy is construed in logical or etymological opposition to the concept of injustice. We should note that justice is different from benevolence, charity, prudence, mercy and generosity. John Rawls account of justice is based on a well ordered society in which all agree on public conception of justice which realistically possible for justice as fairness. Why Rawls devoted so much attention on issues of feasibility and stability of a well-ordered society was to show justice as fairness for two reasons, first to show that justice is within the reach of our capacities and compatible with human nature. Secondly, to show that doing and willing what justice requires for its own sake is not just compatible with but also an intrinsic aspect of human good (12). Rawls idea of justice is quite different from Thrasymachus idea of justice. Rawls proposed a conception of justice that is functional in a well-ordered society. Not in a society where there is a lacuna between political leaders and the subjects, the wealthy individual and the poor, weak and the strong. A society where there is survival of the fittest, no equality, where injustices is the order of the day.

### **AN X-RAY OF THRASYMACHUS' IDEA OF JUSTICE**

In the history of philosophy especially ancient era, there were many groups of philosophers such as Milesians school, Pythagorans school, Atomist school and the Sophist school. But my interest is in the Sophist. The three most outstanding Sophist who emerged in Athen between fifty century B.C. were Protagoras, Gorgias and Thrasymachus. They are called "Sophist or Intellectual". However, my major task on this paper is on one of the Sophists. Who are these Sophist? What are their contributions to development of philosophy? There was a paradigm shift in western philosophy with the arrival of the Sophists. While the early Greek Philosophers focused on the physical world and used deductive method the Sophist attention was on man in the society by inductive method. To answer the first question stated above, the Sophist were part of the group who had come to Athens as traveling teachers and philosophers in the fifty century B.C. they are iterant teachers who went from one city to another teaching and instructing people, especially the youth. They taught, not only philosophy, but also grammar and rhetoric, and they introduced paid- teaching in philosophy. It was not the practice among the Greeks for Philosophers to demand money for teaching philosophy. This very act of paid- teaching made the Sophist unpopular because they taught only those who had money or whose parents had money.

Their contributions to the development of philosophy were as follows; first they made philosophy to be a source of livelihood by making it a job. Secondly, they introduce criticism in Philosophy, hence skepticism came the order of philosophy. Thirdly, relativism was the hallmark of

the Sophist in history of philosophy. Having known the Sophist and their contributions to the development of philosophy, we shall unveil the idea of one the sophist called Thrasymachus. Not much was known about his life, we only know that he lived around fifty B.C. He is from Chalcedon. He is one the Sophist who held that one gained nothing from being just, that justice is not worth practicing, for him “might is right justice is the interest of the stronger”. This idea is the problem we confront in the society when addressing the issue of social justice this is because the interpretation of justice is often influence by history, discipline, ideological orientation, training and influence of the government and wealthy individual.(Otive 1) Thus Omoregbe avers;

What is justice? Thrasymachus answer is that “Justice is the interest of the stronger” for “might is right”. In every state, according to him the stronger established themselves in power, and their interest becomes “Justice” they make laws to protect their interest which automatically become what is “Just” and what is “right” within the state for as long as they are in power(88).

From the above I can see justice in every state, country and nation as the interest of the stronger that is the ruling party in power determines what is “just” and “unjust” without minding the rule of law in the society. The rulers determine what happened in the community, state and nation without considering the rule of law in which everybody is equal before the law. This is the case with Nigeria where the ruling class lord it over the subject. This act of social injustice has being paying them just like what Thrasymachus said “injustice pay more than justice” I think why he propose this type of justice is because of his selfish interest and the wick nature of man and the society. This is what Asouzu calls “ambivalence of human interest”. This is ability of the human mind to pursue only the self interest in all he does in the society without the consideration of the others.

## **THE EFFECT OF THE APPLICATION OF THRASYMACHUS IDEA OF JUSTICE IN NOGERIA**

The idea that “Might is Right, and justice is the interest of the stronger” as proposed by Thrasymachus has be in existence in Nigeria since the advent of colonial masters as stated earlier. This was the beginning of social injustice and the real act of “Might is Right” since then till now that very act has been in practice in Nigeria. This very act of social injustice has made the present Nigeria situation to look hopeless and irremediable. And it has created a very big problem in the country. Thus Uzoukwu avers:

The Nigeria predicament worries not only Nigerians citizens, who are sad that the nation has persistently failed to improve the welfare of its citizenry, but also foreigners, who marvel at the nation’s high level of unproductivity and lack of judicious use of its abundant resource.(261)

This predicament began with the practice of Thrasymachus’s concept of justice back in era of the colonial masters and became worst with military dictatorship in the nation’s polity. The military injected debasement and restlessness into the nation’s politics. The act of “Might is Right” has led to series of unwanted coups by the military to take over power and control the activities of the nations.

For over thirty years, the military leadership has caused this nation a great set back even though they created some new states within the tenure. Since, then Thrasymachus's notion of justices has being active in Nigeria that is why Achebe lamented that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. Thus he said; "the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership" (Achebe 1). It is as a result of "Might is Right" that the wealth of this country is stolen and salted away by people in power leaving the poor, the needy and the weak to died in silent.

From the days of Lord Lugard to President Muhammadu Buhari there has been the practice of "Might is Right" justice is the interest of the stronger" as espoused by Thrasymachus. Till now it is still the era of injustice and bloodshed. It is a stage where man because of his position suppress and dehumanize his follow human being. For example when corruption was the order of the day during Abacha's regime, Obasanjo was seen as unrepentant critic to their corrupt regime and this act nearly cost him life in Abacha's prison. It is important to note that the military era has really encouraged this dictum in Nigerian political sector. Thereby, causing harm economically, politically, socially and culturally. I think this idea of "Might is Right" is the major cause of underdevelopment since after colonialization. This is because we are not the only country that was colonalised. Why is our case different? Why are we not progressing? Why is it that nothing is working out in Nigeria even when God has endowed us with the potential to develop this country? Why is high rate of unemployment peculiar to Nigeria? Why is our power sector becoming weaker and poorer everyday even when the government claims to fund the sector? Where are the basic amenities which government has claimed to have provided to the masses? All these troubles are created by the practice of Thrasymachus's idea of justice.

However, we can not develop and improve this country if we continue with this ideology which has led us to (i) unemployment (ii) poor sharing of allocation (iii) lack of basic amenities and infrastructure (iv) poor power sector (v) low level of moral consciousness among Nigerians. For us to overcome this we need to neutralize this application of justice in Nigeria.

### **DECONSTRUCTING THRASYMACHUS' IDEA OF JUSTICE AND IT APPLICATION IN NIGERIA**

The idea "Might is Right" justice is the interest of the stronger" has created big gap between the wealthy, the rich and the poor in the society. While the rich gets richer the poor gets poorer. It is this same conception of justice that has made those in power to relate or interact with those in power too hence power circulate among powers, wealthy among wealthy, while poverty among poverty in Nigerian society. This practice have may it impossible for a poor man to get justice in Nigeria. This idea of justice has cause a lot of problem in all sectors of the nation. Wealth and power circulate in the hands of wealthy and powerful individual, once you do not have money or power you are no body in the Nigeria society. This concept of justice has polarized our labour sector and makes it inefficient, because those who are fit, suitable and qualify for a particular job can not again employment because they had no body in power and they are not from a wealthy families, even when the employer want to employ, the applicant is ask to pay money. The experience I had in the area of employment had shown that "Might is Right" when there is vacancy in the labour sector and you are recommended by

those in power or the wealthy you must get the job whether you are qualified or not is not the employer's business. Hence Achebe laments:

Why is it that our corruption, gross inequities, our noisy vulgarity, our selfishness, our ineptitude seem so much stronger than the good influences at work in our society?

Why do the good among us seem so helpless while the worst are full of vile energy?

(2)

The question is should this be the case in a real just society where equality of all citizens should be the goal of the leaders? This is why the resources are stolen and salted away by people in power and their accomplices. Thus this makes the labour sector inefficient, hopeless and irremediable in Nigeria. This denial of merit according to Achebe is a form of social injustice which can hurt not only the individual directly concerned but ultimately the entire society. (21) This idea of "might is right" has made the Nigerian judiciary sector inactive in the issues of justice. They are only interested in the highest bidder to win his/her case whether he/she is right or wrong is not the judge's business. This has made it impossible for the poor and powerless to receive a fair hearing in their case. The judiciary in Nigeria do not have time for the poor because they know they will not be paid. Even when they claim to have "Human Rights groups" where the poor and the powerless can go to get justice without money or power. This "human rights group" has become an avenue to make money for some unemployed lawyers, when you cannot foot their bills no justice for you, when you foot their bills you get your justice. They have turned justice to be the thing of the "might" and "power" in the society.

Educational sector is another area where this idea is practiced day in day out in terms of admitting students in institutions, giving employments, passing of examinations and even students' elections. Today, a candidate can score high in jamb and university aptitude test and still will not get admission why does one who performed below average will secure admission, simply because they have the money to buy the admission or they have people who can use their position in power to secure them the admission even when they are not fit, suitable and qualified for the admission. This idea has affected employment opportunity, passing of examination and students' election in Nigerian universities. For instance if those in power support a candidate that the students do not want the candidate will finally win or the election will be concealed. Some of the institutions' elections in Nigeria are determined by the wealthy and the powerful individuals not the electorate. This is not what it ought to be. The poor and powerless should be carried along at all times in the society.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Rejecting this misapplication of justice**

The first step to tackle this idea of justice is by rejecting the misapplication of this justice by all the groups in Nigeria both government and non-governmental organizations. The public should be enlightened to know the need, value and use of social justice rather than the misapplication of justice. This is because misapplication of justice allows only the influential and the strongest to dominate and exploit the country's resources and endowment at the expense of the poor, the weak and the masses. Ekeji, explained that social injustice will hardly bring the needed harmony and stability in Nigeria if we continue to practice it. (172). This misapplication of justice has resulted into a low level of moral

consciousness among Nigerian. Ewelu lamented that the low level of moral consciousness among both the leaders, wealthy individual and the subject is the major causes of disorder and injustice facing our country and citizens today.(96). This is as a result of this misapplication of justice by a man we do not know his background, knowing too well that our problem in Nigeria today is the problem of copycat mentality, our so called political leaders and wealthy individual decided to adopt this idea of justice which has kept this country hostage from independent till now.

### **Enlightenment of the masses**

When we are able to reject the idea of justice as espoused by Thrasymachus, it becomes imperative for us to re-educate the mindset of the citizenry. Most especially those in power both political leaders and wealthy individuals. Hence , there is need for us to re-educate the mind of people towards the acquisition of a mindset that will maintain equal social justice in the society. Asouzu stresses that it is by this re-education of the mind which he called noetic propaedeutic that the individual can be able to neutralize this idea of justice which create gap between the rich and poor, the powerful and powerless, the weak and strong then try to complement each other within the society(81). The main objective of this is to make the masses reject the old mentality of justice and adapt and accept a new way toward promoting social justice in the society.

### **To form a pressure group that can fight for equal justice at all ties of government**

Once the re-education of the mind is achieved, it becomes imperative to establish pressure groups within the nation from the grass root society to the ruling class. The individuals that will make this groups will be the groups that has received the re-education of mind and has build their moral consciousness to fight social injustice. This pressure groups will be drawn from all fields of life especially from academia, professional groups who kwon their onion and will make sure that the rule of law is maintained from the grassroots level of the society. Their basic function will be to protect the common man, weak, poor from the powerful, strong and rich who will want to use “might is right” to subdue their fellow citizen. They will also act as a watch dog to those political leaders and wealthy individual who will always apply this dictum to achieve their selfish act.

### **Independent judiciary free from corruption**

In attempt to overcome this idea of justice there is need to protect the integrity of the pressure groups and their security in order to them to function effectively. One of the ways which I think it can achieve is by empowering the judiciary and making them independent to function effectively. Hence legal justice becomes very important in the society. Legal justice is justice formulated and administered according to law, irrespective of the law’s immorality or otherwise. (Olayinka 123). Therefore, it is the duty of the judiciary to enforce justice and reject injustice if and only if the arm is independent and free from corrupt practices in the society. It is the basic function of the judiciary to uphold the principles of social injustice in Nigeria

### **CONCLUSION**

We have in this work attempted to defined justice to be just conduct, equal and fair treatment of all citizens by the law as well as the promotion of the well being of individuals in the country. We have identified and highlighted effect of practicing Thrasymachus idea of justice in the society. And

from all indication it has done more harm to humanity than good. This paper therefore, is a call to all thoughtful Nigerians to rise up today and reject this misapplication of justice and those habits which cripple our aspiration and inhibit our, chances of becoming a modern attractive country and re-educate the public on important of fair justice to all individuals. To achieve this, strong pressure groups should be form that will help to maintain fair justice. It is important to empower the judiciary to be independent in other for them to uphold justice always. This will make Justice desirable and worthwhile for peace and social stability in nation. When there are more just individuals than unjust individuals the society tends to be just and stable in other words there will corporative progress in the society. This is why Adaramola stress that

“Justice must be done ‘to all manner of men, without fear, or favour, affection or ill-will’ and as such, justice must always not merely be done, but be seen manifestly to have been done, not only by judges and other adjudicators, but by everyone in every act in societal relationships”(267)

From this we can see that to achieve social justice is the sole responsible of every individual in the state even though there are sectors that should be very active in the fight for justice such as the judiciary, pressures groups, government and non-governmental organizations etc. finally, this paper suggested ways of curb this social predicament through rejection of this misapplication of justice, reeducation of the mind of the public, formation of pressure groups. When this is done it will help to maintain and implement the rule of law, curb the problem of corruption, underdevelopment, insecurity, poverty and social injustice.

#### WORKS CITED

- Abanbi, M. “corruption as an obstacle to good Governmence in Nigeria” in *The Nigerian bar journal*.vol.1, no 3 2005
- Achebe,C. *The Troublem with Nigeria*. Heinemann educational book 1984.
- Adaramola, Funso. “On justice” in J. Obi Oguejiofor (ed), *African Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Delta publications Nigeria ltd. Enugu 1988.
- Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* trans. by J.A.K. Thomas, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. Penguin classic England. 1955
- Asouzu,I.*Ibuanyidanda New Complementary Ontology Beyond World-Immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions*. Lit verlag 2007
- Edet,M.I, “Ancient and Medieval Philosophy”. *A Concise Introduction to Philospphy and Logic* edited by Uduigwomen and Ozumba. Jochrisam Calabar 2005.
- Ekei j. c. “Justice in Communalism and Social Stability” *Philosophy and Praxis in African*. Edited by M.F.Asiegbe and Agbakoba J.A. hope publication, Ibadan 2006.

- Elegido, J.M, *Jurisprudence, A Text for Nigeria Student*. Spectrum Ibadan 2007
- Ese, M. *The Nigeria Legal System Text and Cases*. Princenton lagos 2012
- Ewelu, B.I, "The Nigeria Problem; An Ethical Problem" *In African Problem in the Light of Philosophy*. Edited by ewelu. Four dimension enugu 2008
- Hornby, A.S, *Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary of Current English*. University press Oxford 1985
- Hospers, J. *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. Routledge and Kegan paul ltd. London 1981.  
<http://www.onlinenigeria.com/benue>
- Mahajan, V.D. *Political Theory* chad 2000
- Odey, J.O. *The Anti- Corruption Crusade; The Sage of A Crippled Giant*. Abakaliki 2001
- Ogbu, Osita.N. *Human Rights Law and Practice in Nigeria: An Introduction*. Uwani Enugu: CIDJAP publisher 1999.
- Olayinka, S.O, "justice and social stability". *Philosophy and Praxis in African*. Edited by M.F.Asiegbbe and Agbakoba J.A. hope publication, Ibadan 2006.
- Omoregbe, J. *knowing Philosophy*. Vintage Books new York 1991
- Otive, I. *Challenges of Development in Nigeria*. Lagos Robitos Alliance Publisher limited 2009
- Samuel, F. *Justice and Social Contract; Essays on Rawlsian Political Philosophy*. Oxford University Press New York 2007
- Stumpf, S.E. *Philosophy; History and Problems*. USA; cgGram-Hill Inc, 1994.
- Udechukw, H.B. *Justice; the Basic of Authentic Peace and Development vol.2*. Snap Press. Enugu 2012
- Uzoukwu, S.K. *Peace through Dialogue and Solidarity, the Basis of true Humanism. An Appreciation Exploration of John Paul II's Insight and it Lesson and Challenges to Africa-Nigeria in Particular*. Snap Enugu
- Yongo, D. "State Creation Since 1967: Amperative of the Military Contribution to Nation-building in Nigeria" *African Journal of History and Culture Vol 7 Academic Journal* 2015