

Ring of Gyges

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Plato's Socrates holds that we always have reason to be just, since being just is essential for living a happy and successful life (*see* PLATO; SOCRATES). In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates' main interlocutor, Glaucon, raises a vivid and powerful challenge to this claim. He presents the case of Gyges, a Lydian shepherd who possesses a ring that gives him the power of invisibility. Glaucon's contention is that Gyges does not have reason to be just in this circumstance, since being just will not promote his happiness. Thus, the argument poses the following challenge: what reason do we have to be just, particularly in circumstances where we can get away with injustice? (*see* REASONS FOR ACTION, MORALITY AND; WHY BE MORAL; JUSTICE; HAPPINESS; WELL-BEING). In this essay, we describe Glaucon's challenge, highlight its similarity to challenges offered by other skeptical figures in the history of philosophy, namely, Hobbes' Foole and Hume's sensible knave, and present three broad lines of response.

Glaucon frames his challenge in terms of a distinction between three kinds of goods. They are: (1) goods that we desire only for their own sake (e.g., joy, harmless pleasures), (2) goods that we desire *both* for their own sake and for what comes from them (e.g., knowing, seeing, being healthy), and (3) goods that are burdensome in themselves, but desired for what comes from them (e.g., physical training, medicine, ways of making money). Socrates thinks that justice belongs in the second category, which is the finest one: it is desirable both for its own sake, and for the sake of its consequences.

It is important to be clear about how Plato understands the contrast between goods that are desirable for their own sake versus goods that are desirable for the sake of their consequences. It is tempting to think he conceives of the distinction in the following, familiar way: goods we desire for their own sake are valuable in themselves and independently of the relationship they bear to other good things, while goods we desire for the sake of their consequences are valuable because they bring about other good things. But this is not what Socrates has in mind, for he claims that justice is something that should be desired both for its own sake and for the sake of its consequences "*by anyone who wants to be happy*" (*Republic* 358a, emphasis added). This suggests that both goods we desire for their own sake and those we desire for the sake of their consequences are valuable because of the relationship they bear to our happiness. But then how should we understand the contrast? Although this is a matter of some dispute, the examples suggest that Socrates thinks that goods desired for their own sake constitute or realize happiness, while goods desired for the sake of their consequences lead to or bring about happiness, but do not themselves make us happy.

Glaucon challenges Socrates' claim that justice is desirable for its own sake and for the sake of its consequences. He argues instead that most people place justice in the third category: justice itself is burdensome and onerous, but people practice it for the good consequences that are a result of having a reputation for justice. On this view, justice itself does not promote the happy life; instead it is only the *appearance* of justice that leads to our flourishing. Accordingly, while we may always have reason to appear just, we do not have reason to be just. Glaucon defends this account of the value of justice, by first, providing an account of the origin and nature of justice, second, showing that people do in fact think that justice is only good for its consequences, and third, arguing that they are right to do so, since justice itself makes no contribution to our happiness.

Glaucon presents a broadly conventionalist or contractarian account of justice. According to Glaucon, most people think that doing injustice is good, and suffering it is bad. Since, however, the badness of suffering injustice outweighs the goodness of doing it, people make an agreement neither to do nor to suffer injustice; and they invent laws against harming others and call these laws "just." Thus, justice is a kind of agreement or convention that is "in between the best and the worst. The best is to do injustice without paying the penalty; the worst is to suffer it without being able to take revenge" (*Republic* 359a). On this picture, no one agrees to be just because they think that behaving justly is itself a good thing, but rather because they are too weak to do injustice with impunity.

Glaucon proceeds to show that in fact no one thinks that justice is good in itself; instead, people practice it unwillingly, as something burdensome in itself, but good for its consequences. He claims that we can see this most clearly if we consider a thought experiment: if we grant anyone – just or unjust – the freedom to do whatever he likes we will see that he will choose not justice, but injustice. Glaucon illustrates this with the story of Gyges. Gyges is a simple and purportedly just shepherd who discovers a ring that gives him the power of invisibility. Without the slightest hesitation, he arranges to be a messenger to the king, seduces the queen, kills, with her help, the king, and reigns in his stead. Glaucon thinks that anyone in this situation would act as Gyges does and choose injustice over justice.

Perhaps more importantly, Glaucon contends that anyone in this type of circumstance would be right to pursue injustice, "for someone who did not want to do injustice, given this sort of opportunity, and who did not touch other people's property, would be thought most wretched and most foolish by everyone aware of the situation" (*Republic* 360d). Glaucon thinks that the reason for this is our human nature and the resulting conception of human happiness. Glaucon claims that we are by nature acquisitive and competitive and thus that happiness lies in the possession of material goods and power. He says, "the desire to do better than others ... is what every natural being naturally pursues as good. But by law and force, it is made to deviate from this path and honor equality" (*Republic* 359c). According to Glaucon, then, it is injustice that promotes our happiness, while justice itself is an impediment. Assuming that what we have reason to do is what promotes our happiness, it follows that we have no reason to pursue justice in those circumstances where we can get away with injustice.

Subsequent moral philosophers, particularly those who hold a conventionalist or contractarian account of justice, have found this challenge troubling. Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, for example, develop conventionalist accounts of justice that share many features of Glaucon's account, and both face adversaries like the Lydian shepherd (*see* HOBBS, THOMAS; HUME, DAVID). Hobbes confronts the Foole who challenges the claim that we always have reason to be just: "he questioneth, whether injustice, taking away the feare of God ... may not sometimes stand with that Reason, which dictateth to every man his own good" (Hobbes 1996: Ch. 15). Hume engages with "a sensible knave" who thinks that honesty may be the best rule but that it is a rule that is liable to many exceptions. The knave may find wisdom in observing the general rule but taking advantages of all the exceptions (Hume 1999: 232). Both Hobbes and Hume have difficulty showing that everyone always has reason to be just. Hume's predicament may be more interesting as he singles out justice among the virtues: "Treating vice with the greatest candour, and making it all possible concessions, we must acknowledge that there is not, in any instance, the smallest pretext for giving it the preference above virtue, with a view to self-interest; *except, perhaps, in the case of justice*, where a man, taking things in a certain light, may often seem to be a loser by his integrity" (Hume 1999: 232, emphasis added). Plato seems also to think that justice is different from the other virtues and worries that it is problematic in the way that Hume suggests.

Both Hobbes and Hume think that justice presupposes scarcity and conflict, as do many later thinkers (e.g., Marx). Hume claims that in a condition of profuse abundance, where all our wants are satisfied, "in such a happy state, every other social virtue would flourish, and receive tenfold increase; but the cautious, jealous virtue of justice would never once have been dreamed of." Absent certain conditions, justice, "being totally useless, would be an idle ceremonial, and could never possibly have place in the catalogue of virtues" (Hume 1999: 145). These conditions of justice, dubbed "the circumstances of justice" by John Rawls, usually include the following: (1) rough equality of physical and mental powers, vulnerability to attack, moderate scarcity, and (2) consciousness of the latter, and awareness of conflict as well as of some identity of interest. On the view of these and other thinkers, justice makes possible human cooperation and the benefits thereof (Rawls 1971: Ch. 3, sect. 22, and the references cited therein).

It is interesting to think of the Lydian shepherd in the context of these "circumstances of justice." Gyges' ring gives its bearer the powers "of a god among humans" (*Republic* 360c). Such a being would be able to obtain what it wishes without giving anything up. Hume thinks, in fact, that this is the position in which we humans find ourselves in relation to animals:

Were there a species of creatures intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment; the necessary consequence, I think, is that we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly

speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them, nor could they possess any right or property, exclusive of such arbitrary lords. ... This is plainly the situation of men, with regard to animals. (1999: 152)

Gyges, wearing his ring, would be similarly placed in relation to us. Glaucon's challenge might make us worry that anyone with powers like those possessed by Gyges would behave as most humans behave toward animals, since, for this person, the conditions of justice do not obtain.

For the most part, philosophers have responded to Glaucon's challenge by rejecting one or more of the key claims underlying his account: (1) the contractarian or conventionalist theory of justice; (2) the claim that we are essentially acquisitive and competitive and that human happiness crucially involves the possession of material goods and power; (3) the claim that we only have reason to do what promotes our happiness.

Plato attempts to answer Glaucon's challenge by simultaneously rejecting (1), the contractarian account of justice, and (2), the account of human happiness. In Book IV of the *Republic*, Socrates argues that being just is a state or condition of the soul or psyche. In brief, it is the state where reason, which knows what is best for the whole soul, rules over both our spirited or competitive desires and our appetitive desires. Injustice is the opposite: it is the state where ignorant and unruly spirited or appetitive desires rule the individual and so lead to dissatisfaction and disorder in the soul. Plato has little trouble establishing that justice as he defines it is important, indeed essential, for happiness. Following his definition of justice, Socrates says:

So it now remains, it seems, for us to consider whether it is more profitable to do just actions, engage in fine practices, and be just, whether one is known to be so or not; or to do injustice and be unjust, provided that one does not have to pay the penalty and become a better person as a result of being punished.

But, Socrates, [Glaucon says] that question seems to me, at least, to have become ridiculous, now that the two have been shown to be as we described. Life does not seem worth living when the body's natural constitution is ruined, not even if one has food and drink of every sort, all of the money in the world, and every political office imaginable. So how – even if one could do whatever one wishes, except what would liberate one from vice and injustice and make one acquire justice and virtue – could it be worth living when the natural constitution of the very thing by which we live is ruined and in turmoil. (*Republic* 444e–445b)

But readers have often worried that Plato has not provided an adequate account of justice. More specifically, they have wondered why Plato thinks that someone who has justice in his or her soul would do what we typically think justice requires. Much depends on Plato's account of the role of reason in directing our actions. If Plato conceives of reason in broadly Humean terms, then it is unclear why we should think that reason would never determine that injustice is the best means for satisfying our desires. But if he conceives of reason in some other way, and so holds that it will

direct us to act justly no matter what the cost, then it is unclear why being ruled by reason is crucial for happiness.

Other philosophers respond to Glaucon's challenge by maintaining a broadly conventional or contractarian account of justice, but challenging (2), the account of human nature and human happiness. Glaucon claims that we are by nature acquisitive and competitive and thus take material goods and power to be the main components of happiness. But surely this is a limited and one-dimensional account of human nature. We are also social creatures: we require companionship and cooperation and cannot flourish in solitude. Thus, if we understand the goods that are scarce in the circumstances of justice to include those that we acquire through the companionship and cooperation of others, then even equipped with Gyges' ring we would still need justice. In his *Morals by Agreement* (1986) David Gauthier argues that Glaucon is mistaken in representing "justice as a necessary evil because he supposes that it affords us only a second-best means to our ends." He argues that the cooperation made possible by justice is not a second-best way of realizing ends that might sometimes be achieved in other ways, for "[i]n cooperating we make the most effective use of our powers to attain ends that would otherwise lie beyond our individual capacities. And we find value in ways that no solitary being could experience." Glaucon is wrong, then, to think that Gyges would have no need for justice, for humans "are neither all-powerful nor all-sufficient" (Gauthier 1986: 345; see also Gauthier 1990). The problem with this type of approach, however, is that it is not clear that it can show that we *always* have reason to be just; more specifically, it may not show that we have reason to be just to everyone. Glaucon may concede that people are not affectively and socially self-sufficient and so need to be just to some people in order to be happy, without conceding that we need to be just to everyone, particularly those with whom we do not care to have cooperative relationships.

Finally, many philosophers respond to Glaucon's challenge by rejecting (3), the view that we only have reason to do what promotes our happiness. These philosophers argue that we also have reason to do what is just or right, regardless of the impact on our happiness, indeed, regardless of the impact on any of our ends, whether those ends are narrowly self-interested or altruistic. The Kantian tradition, for example, holds that all rational beings owe just treatment to other rational beings, and have reason to act accordingly. The challenge for this approach is to spell out this alternative theory of what we have reason to do. A prudential theory of rationality grounds our reasons in our interest or our informed desires. A more general but broadly instrumental theory would link reasons to our ends, whether self-interested or not. A Kantian theory would reject these accounts, but would have to offer an alternative. Why should we think that we always have *reason* (and a reason of the right sort) to be just, even when justice has no relation to our ends? What principle of rationality explains this? The Kantian approach may hold out the best promise of a reply to Glaucon's challenge, but it is of course the most difficult one to produce (*see* KANT, IMMANUEL).

The challenge embodied in the tale of Gyges' ring forces us to think very hard about some of the deepest questions in moral philosophy. What is justice?

How should we characterize human nature and human happiness? And what do we have reason to do? As such, it is of abiding concern to moral theorists.

See also: HAPPINESS; HOBBS, THOMAS; HUME, DAVID; JUSTICE; KANT, IMMANUEL; PLATO; REASONS FOR ACTION, MORALITY AND; SOCRATES; WELL-BEING; WHY BE MORAL

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