

Plato  
*Glaucon's Challenge*

Book II raises some of the most important questions in the *Republic*. The most salient of these is raised by Glaucon: Why should I be just (and moral)? I want us to look at Glaucon's challenge to Socrates, examine how fundamental such a challenge is, and what questions it raises about the nature of morality and justice.

Initially, Glaucon decides to resurrect Thrasymachus' definition of justice – that justice is what is good for the stronger. We should, by now, have understood the objections that were raised by Socrates to Thrasymachus' position. Nonetheless, Glaucon plays devil's advocate and suggests that, whilst Socrates may have bewitched Thrasymachus, he (Glaucon) is not satisfied. Justice may not be a positive evil (as Thrasymachus argued) but, nevertheless, it is not something worthwhile for its own sake. Rather, it is something that is chosen by weak human beings to avoid being oppressed; weak human beings make deals with one another that avoid inflicting or suffering injustice.

The challenge to Socrates is manifold; two big themes dominate however. Firstly, he needs to explain why it is better to be just than unjust (this was, in part, addressed in his exchanges with Thrasymachus). Secondly, and more fundamentally, he needs to show that justice is not merely something we adhere to when we can't get away with being unjust. Glaucon's challenge is, essentially, that injustice is the course of action we would choose *if* we could get away with it. In a nutshell the question is: why should I be moral? – If someone were powerful enough, intelligent and well-placed (politically, for example), he would reasonably have no interest in justice.

There are a few subtleties here that need to be flagged before we get into discussion. Above, I said that Glaucon's argument is that weak human beings make deals with one another that avoid inflicting or suffering injustice. This can be read as a deviation from Thrasymachus' cruder definition of justice (that it is what is good for the stronger). In this case, if we take justice as something we adhere to only when we can't get

away with being unjust, we can say that justice is, in fact, a device for the weak to make themselves strong. Put another way: Thrasymachus' point was that justice is ultimately an exploitation of the weak; Glaucon's version of this is that it is, in fact, a device used by the weak to make themselves stronger. The main thing that Glaucon's account has in common with Thrasymachus' however, is that, ultimately, justice is a device that can be used (in one way or another) for satisfying one's own desires. It is self-serving. This makes justice look 'second-rate'. By that I mean that it is far too ego-centric to be a virtue (think about Aristotelian virtues here: none of them are ego-centric in the way that justice is on Glaucon's account). What both Glaucon and Adeimantus want from Socrates is an account of justice that shows that it is rational to be just for its own sake – not merely valued for its effects. – One can see, in this demand, a definite Kantian ring. Both Glaucon and Adeimantus want to believe (and have Socrates show them) that there is a rational basis to justice of the kind that justifies it as valuable for its own sake. How far-reaching the role of consequences (utilitarianism) is, in this respect, is debatable.<sup>1</sup>

You will have noticed that I have conflated justice and morality here; this is not accidental. Plato offers little by way of a definite distinction between justice and morality in Book II. Indeed, later on, the individual seems to be relegated to a sort of cog in the machinery of a just society. In other words, each individual is seen as performing one particular role in a just state. This, of course, raises a problem in terms of whether we are to think about justice as something that is primarily concerned with the state (with felicitous consequences for the individual), or as something that is concerned with the individual that then, as a practical consequence, produces a just state. In other words, when we think about justice, are we to consider it as something that functions primarily in relation to a collective (a state) or an individual? If the latter, do we assume that this has the happy consequence of producing a just state? – I now want us to discuss Glaucon's challenge!

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<sup>1</sup> Again, throughout this section you should be able to see aspects of the three big normative moral theories we have covered (utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics).

- (357) The three classes of good things. 1. Those things that are harmless pleasures. 2. Those things that are good for their own sake and bring consequential benefits. 3. Those things that are not good in themselves but that we tolerate/encourage because of the anticipated benefits. Can you think of examples for each of these?
- Is there anything that actually fits into the first class? – Most things we do, have consequences. Discuss.
- Bear in mind that the subsequent two categories are largely defined by reference to the possibility of the first category.
- Socrates believes that justice belongs to the second class (the best class he thinks). Do you agree?
- Also, it is interesting to note that Glaucon believes Thrasymachus to have been bewitched by Socrates. This is something that Socrates often accuses the sophists of doing (bewitching through rhetoric; note however, that Socrates does not use rhetoric in this way (if at all)). Nonetheless, is there the implication of dishonesty here?
- Thrasymachus and many others believe that it belongs to the third category (that, ultimately, it is practised against the individual will).
- (358/9) Glaucon sees justice as developing from the union of two aspects of human life. 1. We dislike being wronged *more* than we like being able to harm or wrong others. Most of us (as individuals), in any case, do not have the means to prevent others doing wrong to us. Therefore, according to Glaucon, we develop compromises that allow us to do the best we can in the circumstances. This, apparently, is justice. 2. Given the opportunity to act unjustly (and get away with it) we would do so. This view is first set out in Glaucon's rendition of the story of the Ring of Gyges.
- (359/60) Ring of Gyges.
- Why does Glaucon take away any reputation of justice for the just man? Is he right to do so?
- NOTE WELL: our concept of justice has a distributive sense (one that applies to social and political constructs). Yet we find it no less natural to speak of a just individual – someone who is just whilst having nothing directly to do with the distribution of welfare (goods, wealth etc.).
- But is the just man really just? Is he truly (as Socrates suggests) beyond the reach of the kinds of temptations that the story of the Ring of Gyges is meant to illustrate?
- Thus far we have accepted Glaucon's challenge to Socrates. However, should we accept it as a reasonable challenge? Let us return to Glaucon's three classes of things. 1. Those things that are harmless pleasures. 2. Those things that are good for their own sake and bring consequential benefits. 3. Those things that are not good in themselves but that we tolerate/encourage because of the anticipated benefits.
- Socrates puts justice in the second class. However, are we really to believe that the trivial pleasures of the first category are internal to a serious concept of justice?
- The examples of the second category that are compared to justice (health & sight) are not merely a combination of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class; they are not pleasures that are trivial in the way that they are enjoyed just for their own sake which, in addition, merely happen to have decent consequences!
- Is there something wrong with the original division, or with the way Glaucon has used it to set up Socrates' response? And why didn't Socrates notice?
- Are we to take it that Glaucon is demanding that Socrates prove to *anyone* that justice is better than injustice? Surely there could be individuals who are not moved by any aspects of morality and, therefore, will not see the point of any of Socrates' arguments?
- Think about the shepherd in the Ring of Gyges story. What are his attitudes to morality?
- We are asked to consider the existence of two such rings – one given to the just man and the other to the unjust man. Socrates is asked to show why their conduct would not end up the same. Put another way: Socrates is asked why someone who is already just would not be corrupted by the ring. That is quite different from asking for reasons that could be given to anyone at all for not exploiting the ring. Note, in the latter case, the idea of justice need not

enter into things at all! (Again, ask yourself: is Glaucon's challenge reasonable?)

- (361) Reputation: We are asked to imagine that the just man has the worst possible reputation and that the unjust man has the best reputation. Think about this demand in relation to the second class of goods (sight & health). What if you are perfectly healthy but suspected of having HIV. Imagine, also, that you live in a country where there is huge moral stigma attached to the disease. You may very well be faced with prison. In prison, you can expect your health to deteriorate even though you were perfectly healthy. Is it not enough for Socrates to show the benefits of justice even if being mistreated could undermine your commitment to justice (by analogy, becoming less healthy when such a commitment is undermined)?
- (368) Is there anything in the idea that justice in states (societies) is a larger version of justice in individuals?
- Is Socrates' analogy between large and small writing trivial?
- Are the principles of need and specialization a plausible basis for the origin of a political society (link to the political philosophy you have covered with Mr. Bartlett)?
- (371e) After putting some flesh on the bones of the origins of a city, Socrates asks where justice resides within it.
- Adeimantus suggests that it may reside in a "*mutual relationship of these elements*".
- (369 – 372) Read. What variety of wants/needs are there in the city? Provision of food is the first, provision of housing the second etc..
- Will a single individual do better concentrating on a number of skills or just on one?
- What justification does Socrates give for his view that an individual would do better concentrating on just one skill?
- You will note here that there is a good degree of coercion. People are to be limited as to what functions they perform in a city. Does this ignore the requirements of the individual?
- (372d-e) Glaucon interrupts and says that Socrates' city is meagre and devoid of luxury (a city of pigs). He wants a city that caters for

more than basic requirements. What follows is very interesting.

- Socrates claims that the healthy state (*viz.* the one he has described) is sufficient but then (373) goes on to describe the 'fevered state' (what Glaucon asks for).
- **AN ASIDE:** there is no further discussion of the healthy state or any further discussion about it in relation to justice. Some scholars believe that Plato did not believe that the 'healthy state' was up to the task of illustrating the origins of justice and injustice. This has led some to believe that it is at this point in Plato's canon that he parts company from the views of Socrates. Very much a moot point however.
- Why would a luxurious city lead to war?
- (375-376) Finally, there is the need for defence of the 'realm'. What qualities are needed?
- Those who are to fight also need special training. They, too, are to have one role only.
- The Guardians need to have the highest level of training and a suited disposition.
- Someone of appropriate disposition is compared to a young pedigree hound.
- What other qualities are required (this is important!)?
- What do you think Socrates means by saying the 'healthy state' is sufficient for describing the origins of justice and injustice?