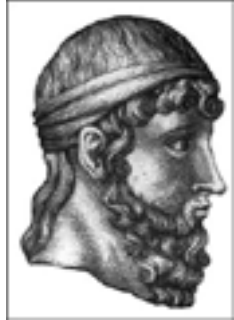


“The Ring of Gyges” by Plato



Relief of Plato Thoemmes Press

About the author... Other than anecdotal accounts, not much is known about Plato's early life. The association with his friend and mentor Socrates was undoubtedly a major influence. Plato's founding of the Academy, a school formed for scientific and mathematical investigation, not only established the systematic beginning of Western science but also influenced the structure of higher education from medieval to modern times. Plutarch once wrote, "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy is Plato."

About the work... Glaucon, the main speaker of this reading from Plato's *Republic*,¹ expresses a widely and deeply-held ethical point of view known as egoism—a view taught by a Antiphon, a sophistic contemporary of Socrates. Egoistic theories are founded on the belief that everyone acts only from the motive of self-interest. For example, the egoist accounts for the fact that people help people on the basis of what the helpers might get in return from those helped or others like them. This view, neither representative of Plato's nor of Socrates's philosophy, is presented here by Glaucon as a stalking horse for the development of a more thoroughly developed ethical theory. Although Socrates held that everyone attempts to act from the motive of "self-interest," his interpretation of that motive is quite different from the view elaborated by Glaucon because Glaucon

1. Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. by Benjamin Jowlett, Book II, 358d—361d.

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seems unaware of the attendant formative effects on the soul by actions for short-term pleasure.

From the reading...

“... those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust...”

Ideas of Interest from “The Ring of Gyges”

1. According to the Glaucon’s brief, why do most persons act justly? Explain whether you think Glaucon’s explanation is psychologically correct.
2. If a person could be certain not only that an action resulting in personal benefit would not be discovered but also that if this action were discovered, no punishing consequences would follow, then would there any reason for that person to act morally?
3. Is it true that sometimes our self-interest is served by *not* acting in our self-interest? Fyodor Dostoevsky writes:

Advantage! What is advantage? And will you take it upon yourself to define with perfect accuracy in what the advantage of a man consists? And what if it so happens that a man’s advantage, *sometimes*, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous.²

Construct an example illustrating this view, and attempt to resolve the paradoxical expression of the question.

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Constance Garnett. 1864.

4. Quite often people are pleased when they can help others. Analyze whether this fact is sufficient to prove that the motive for helping others is ultimately one of pleasure or of self-interest.
5. According to Glaucon, how does the practice of justice arise? On the view he expresses, would there be any reason prior to living in a society to do the right thing? Does the practice of ethics only make sense in the context of living in a society?

The Reading Selection from “The Ring of Gyges”

I am delighted, he replied, to hear you say so, and shall begin by speaking, as I proposed, of the nature and origin of justice. They say that to do injustice is, by nature, good; to suffer injustice, evil; but that the evil is greater than the good. And so when men have both done and suffered injustice and have had experience of both, not being able to avoid the one and obtain the other, they think that they had better agree among themselves to have neither; hence there arise laws and mutual covenants; and that which is ordained by law is termed by them lawful and just. This they affirm to be the origin and nature of justice; —it is a mean or compromise, between the best of all, which is to do injustice and not be punished, and the worst of all, which is to suffer injustice without the power of retaliation; and justice, being at a middle point between the two, is tolerated not as a good, but as the lesser evil, and by reason of the inability of men to do injustice. For no man who is worthy to be called a man would ever submit to such an agreement if he were able to resist; he would be mad if he did. Such is the received account, Socrates, of the nature and origin of justice.

Now that those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust will best appear if we imagine something of this kind: having given both to the just and the unjust power to do what they will, let us watch and see whither desire will lead them; then we shall discover in the very act the just and unjust man to be proceeding along the same road, following their interest, which all natures deem to be their good, and are only diverted into the path of justice by the force of law. The liberty which we are supposing may be most completely given to them in the form of such a power as is said to have been possessed by Gyges the ancestor of Croesus the Lydian.

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According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and reascended.

From the reading . . .

“For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice. . . .”

Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring inside his hand, when instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result—when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court; where as soon as he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom.

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other. No man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men.



Socrates and Aeschylus, Antiquities Project

Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice. Enough of this. Now, if we are to form a real judgment of the life of the just and unjust, we must isolate them; there is no other way; and how is the isolation to be effected?

I answer: Let the unjust man be entirely unjust, and the just man entirely just; nothing is to be taken away from either of them, and both are to be perfectly furnished for the work of their respective lives. First, let the unjust be like other distinguished masters of craft; like the skilful pilot or physician, who knows intuitively his own powers and keeps within their limits, and who, if he fails at any point, is able to recover himself. So let the unjust make his unjust attempts in the right way, and lie hidden if he means to be great in his injustice (he who is found out is nobody): for the highest reach of injustice is: to be deemed just when you are not. Therefore I say that in the perfectly unjust man we must assume the most perfect injustice; there is to be no deduction, but we must allow him, while doing the most

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unjust acts, to have acquired the greatest reputation for justice. If he have taken a false step he must be able to recover himself; he must be one who can speak with effect, if any of his deeds come to light, and who can force his way where force is required his courage and strength, and command of money and friends.

And at his side let us place the just man in his nobleness and simplicity, wishing, as Aeschylus says, to be and not to seem good. There must be no seeming, for if he seem to be just he will be honoured and rewarded, and then we shall not know whether he is just for the sake of justice or for the sake of honours and rewards; therefore, let him be clothed in justice only, and have no other covering; and he must be imagined in a state of life the opposite of the former. Let him be the best of men, and let him be thought the worst; then he will have been put to the proof; and we shall see whether he will be affected by the fear of infamy and its consequences. And let him continue thus to the hour of death; being just and seeming to be unjust.

When both have reached the uttermost extreme, the one of justice and the other of injustice, let judgment be given which of them is the happier of the two.

From the reading...

“Now suppose there were just two magic rings...”

Related Ideas

Social Contract (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/soc-cont.htm>) *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A short summary of the history of social contract theory.

Prisoner's Dilemma (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma/>) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. An outstanding summary of a variety of characterizations of the philosophical and mathematical aspects of the dilemma.

Opening Pages of the The Selfish Gene (<http://www.world-of-dawkins.com/Dawkins/Works/Books/selfish-gene/>) *The World of Richard Dawkins: Evolution, Science, and Reason*. A short

excerpt from Richard Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene*, introducing the biology of egoism and altruism.



The Parthenon, Library of Congress

From the reading...

“For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice...”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Psychological egoism is the view that all persons, without exception, seek their own self-interest. Ethical egoism is the view that recognizes that perhaps not all persons seek their own self-interest but they should do so. Explain whether Glaucon’s account supports psychological hedonism or ethical egoism or both. Explain whether psychological egoism implies ethical egoism. Can you construct an unambiguous example of an action that could not possibly be construed to be a self-interested action? Would people always steal when the expected return greatly exceeds any expected penalty? You might want to consult such subjects as rational decision theory, the oft-termed

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- “Chicago school” economics, and psychological studies of the Prisoner’s Dilemma.
2. A closely related view to egoism is psychological hedonism: the presumption that all persons seek pleasure. If I go out of my way to help others, and it gives me pleasure to do so, am I necessarily acting as a psychological hedonist? Explain this apparent paradox. If psychological hedonism were true, would that imply that ethical hedonism is true? Ethical hedonism is the view that all persons *ought* to seek pleasure, even though some persons might not actually do so.
 3. Compare Glaucon’s account of the origin of covenants with the idea of the social contract described by Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau. Social contract theory holds that people in a society implicitly agree to abide by unwritten or written agreements among themselves because it is in their interest to do so. Does Glaucon presuppose an actual “state of nature” prior to the formation of covenants or is his account only a logical justification of mutual agreements?
 4. If human beings have a biological nature just as other living things have a nature, then what arguments can you propose that the nature of human beings is primarily social rather than individual? Aristotle wrote, “A man living outside of society is either a man or a beast.” In the language of Richard Dawkins, are our genes “selfish”? Do human genetic factors favor cooperation among the species? Do you think this question empirically resolvable?

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