

## IMMORALISM AND AMORALISM:

### THRASYMACHUS AND GLAUCON IN *REPUBLIC I – II*

THRASYMACHUS see justice as a piece of ideology, in this sense: a way of thinking that is ideological cannot survive a reflective understanding, and so suffers from a failure of transparency; engagement in it involves either pretence or delusion.

How are we to understand *Rep.* 343c3-5? ‘Justice and the just are what is really the other’s good – good for the stronger, the ruler – while for the one who obeys and follows, they are harm to himself’ (343c, after Griffith). Note how this confirms that Thrasymachus is not *defining* justice: even if ‘what is really the other’s good’ might be a *definiens*, ‘harm to himself’ could not possibly be. Compare: ‘Religion is the opium of the people’ – a deep truth, maybe, but not a definition of religion.

Yet there is a problem: it would seem evident that ‘the other’s good’ (*alotrion agathon*) and ‘good for the stronger, the ruler’ (*tou kreittonos te kai archontos sympheron*) aren’t equivalent, though Thrasymachus speaks as if they were. In the light of what Thrasymachus goes on to say within 343-4, there would seem to be two lines of interpretation:

(A) We might take Thrasymachus to be implicitly distinguishing legal from natural justice. Perhaps the legally just is what accords with the laws and thus, in fact, serves the interests of the lawgivers (338e1-4). Then the naturally just extends more widely: it is what serves another’s good – and so, within the perspective of the subject *qua* subject, broadly coincides with legal justice. One notes that Thrasymachus first, at 343d, describes how, in business dealings, which he *distinguishes* from dealings with one’s city, one just man comes off worse compared to another, and then, at 344a-c, describes the tyrant as the prototype of the *unjust* man (despite 338e2-4, noting that a tyranny passes tyrannical laws, so manifesting what is good for the ruler and defining what is good for his subjects). So there is reason to find him moving from one conception to a different one. The general story about an ideology might then be this: each of us, as a single individual, is bamboozled by the rest of us, as a collective.

(B) One might prefer to draw on a point made by Shorey *ad loc.* He compares the use of ‘really’ or ‘truly’ elsewhere (at 4.442a4-5 ‘truly’ intensifies ‘one’s own things’, i.e. the soul’s *own* work taken internally, while at 443d3 ‘really’ intensifies ‘what is one’s own’, i.e. one’s internal state), noting that it ‘marks the application of an image or familiar proverbial or technical expression or etymology’. That justice is *alotrion agathon* may be a commonplace, upon which Thrasymachus offers a theoretical gloss. It may confirm this that Aristotle is familiar with the idea as a commonplace: see *NE* 5.6.1134b5-6, ‘They say that justice is *alotrion agathon*’, referring back to 1130a3-5, where *dokei* appears. This may rather suggest that Thrasymachus may be re-interpreting the commonplace of *alotrion agathon* by his own concept *tou kreittonos sympheron*. Within 343d, he may suppose that a businessman who acts justly, and so benefits his city, is bound to gain less than a partner who simply benefits himself. And 344a-c may describe a *nouveau* tyrant who is acting within the context of (say) a democracy with democratic laws, and so not serving ‘the advantage of the established government’ (339a1, tr. Shorey).

GLAUCON imagines a pair of agents, of whom previously one was just and one unjust, whose power is ascribed on the model of the myth of Gyges to a magic ring bestowing invisibility. This now transports its possessors beyond human fallibility and individual impotence: both of them, just and unjust alike, will be unable now to refrain from breaking the rules of justice against adultery, murder, and the like (2.360b3-c5). Ringless, we have reason to be just, but only as a second-best: able to do wrong but liable to be wronged, we make a social contract that denies us both the advantages and the disadvantages of injustice (358e5-359a7). What is the denotation of 'justice' within this aetiology? It is the class or characteristic of actions that are permitted by the law (a3-4); its opposite is the legal category of forbidden wrongdoing or 'malum prohibitum'. However, there is a difficulty. We are told that it is naturally good to do wrong or act unjustly, and bad to be wronged or treated unjustly; with a minor oddity, the agreement is to forego both. Thus it appears that justice is an artificial virtue (as Hume was to conceive it), while injustice is a natural and pre-contractual concept. This is coherent, if injustice was already recognized as a possible quality of actions, and all that the contract added was agreement that it should not be practised.

Yet how in a state of nature was justice to be understood, and its extension grasped as a unity? Perhaps Glaucon offers an implicit gloss that defines justice outside the law: to remain just is to abstain from what belongs to others (360b5-6). Socrates will not disagree: justice is neither having what belongs to others, nor being deprived of one's own (4.433e7-11). Yet such remarks rather move within a moral circle than reduce the moral to the natural: it is equally apposite to say that what is my own is that of which it would be unjust to deprive me. We should rather suppose that it is retrospectively that the contract is motivated by fear of injustice *as such*: what existed before the contract was not resentment of injustice, but fear of acts of a kind *later* to be penalized as 'unjust'.

Plato has two grounds for rejecting this approach. Firstly, it does not work: the content of a virtue, or the range of actions that accord with it, cannot be explicated by a concrete rule of conduct, however complex. That the just is that which the law prescribes or permits (2.359a3-4) is only plausible if the law uses terms (like 'murder' and 'adultery') whose application depends upon a shared sense of justice.

Secondly, Glaucon's framework provides virtue with the wrong kind of justification. To show what he would prefer, he offers Socrates an exhaustive trichotomy of goods: (a) goods that we welcome for their own sake and not for their consequences, such as enjoyment, and harmless pleasures that only bring enjoyment; (b) goods that we welcome both for their own sake and for their consequences, such as understanding, sight, and health; (c) goods that we welcome only for their consequences, such as exercise, being healed, and doctoring or other money-making (357b4-d2). Socrates replies that he would place justice in class (b) (358a1-3). Otherwise, as soon becomes explicit, the value of justice becomes variable and contingent: get yourself a magic ring, and it evaporates. (That is fantasy, but reader's of Plato's *Crito* knew that a respect for justice can be fatal.) Glaucon initially speaks of justice as a practice (a5-6), but then as a state of soul: he wishes to hear what justice and injustice are, and what power each possesses in and of itself when it is present in the soul (b4-6, cf. 366e5-6). It becomes explicit that he is shifting his focus from its external to its internal operations when he asks how it acts upon its possessor (367b4, e3). The shift is motivated by his concern whether being just is a good thing to be. It suits Plato

more particularly, both anticipating what is to come, and recalling the most pregnant passage of Book 1: injustice occurring within an individual does not lose its power, but here too produces faction and enmity (1.351e6-352a3). This talk of how a state acts upon a thing ‘in and of itself’ can seem a contradiction in terms, asking about consequences even as it excludes consequences, and has provoked much discussion. One suggestion has been that Glaucon wants to set aside not natural but artificial consequences, excluding rewards and penalties that are attached to the appearance (2.367d4) but not psychological effects that attach to the reality; but this fails to fit, for strength and health are natural effects of taking exercise and receiving treatment, which are placed within category (c). We must rather suppose that injustice and enmity, justice and friendship, stand in an internal and necessary relation that helps to constitute what justice and injustice really *are* (in a manner in which strength does not define what it is to wrestle, nor health what it is to diet). Virtues and vices have real natures and not just verbal definitions; a true understanding of their nature, which is a prerequisite of a proper justification of their value (see 354b), will reveal what it is for them to take effect within a soul.

It may seem inconsistent of Glaucon to ask Socrates to praise justice in and of itself (358d1-2), to offer to praise injustice in the manner in which he wishes to hear the dispraise of injustice and the praise of justice (d3-6), and then to speak at length (within the fantasy of Gyges’ – or an ancestor’s – ring) about the consequences of injustice, e.g. winning the opposite reputation, presumably through deception or other ploys that pile injustice on injustice (361a7-b3). However, he must mean not that it is appropriate to praise justice and injustice in the same way, but that he wishes them both to be praised appropriately: he will play at recommending injustice instrumentally as emancipation from a negative constraint, while Socrates must succeed in recommending justice intrinsically as a positive ideal. The unjust refuse to let justice stand between themselves and what they want; the just want to be just.

Glaucon intensifies the contrast: he proposes that they compare the intrinsic value of justice with the maximal instrumental benefits of injustice, imagining that the unjust agent receives all the rewards merited by justice, and the just agent all the penalties merited by injustice (360e1-362c8). In supposing that it is better to be just but impaled than unjust and respected, he implicitly makes a further requirement of the motivations of just agents: they must not only value justice for its own sake, but take its value to trump all possibly conflicting values, in the sense that in cases of conflict it eclipses or silences them. Otherwise the demands of justice would be bound to be outweighed on occasion, however rarely, by other considerations. Injustice must be its own worst punishment.