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Philosophy 10

11-8-2010

Plato, *Republic*: Justice

In Book I of the *Republic*, Thrasymachus provides an account of justice stating that it is the advantage of the stronger. In Book II, Glaucon refuses to accept Thrasymachus' abandonment of the argument and divides the idea of "good" into three parts, defending injustice by arguing that justice is only good for its consequences. Glaucon then introduces two thought-experiments, the "ring of Gyges" and the "choice of lives," in an attempt to show that as long as one's reputation is not in jeopardy, one will have no desire to maintain his moral character.

The main point in Thrasymachus' account of justice in Book I argues that justice is nothing more than the advantage of the stronger. He argues that it does not pay to be just because, in doing so, one is only working to the advantage of another rather than himself. Furthermore, Thrasymachus argues that it is a person's natural inclination to try and out-do someone else, and whoever is successful in doing so, succeeds in becoming the better and happier person.

Because the value of justice must not only be defined but also proven to be good for its own sake as well as its consequences, Glaucon presents two thought-experiments where injustice appears to prevail, and asks Socrates to defend why one should act justly in each of the scenarios. The first theory presented is that of the "ring of Gyges," and tells how a ring found in the depths of a chasm has special invisibility powers. "If he turned the setting inward, he became invisible; if he turned it outward, he became visible again" (360A). Glaucon then proceeds to

hypothesize a scenario where if there were two such rings, one worn by the just person and the other by the unjust, that both people would travel down the path of injustice. He argues that in circumstances where justice is no longer a necessary means to that end, a person would choose to not be just. Glaucon goes on to say that this example provides “great proof that one is never just willingly but only when compelled to be” (360C), since it produces a desire to avoid suffering any injustice.

The second thought-experiment presented is the “choice of lives” theory. In this defense of injustice, Glaucon distinguishes between two lives: 1) the life of the most unjust person (someone who is unjust but believed by all to be just), and 2) the life of the most just person (someone who is just but believed by all to be unjust). Like the ring of Gyges, this thought-experiment shows that once one’s reputation is not in jeopardy, one will have no desire to maintain his moral character. Essentially, “(Justice) is to be practiced for the sake of the rewards and popularity that come from a reputation for justice, but is to be avoided because of itself as something burdensome” (358A). Each of these theories implies that people both lack the power to do anything but act justly and that they have “good reason to act as they do, for the life of an unjust person is, say, much better than that of a just one” (358C).

These theories are presented as a way of asking Socrates to prove the intrinsic value of justice to be greater than the value of any possible consequences of injustice. In order to do this, Socrates must show that “it is better in every way to be just than unjust” (357A) by proving that 1) justice has non-instrumental value, and 2) that non-instrumental value of justice is greater than any instrumental value injustice might have.

In an effort to assist Socrates in this defense of justice, Glaucon constructs a way of dividing goods into three main categories: 1) that which is good in itself, 2) that which is good in

itself and for its consequences, and 3) that which is good only for its consequences. Glaucon provides a defense of injustice by arguing that justice belongs in the third group, being good for only its consequences, leaving Socrates the challenge of showing that justice belongs in the second group, being good in itself and also for its consequences.

In the first type of good, that which is good in itself, is representational of a non-instrumental good. It is a good that is valuable independently of its consequences, “such as joy and all the other harmless pleasures that have no results beyond that joy of having them” (357B). These goods are welcomed not because we desire what comes from them, but rather for their own sake.

In the second type of good, that which is good in itself and for its consequences, is the strongest type of good in Glaucon’s construction. This type of good that is both good in itself and its consequences is considered to be both instrumental and non-instrumental. It is a good that is desirable both for its own sake and for what is received by it such as knowledge, sight, health, etc.

The third type of good, that which is good only for its consequences, is a strictly instrumental good. It involves things like physical fitness and medical treatment when sick, goods that are only performed for the benefit of what they can bring. These goods would not be chosen for their own sakes, as illustrated in the first two categories, but rather “for the sake of the rewards and other things that come from them” (357C).

Because Socrates had failed in Book I to provide an accurate account of Justice to Thrasymachus, Glaucon and his brother Adeimantus pick up in Book II, asking Socrates, again, to try and show that justice is a dominant good. By offering illustrations of thought-experiments, such as the “ring of Gyges” and the “choice of lives” theories, as well as providing a division of

goods, the brothers are able to show Socrates what claims about justice he needs to make in order to be able to provide to them the sort of defense of justice that they are asking for.