

The Myth of Gyges Revisited

Can be taken two ways:

Shows that when the individual is isolated from consequences, there is no reason to be moral

Plato thinks the Myth does display something significant about the reasons to be moral, but that G & A have drawn the wrong conclusion. He thinks it:

Shows that morality cannot be understood by looking at the individual in isolation from other individuals. Morality is a byproduct of the relationships among individuals, and the myth of Gyges shows us that if we, by a thought experiment, remove the individual from all relation to others, we thereby remove him/her from a context which makes a sense of conscience possible and necessary.

Based on this reinterpretation of the thought experiment, Plato suggests that we must look at how individuals are related in a society in order to understand what it is to be moral. In this thought experiment, he notices an initial fact about human relations: we cannot do everything by ourselves, but need others to satisfy our basic needs. This is the fact about human life which generates the possibility of morality in the state. Without this relational need for each other, there would be no basis for this possibility. If we look at these relations, then, we see one outstanding fact: the best community results from a division of labor in which each individual does what he/she does best, and nothing else. This, in turn, is based on the claim that no individual does more than one thing with equal excellence. Further inspection shows that the state has need for three types of individuals: producers, auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (philosopher kings). These each correspond to functional needs of the state: the first group satisfies basic needs of individuals; the second group protects the community from foreign martial assault; the third group, by understanding the basic principle of "each man does what he does best" and why it represents the best model of communal life, and the truth about reality in other respects (since its speciality is knowledge of the broadest, highest kind), guides all the rest (and they need guidance, since each part is more or less ignorant of the rest, and properly so, Plato thinks).

Justice in the State is, then, a relationship among the three kinds of individuals, each corresponding to the satisfaction of the three basic needs of individuals living communally. This relationship is one in which each individual does what he/she does best and leaves to others what they do best, and this "from each according to his ability" principle applies equally to the relationship among the three classes. A just society results when this principle is observed both individually and collectively.

Now we have the rest of the puzzle resolved when we learn how Plato justifies the claim that what is justice in the individual is analogous to what is justice in the state. This requires him to prove that the individual has parts which are in necessary relations to each other, relations which must obey the same principle "from each according to her ability". If he shows this, he has established the plausibility of the analogy. His proof: Handout #5.

Where we are:

Plato has met Glaucon's challenge (myth of Gyges) by showing that justice in the state is not merely a name for the rule under law (social contract) by which the weak protect themselves against harm from the strong, but rather is the name for the proper division of labor in a system of interdependence

which is natural for human beings, and which generates the basis for the moral distinction between good and bad in the state (good=healthy community, bad=unhealthy community).

Two things remain to be shown:

1) Plato must respond to Glaucon's other challenge (why isn't it better to seem just than to be just: isn't it better, in terms of outcomes for the individual, to be an undiscovered thief than Socrates drinking the hemlock?):

a) establish that the soul has three parts (see below) and that health in the soul arises when the three parts are arranged with reason in charge of spirit and appetite. The thief is now unbalanced internally, and this is bad regardless what he/she manages to acquire by way of external rewards....an unbalanced individual cannot function as well as a balanced one (so one actually cannot be an excellent thief and achieve excellence in the soul).

2) Plato must show that the analogy between justice in the state and justice in the individual is correct:

a) need a proof that the soul has 3 parts, corresponding to the 3 types of human beings (the "conflict of motives" argument)

b) the properties of the three kinds of human beings must correspond to those of the three parts of the soul (Plato's argument for this claim: these properties of the state are derived from the properties of individuals, and therefore they must not only correspond, but be entirely congruent with each other [Book IV, 434-435]).

The Proof for the 3-Part Soul Chapter 13, Book IV, Republic

(i) the same thing can [never] act or be acted upon in two opposite ways, or be two opposite things, at the same time, in respect of the same part of itself, and in relation to the same object.

(ii) People are sometimes both thirsty and unwilling to drink (thirst is inhibited).

(iii) People can desire something by which they are simultaneously disgusted (Leontius and the executed criminals).

(iv) People can feel indignant at unjust treatment and yet cease their pursuit of justice under the influence of their capacity for reflection (Book IV, 440).

∴ Given (i) and (ii), people must have at least two parts, one associated with thirst (appetite), one associated with the inhibition of thirst (reflection...reason).

∴ Given (i) and (iii), people must have at least two parts, one associated with desire (appetite), one associated with moral indignation (the "spirited part").

∴ Given (i) and (iv), people must have at least two parts, one associated with moral indignation (the spirited part) and one associated with reflection (reason).

∴ Given these conclusions, there must be three parts to the soul: one associated with appetite, one associated with moral indignation, one associated with reflection/reason.

Plato's argument that it is worse for the criminal to be a criminal is contained in Chapter 14, Book IV of the Republic. There he shows that justice in the individual is a specific kind of harmony of the three parts of the soul (with the reasonable part guiding the other two according to the knowledge which is available to it). Right behavior necessarily follows from this state of harmony (since it involves putting the moral will and appetites in service of reason, which is capable of detecting the Good). If, indeed, a criminal is in a state of injustice, this means he/she is in a state of internal discord. This discord is

obviously not preferable to the state of harmony (any more than disease is preferable to health). So, the reason it is better to be Socrates awaiting the hemlock than a successful political thief who has pulled the wool over everyone's eyes is that to behave in the former manner is to have a harmonized soul, whereas to live in the latter way is to be at odds with oneself (not just with one's society).