

ON THE LOVE OF JUSTICE: A RESPONSE TO GLAUCON

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The best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just. That, at any rate, is the thesis for which Glaucon argues in the first few pages of Book II of *The Republic*.¹ Glaucon is, of course, playing devil's advocate. He hopes (and fully expects) that Socrates will be able find a fatal flaw in his argument and, moreover, eventually demonstrate that his thesis itself is false. After a few words from Glaucon's brother Adeimantus, Socrates takes up his task. Finally, seven or eight books later, Glaucon and the rest are satisfied that indeed, despite Glaucon's argument, the best life of all is that of the just person.

The better part of Glaucon's argument to the conclusion that the best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just consists in an attack on the supposed usefulness of committing oneself to justice in securing the things one wants in life. Glaucon argues convincingly that acting justly is not as efficient a way of realizing one's goals as people seem to think it is. Indeed, for the smart and resourceful, it is a seriously inefficient way. But the thought that acting justly is instrumentally valuable is only one sort of reason a person could have for forming a commitment to justice; one might also form a commitment to justice out of an attraction to justice itself, out of a love of justice for its own sake. Glaucon concentrates his fire on the supposed usefulness of justice rather than on the love of justice for its own sake, for he doubts that anyone actually is committed to justice out of a love of it for its own sake.

We will begin our discussion with Glaucon's main argument, the argument that acting justly is an inefficient way to realize one's goals. Later we will examine the grounds of Glaucon's doubts that anyone loves justice for its own sake. We will find that Glaucon is right that only a fool would commit himself to justice in the hope that being just will best serve his interests; but we will also show that Glaucon has given little reason to think that no one is committed to being just out of a love of justice for its own sake. For all Glaucon has said, then, and even before Socrates begins his response, the issue whether the best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just is still open.

I

The only point to being committed to justice, to doing the just thing out of principle, Glaucon proposes, lies in the effects that come to one from acting justly. These effects include being honoured by others and being respected and trusted by them. Being honoured by others is something that one can love for its own sake. Being respected and trusted by others might also be things one can love for their own sakes, but in any case they are of great instrumental value in our dealings with others. A person respected or trusted by others will, in his dealings with others, be taken at his word without being

investigated or required to stake much collateral. Further, acting justly encourages others to act justly, and one might come to benefit from their just acts. Finally, in acting justly one promotes peace and happiness in one's community, and it is easier to pursue and enjoy one's good in a peaceful and happy community than it is in a strife-torn and rancorous one. Now the good life, the life worth living, is the life spent enjoying those things that one loves for their own sakes, whatever those things are. Since the effects of acting justly are either already things one loves for their own sakes or are things instrumentally valuable in the pursuit of things one loves for their own sakes, the effects of acting justly are clearly worth pursuing. And so, it would seem, a commitment to doing the just thing out of principle is a basis from which to live a good life.

But the effects of acting justly, Glaucon notes, come to one not in virtue of any real commitment to justice that one might have, but only from one's having among one's fellows the reputation for being just. One can have a reputation for being just, and, thereby, enjoy both honour and the benefits of being respected and trusted while living in a peaceful, happy community, without actually committing oneself to being just; without actually forswearing injustice in those cases in which injustice would be to one's advantage overall. Moreover, without a reputation for being just, one will certainly fail to receive the benefits of acting justly, even if one in fact is just, even if one is deeply committed to justice. The unjust person with a reputation for justice is as well honoured, respected, and trusted as is any truly just person, while a truly just person lacking a reputation for justice is scorned and despised. What we are wise to seek, then, in our quest for the good life, is merely the reputation for justice.

Still, one might think, though being just is neither necessary nor sufficient for having a reputation for justice, being just—that is, being deeply committed to doing the just thing—is an efficient way to secure for oneself a reputation for being just. And, thus, one might say to Glaucon, that in order to increase the chances that she will acquire a reputation for justice, the wise person will, after all, commit herself to justice.

In what, though, Glaucon asks, does a commitment to justice consist? What are the costs of having this commitment? A person committed to being just—that is, a truly just person—is a person who, as a matter of principle, abstains from using certain means by which to attain those things that she loves for their own sakes. She does not use lies or trickery in pursuing her ends, nor does she pursue an end if pursuing it or attaining it threatens to harm the common good or to diminish the general happiness. She does not use unjust means even when they are the most efficient means to some specific end she values and her using them puts at risk none of her other ends. To have a commitment to justice, then, it seems, is at least potentially to tie one's hands behind one's back in the pursuit of those things one loves for their own sakes. On the other hand, the unjust person uses whatever are, overall, the best means at his disposal, without scruple. The unjust person will use just or unjust means, whichever he judges all things considered to be best in his general pursuit of the good life. Glaucon's conclusion is that the costs to one's own good of being just are potentially very great. Thus, the wise person will commit herself to being just as a strategy for acquiring a reputation for justice only if she judges that without such a commitment she will tend to underestimate the risks of using unjust means and, thereby, eventually come to grief. Otherwise, she will cultivate a reputation for justice while maintaining a readiness to do the unjust thing whenever she judges that doing the unjust thing will promote her living the good life.

Thus, Glaucon concludes, the best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just. Yes, a person aware in a cool moment that in the heat of battle he is a poor judge of risks and benefits would be wise to commit himself to justice, but only because he is likely to make a mess of it were he to attempt to live the best life of all. Such a person is by temperament debarred from living the best life of all. Anyone of sound practical judgement in both cool and hot moments, though, would be wise to divest himself of whatever commitment to justice he has, to show it the door and instruct it never to return.

Again, a central premise of this argument is that the only point to being committed to justice, to doing the just thing habitually or out of principle, lies in the effects of doing the just thing. This premise implies that a commitment to justice can at best have instrumental value. Given this premise, Glaucon's argument is, it would seem, unassailable. The best life of all is that of the unjust person whom people believe to be just, though only resourceful and intelligent people can live such a life. But should we accept that central premise? Let us turn to Glaucon's defence of his central premise.

II

Glaucon's argument to his final conclusion, that the best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just, begins a little after the passage in which he relates the story of the ancestor of Gyges, the King of Lydia at the time of the action of *The Republic*. That story introduces a thought experiment, from which Glaucon draws the lesson that the only point to committing oneself to justice, to habitually doing the just thing, lies in the effects of doing the just thing. This lesson becomes a central premise in Glaucon's argument to his final conclusion.

The only point to being committed to justice, to doing the just thing out of principle, lies in the effects that come to one from doing justice. In endorsing this premise, Glaucon is denying that the point of being committed to justice ever resides simply in one's commitment to justice itself. That is to say, Glaucon denies that anyone actually loves justice for its own sake, that anyone directly finds joy or satisfaction or contentment or fulfilment in doing the just thing, that anyone's principled commitment to justice is an expression of a love of justice for its own sake. Glaucon holds instead that a person's commitment to justice is always simply a commitment to use a certain tool in his pursuit of his good. Glaucon argues that for the intelligent and talented person, a principled commitment to justice is an inefficient and wasteful tool for that end.

A person who instead loves justice for its own sake, who finds joy or satisfaction or contentment or fulfilment in acting justly, and in seeing or hearing that justice was done, were there any such person, might well, then, be wise to commit himself to justice. A good life is a life spent pursuing and enjoying the things one loves for their own sakes, and if one loves justice for its own sake, wisdom might well recommend that one pursue and enjoy justice as part of one's good life. Let us, then, see why Glaucon denies that anyone loves justice for its own sake.

The story of the ancestor of Gyges prepares us for Glaucon's defence of his contention that no one loves justice for its own sake. The ancestor of Gyges was a simple shepherd, as upstanding and righteous as it is possible for a man of humble station and limited responsibilities to be. After acquiring a ring that made him invisible, and, as such, invincible in his pursuit of his good, this erstwhile upstanding man killed the King of Lydia, seduced the Queen, and made the kingdom his own. Glaucon's

contention here is that the ancestor of Gyges was no lover of justice for its own sake, even when he was at his most just. Instead, he was committed to justice prior to acquiring the ring simply out of a sense that being just is useful to a person lacking power.

Having told this story, Glaucon invites us to imagine two people, one presently committed to justice, the other not, both of whom, like the ancestor of Gyges, become invincible in their pursuit of whatever they love for its own sake. Glaucon tells us that each will behave badly, the person formerly committed to justice as well as the person not committed to it. That the person formerly committed to justice would behave unjustly in this new situation shows, Glaucon says, that he was committed to justice merely as a policy by which he sought to secure his advantage, and not as an expression of his love of it for its own sake. Had he actually been committed to justice out of love of it for its own sake, he would not have abandoned his commitment once his circumstances changed. Perhaps he would have used his invincibility to serve justice more frequently and vigorously. The lesson Glaucon would draw from his thought experiment is that in our world, a world in which we are not invincible in our pursuit of advantage, the just man and the unjust man do not differ in what they love, but merely in their beliefs about how best to pursue and maintain what in fact they do love.

One thing unsatisfying about both the story of the ancestor of Gyges and the thought experiment it introduces is that the lesson to be drawn from it can be nothing more than that in fact no one does love justice for its own sake. Glaucon cannot and does not suppose that the lesson is that no one *could* love justice for its own sake. Neither the story nor the thought experiment gives us any explanation as to why no one loves justice for its own sake. And without any explanation, we are in the dark as to whether it is impossible for a person to love justice for its own sake. Certainly Glaucon would be in a better position to argue for the foolishness of commitment to justice were he to hold that it is impossible to love justice for its own sake. But nothing he says entitles him to the stronger contention that justice cannot be loved for its own sake, and nothing he says indicates that he thinks he is entitled to it.

III

Is Glaucon right to draw the lesson that he does from the story of the ancestor of Gyges, that no one loves justice for its own sake? It's easy, and perhaps in the end entirely appropriate, to charge Glaucon with generalizing much too hastily. Of course some people now committed to justice would drop their commitment were their circumstances to change, but the fact that one or another would does not by itself enable us to generalize to the conclusion that all would. The story of the ancestor of Gyges can be parried by other fantastic stories, that of the young Clark Kent, for instance, who decides to use his invincibility to fight evil. No doubt there are actual people who become powerful but continue to serve justice faithfully (that they are not invincible diminishes their relevance to the issue, of course). But maybe the charge of hasty generalization is not to the point Glaucon means to make. Glaucon's thought experiment answers the response to the story of the ancestor of Gyges that the ancestor's behaviour can be taken to show that he really wasn't originally committed to justice at all. It is simply stipulated in the thought experiment that the formerly just man *was* deeply committed to justice before acquiring invincibility. Now that Glaucon has drawn his lesson from the thought experiment, it is up to those who reject that lesson to explain why this or that other good man would not go bad were he to become invincible. After all, we all see the attractions of going bad, and it is entirely plausible that the originally

just man in Glaucon's thought experiment would behave just as Glaucon says he would were he to become invincible in his pursuit of his good.

So let us set aside the objection that Glaucon generalizes from too small a sample, and suppose instead that Glaucon has placed the burden of proof on the shoulders of those who think that one or another just man who comes to be shielded from the unwanted consequences of acting unjustly would continue to be just. Let us accept that the just man Glaucon imagines would become unjust were his circumstances to change. What we now need to understand is why we should think that the man formerly committed to justice who abandons his commitment in changed circumstances was originally committed to justice only as an instrument to further his ends, and not out of a love of justice for its own sake. Glaucon can draw his lesson from his thought experiment only by assuming that if a person loves justice for its own sake, he will not abandon his love should his circumstances change. Only under that assumption can losing a commitment under a change of circumstance indicate that the commitment was not held for its own sake. For Glaucon, love is not love which alters when its alteration finds. Is this assumption warranted?

There are good reasons for thinking it isn't warranted. We all love many things for their own sakes, many different things, and our love of one thing can easily in one or another circumstance interfere with our expression of our love of another thing. We arrange the things around us as far as we can to enable us to pursue activities in which we take joy or satisfaction, and, if we are lucky, we manage to impose (as John Dewey put it) a working harmony on our diverse desires so that in our situations we can satisfy as many of the ones most important to us as possible. Sally loves philosophy, she loves playing tennis, she loves what she has made of her apartment, and she loves her child. Her various loves engender various commitments, commitments that then engender the actions through which she expresses her loves. Her commitments, of course, are structured according to her circumstances, both material and emotional, such that she can keep to a minimum the conflicts and tensions that arise among them. But were her circumstances to change, so too might her current levels of commitment to each of her loves. Were her child to become ill, or were Donald Davidson scheduled to give a series of lectures at the local university, or were she to come into enough money to buy a house, her various commitments would change. That Sally would come to be less committed to one thing under a change in circumstance does not mean that she had always been committed to it merely as a device to secure some other good. No, she was committed to it out of love, but now that things are different she has come to love it less.

We can also imagine Sally coming to be indifferent or worse toward something that she previously loved for its own sake. Sally might discover music or history, and through pursuing her new love come eventually to find that she no longer enjoys philosophy. The joy or satisfaction that her pursuit of music now brings her makes her wonder how she ever found thin and pale philosophy attractive. But that she now no longer loves philosophy does not mean that she in fact didn't earlier love it for its own sake.

Our loves, of course, and thereby the commitments they support, are resistant to changes in our circumstances. We do not easily become indifferent to something that we love; we do not even easily come to love it less. Certainly our willingness to reduce our level of commitment to something or to abandon it speaks to the strength with which we love that to which our commitment is in service. But

when the things around us change drastically, often so too do the intensities of our passions, and sometimes the love we had for something dissipates completely. A man who loves justice for its own sake can very well love many other things for their own sakes, and, when it is suddenly possible for him to satisfy his passions for these other things if only he would lose his love of justice, he might very well lose his love of justice. Glaucon is wrong, then, to think that the fact that the just man in his thought experiment becomes unjust implies that he really didn't originally love justice for its own sake. Perhaps the ancestor of Gyges was not originally any lover of justice, as Glaucon infers, but perhaps he was, and then his new-found power to secure other things he loved corrupted and destroyed that love.

IV

Glaucon's argument that the best life is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just rests on the premise that no one loves justice for its own sake. That premise is the lesson Glaucon draws from the story of the ancestor of Gyges and the thought experiment that follows it. But that lesson can be drawn only if it is true that a person's willingness to abandon a commitment in changed circumstances indicates that that commitment is not an expression of the person's love of the thing for its own sake. Since we have good reason to think that a person's willingness to abandon a commitment is not inevitably a sign that that commitment is merely of instrumental significance to that person, we must conclude that Glaucon is not entitled to the premise that no one loves justice for its own sake.

Still, Glaucon has shown that for anyone clever, powerful and resourceful, and who is indifferent to justice for its own sake, wisdom counsels that he not commit himself to being just. Or at least we have found no flaw in this part of his argument. What that means is that one can be wise to adopt a commitment to justice only if one is possessed of a love of justice for its own sake.

Of course, nothing we have said implies that anyone *does* love justice for its own sake. We can conclude at this point only that Glaucon has gone no distance toward showing that no one loves justice for its own sake. To go any further, we will have to construct arguments of our own. One reason for thinking it perfectly possible for a person to love justice for its own sake is that humans seem capable of loving just about anything for its own sake. The love of justice for its own sake, even if it is a rare and fragile love, is no more strange or perplexing than many other loves. There seems, in any case, to be plenty of evidence that many people do love justice for its own sake. That a person is shocked by news of injustice far away, and made indignant by that injustice though it will have no effect on her fortunes, speaks to her love of justice for its own sake. So does her joy and satisfaction on hearing that justice has prevailed. A person's feelings of shame at failing to do the just thing, or of regret when she judges that some unjust thing is the best thing for her to do, are well explained by supposing that she cares to do the just thing independently of its consequences. And, of course, the fact is that many people have often themselves done, or accepted that others do, the just thing when the just thing was contrary to their other interests. All of this evidence strongly indicates that justice is loved by some people for its own sake. It might be possible to explain this evidence away. But to explain it away, one would need some general argument that people do not love justice for its own sake. We have dealt with one such argument, and found it seriously wanting. It is hard to imagine what another argument to that conclusion could look like. Until we possess a cogent argument that no one loves justice for its own sake, we are well entitled to presume that at least some of us do love it for its own sake.

That is not the end of the matter, though. Another profound issue now confronts us. Though it is possible for a person to love justice for its own sake, as we have concluded against Glaucon, it might nonetheless be foolish of him to do so; if he in fact loves justice for its own sake, it might be wise of him to try to lose that love, just as it might be wise of a person to try to lose her love of gambling or fried foods or independence. Glaucon might in the end be right that the best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just, though not for the reasons he gives. But that is an issue for another occasion.²

Notes

- 1 Plato, *The Republic*, translated by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 358c (p. 34).
- 2 I thank Sophie Beaulé, Stephen Haller, and John MacKinnon for their help.