

## Republic (Plato)

Excerpts for PHI 14 (Eliot) Fall 2017

This is an excerpt of Book 2 Chapter 3 of *Republic*. We begin in the middle of a conversation. The main speaker in this section, from the beginning, is named Glaucon. Here he is speaking to Socrates. Socrates also briefly speaks, and he is the narrator. Glaucon and Socrates were both real people, but this dialogue is fictional, invented by Plato.

“And now listen to what I said I would talk about first: what justice is and where it comes from. You see, people do say that to commit an injustice is naturally good, while to be the victim of it is bad. Yet being wronged is much more of a bad thing than committing wrong is a good thing. The result of this is that whenever people wrong each other and are also victims of wrong and have a taste of both sides, those who are unable to avoid the one or achieve the other believe that it is in their interest to make a mutual agreement with each other not to do anything wrong to each other. From this basis they begin to make laws and covenants with each other, and they give the terms ‘legal’ and ‘just’ to what is laid down by the law.

“This is indeed the origin and essence of justice, lying between what is best: to commit wrong with impunity, and what is worst: not being able to get revenge when wronged. So justice, being midway between these two, is welcomed not as a good thing, but is valued through our being too weak to commit an injustice. For anyone who had the power to do wrong and was a real man would never make a compact with anybody not to inflict injustice on each other: he would be mad to do so. Therefore, Socrates, the nature of justice is just such as this, and this is how it originated, as the argument goes.

“We would most effectively grasp the point that people who practice justice do so because they are unable to commit injustice, if we were to explore the following idea. Imagine giving to each of them, the just and the unjust, the power to do whatever they wish, and then following each of them, watching where their desire leads them. We should then catch the just person red-handed, going after the same thing as the unjust man. [Both go after something that] everyone naturally pursues as a good thing because of his greed, but is forcibly deflected from by the law into respect for equality.

“The ability I am talking about is particularly like the kind which would come from having the power which they say was once possessed by the ancestor of Gyges the Lydian. They say that he was a shepherd in the service of the then ruler of Lydia, and when a heavy shower of rain came on together with an earthquake, the ground opened up, creating a chasm in the place where he was tending his flock. Amazed at the sight, he climbed down and among the marvels there—the sort they make fables about—he saw a bronze horse which was hollow and had small openings in it. Peeping through these, he saw a corpse inside which appeared to be of more than human size. It had nothing else on but a gold ring on its finger, which he took off and then climbed out.

Plato was born in Athens about 427 B.C.E. He wrote *Republic* about 380 B.C.E. This version was translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy. The full text is available through Hofstra Library as an eBook, so if you'd like to see the parts I've left out and footnotes I've deleted, look there.

“When the time came for the shepherds’ regular meeting to make their monthly report to the king about the flocks, he also attended wearing the ring. Now while seated with the others he happened to twist the setting of the ring toward himself, to the inside of his hand; at this he became invisible to those sitting by him and they spoke about him as if he had gone away. He was amazed and, feeling the ring again, he turned the setting outward and became visible. He pondered this and experimented with the ring to see if it actually had this power, and he found that this was the case: if he turned the setting inward he became invisible, outward and he became visible again. As soon as he became aware of this, he immediately arranged to become one of the messengers who went to the king, and when he got there he seduced his wife and with her help attacked the king, killed him and took possession of his kingdom.

“Now if there should exist two such rings, and the just person were to put on one and the unjust person the other, nobody, it could be supposed, could have such an iron will as to stick to justice and have the strength to resist taking other people’s property, while at the same time being capable even of taking from the marketplace whatever he wanted with impunity. He could go into houses and seduce anyone he pleased, kill and release from prison whomever he liked, and in all other matters behave like a god among humans. In acting thus, the behavior of neither would differ in any way from the other. Both would take the same course.

“And indeed, one would say that this is firm evidence that no one is voluntarily just, but only under compulsion. Justice is thought to give no personal benefit, since in any circumstances where an individual thinks he will be able to get away with being unjust, he is so. That there is far more personal profit in injustice than in justice is what every man believes, and rightly so, as the person putting forward this sort of argument will maintain, because if a person who had this sort of opportunity within his grasp should be unwilling ever to behave unjustly or seize the possessions of others, he would be regarded as most wretched and foolish by those who observed him, although in front of each other they would commend him, deceiving one another for fear of being treated unjustly themselves. So this covers that point.

“But to come now to the distinction itself concerning the life of those we are talking about, if we distinguish between the most just man and the most unjust, we shall be able to make a correct judgment, but if not, then we can’t. In what then lies the distinction? It’s this: let us take away nothing from the injustice of the unjust person, nor from the justice of the just person, but take each to be perfect in his own way of life. First, then, the unjust person: let him operate as clever professionals do—for example, as a first-rate navigator or doctor—who clearly distinguish what is and is not possible in their art, and attempt the former but leave the latter alone. Then, too, if they ever make any mistake, they are capable of correcting it. Similarly, let the unjust person going about his wrongdoing in keeping with his character escape

detection in his wrongdoing, if he is going to be thoroughly unjust. The person who is caught must be considered a bungler, for the height of injustice is to seem just when you are not.

“So we must grant the completely unjust person the most absolute injustice, and not deprive him of any of it, but allow the wrongdoer to obtain for himself the greatest reputation for justice by doing the greatest wrong, and if he should slip up at all, to be capable, through his courage, strength, and the backing of friends and material resources, of correcting his mistake and of arguing to persuade people, if any of his injustices come to light; and to use force when force is needed.

“Having set the unjust person up as this sort of character, let us in turn place the just person by his side in the argument: a straightforward, high-minded man who, to quote Aeschylus,<sup>1</sup> ‘wants not to seem to be good, but to be’ good. Now we must take away the outward appearance; for if he is going to be reputed just, he will have the honors and gifts this sort of reputation bestows on him, and then it will be unclear whether he has such a character because of his justice, or because of his gifts and honors. Indeed let him be stripped of everything except his justice and be made exactly the opposite of the unjust person we imagined before; although doing no wrong, let him have a reputation for the greatest injustice so that he may be thoroughly tested for his justice by his not weakening in the face of ill-repute and all that goes with it. But let him hold an unalterable course until death: although he is really just, let him be regarded as unjust throughout his life, so that, when both have reached the ultimate of justice and injustice respectively, we may judge which of them is the happier.”

“That’s fantastic! Glaucon,” I said,<sup>2</sup> “how vigorously you’re polishing up each of your two men as if they were sculptures entered for a competition!”

“I’m doing my best,” he replied. “If they are both as I have described them, I don’t think there will be any further difficulty in developing our discussion about the sort of life that awaits each of them. So, we must discuss that. Moreover, if my account is delivered in a somewhat uncouth manner, don’t think that it is me speaking, Socrates, but those who commend injustice over justice. What they will say is that, such being his character, the just person will be whipped, stretched on the rack and imprisoned, his eyes will be burned out and finally, after suffering every evil, he will be impaled on a stake, and come to realize that not to be just, but to seem just is what one must aim for.

“So the saying I quoted from Aeschylus would be more correctly applied to the unjust person. In reality they will say that the unjust person, inasmuch as he is pursuing something that relates to the truth and is not living with an eye on his reputation, does not want to seem to be unjust but to be unjust:

harvesting the deep furrow throughout his mind,  
from which spring valuable resolutions,

first, by holding office in the city because he is thought to be just, secondly by

<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus grew up in Greece as a grape-farmer and distinguished himself as a soldier in several major battles, while winning more prizes for his tragic plays than any other writer.

<sup>2</sup> This is Socrates speaking, briefly.

marrying into any family he wishes, marrying off his children to whomever he wishes, joining up in business with anyone he likes. And in all this he is helped to gain advantage by the fact that he does not have any scruples about committing injustice. And so, by engaging in lawsuits, private and public, he wins and gets the better of his enemies, and this enables him to become rich and do good to his friends and harm to his enemies. He will make sacrifices and dedicate votive offerings to the gods on an appropriately magnificent scale, and do service to the gods and any humans he wishes far more effectively than the just person, so that it is reasonable to suppose that he is also more loved by the gods than the just person. Thus they say, Socrates, that a better life has been provided by gods and men for the unjust than for the just person."