

History of Social Thought

Assignment #3 on Plato's *Republic*

Due one day after we finish discussing it in class, with one week's grace before your grade is lowered for lateness.

Plato's *Republic*

Don't be confused. There are ten homework questions that you need to answer. They are numbered and appear in boldface below. Any other questions in the text below are either answered or will be to set up the homework questions that call for a written response, i.e., (1) = (10).

What is justice? Is it honesty in word and deed, as Cephalus argues? Is it helping friends and harming enemies, as Polemarchus argues? Is it the advantage of the stronger, as Thrasymachus argues? Your reading encompasses these three answers, and Socrates' response. Another question is taken up in the Prologue and Book II as well. It asks this question: Is injustice more profitable than justice? The classic formulation of this question comes in the form of the story of the ring of Gyges, put to Socrates by Plato's brother Glaucon. It goes as follows:

"There was once a shepherd named Gyges in the service of the ruler of Lydia. There was a giant thunderstorm, and an earthquake broke open the ground and created a chasm at the place where he was tending his sheep. Seeing this, he was filled with amazement and went down into it. And there he saw a hollow bronze horse. There were window-like openings in it, and peeking in, he saw a corpse wearing nothing but a gold ring on his finger. So he took the ring and came out of the chasm."

"He wore the ring at his usual monthly meeting that reported to the king on the state of the flocks. And as he was sitting among the others, he happened to turn the setting of the ring towards himself, to the inside of the hand. And when he did this, he became invisible. So he experimented with the ring to test whether it indeed had this power, and it did. If he turned the setting inward, he became invisible, and if he turned it outward, he became visible again."

"When he realized this, he arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. And when he arrived there, he seduced the king's wife, with her help, attacked and killed the king, and took over the kingdom."

Now, why does Glaucon tell this story? He does it to prove that if we could get away with acting unjustly, that is exactly what we would do. And, when we act in conformity with the moral code of our society, we do so because we lack the power to do otherwise, i.e., because we fear the punishment of society. We act justly because we have no other

choice, not because justice is valuable in itself. This, of course, is exactly the opposite of what Plato believes. If Glaucon is to be believed, people act justly *unwillingly*, and the only reason they act justly/conform to the laws of morality is because of *what other people think of them*, not because acting justly has an intrinsic value.

(1) The first part of your homework assignment is to buttonhole three people you know, tell them the story of the ring of Gyges, make sure they understand it, and get their response. The story is asserting that if people had the chance, they would take advantage of invisibility to commit unjust (is it easier to think in terms of “criminal”?) acts. Given the opportunity – with no consequences attached, what would people do? Glaucon certainly believes they would use their invisibility to seduce and steal, if not rape and pillage. At the very least, perhaps, they would sneak into a corporate boardroom, listen in on “insider” information about what a company was going to do, and place a “sure” bet in the stock market. In other words, at the very least, they would use their invisibility to rig their own stock trades. Having gotten rich on insider trading, would they be satisfied to sit back and obey the law, or would they go for more – settling grudges, rigging elections, etc. Once you get an answer from the people you have buttonholed, ask them why they think folks would act as they say they would. If your respondents claim that some folks would resist the temptation, ask them how many people out of 100 they think would be able to resist, and why? And, of course, if they think that there are those who would resist temptation, ask them why they think these just people act justly.

A second part of Glaucon’s argument is that people act justly out of fear of punishment or fear of loss of reputation, not because they believe that justice is inherently, absolutely right. To get at this point Glaucon tells another story, the story of the inversion, in which someone who acts justly is perceived as acting unjustly and vice versa. Would you continue to behave in accord with the standards of morality if the opposite reputation attached to you? **(2) Think of a time when something you did for just or ethical reasons was misinterpreted. What you did was seen as unjust or unethical. How did that make you feel? How important was it to you to be understood correctly? Was it enough for you just to know that you had done the right thing even when no one else thought you had?**

Here’s another example, exploring the implications of Glaucon’s challenge to Socrates/Plato. Imagine yourself on a beach in summer. There are lots of people around. Your daughter is playing in the waves some distance away when a large wave comes in, knocks her over, and she begins to struggle. There is no lifeguard on the beach, but next to you is a healthy-looking young man who is, you have observed, an excellent swimmer. He sees your daughter in trouble in the water at almost the same time you do. After a moment, he gets up from his towel, runs into the water, and with some effort rescues your daughter, to adulation and applause. By chance, the rescue is even caught by numerous onlookers with cell phones and goes viral on social media. **(3) Here’s the question:**

Does it matter to you whether or not he rushed into the water to save your daughter because he believed it was the right thing to do, or because he would have been embarrassed and lost “reputation” if he had not? Okay, you’re going to be grateful to him in either case, but would you value what he did more if he saw it as his moral duty than if he was just too embarrassed to stay on his towel or pretend he didn’t see your daughter struggling? Briefly explain your answer.

Would it surprise you to know that a psychologist working today has put Glaucon’s questions to the test? Daniel Batson, a psychologist at the University of Kansas, conducted a series of experiments getting at how people behave when they think they are not being observed. [Is the aim of people to be moral, or is it the aim of people merely to appear to be so?] Batson was particularly interested in how people construed their actions to themselves, and what factors, if any, led them to behave better. Without getting into the details of his experiments, which I invite you to do on your own, Batson concluded from his empirical data that what people care about is seeming to be moral, and not, in fact, acting in a way that is fair. In eight out of ten to nine out of ten cases, people, given the chance to represent to themselves that they have behaved morally, will do that *even if* what they’ve really done is take advantage of an ambiguous situation.

But what can one do to induce pro-social moral behavior? Batson employed the same experimental design as before, but placed a mirror in the room. With the mirror facing away from the subject, he got the same results as before. But when he turned the mirror around so that the subject was facing the mirror, his subjects behaved in a markedly more pro-social way. (4) **Without telling your friends or family members the results of Batson’s mirror studies, ask them what they think the outcome of the following study was and why. First, however, ask them whether they think almost everybody or almost nobody follows the honor system when it comes to donating money when they take coffee from a communal coffee machine set up in an office or workplace. You can tell them it is either one or the other. [Almost nobody does, in the studies on record.]:**

(5) In this Batson-type study, there is an honor system about putting money into a cup if you drink coffee in the office/ workplace. Some weeks, taped above the cup of the coffee machine were pictures of flowers. During those weeks, almost nobody put money in the pot. Other weeks, taped above the pot were pairs of eyes. Did the eyes change the behavior of the subjects? In other words, which of the following do you think was true when images of eyes were taped above the pot? Almost nobody put money into the pot. OR Overall subjects put large amounts of money into the pot. [Yes, this is an either/or choice.] Record your family members’ response. Record your friends’ response.

Match point to Glaucon? No so fast. Not everyone was a moral hypocrite; and not everyone put him/herself in a position to act hypocritically. That is, not everyone did what was unfair to begin with. Are they the philosophers among us? That is, are they the

ones among us living examined lives? What do you think Socrates would say? To act fairly, one must at least entertain the question, “What is fairness/justice?” So yes, they are living examined lives.

The profound and shocking insight of Glaucon’s story of Gyges in Plato’s *Republic* is, in light of contemporary research, almost chilling. If I may cut to the chase, Socrates’ response goes something like this: “It may seem to you that all you care about is what you appear to be to others. But as a matter of fact, when you let your soul get out of order, when you behave in ways that are impulsive, that are insensitive to the needs of others, you, yourself will be unable to flourish.”

Let us move on to the three parts of the soul. Plato suggests that our soul can be understood as having three parts – a rational part, which he represents sometimes as a human being, sometimes as a charioteer, a spirited part, which he represents sometimes as a cooperative horse, sometimes as a lion, and an appetitive part, which he represents sometimes as a wild horse, and sometimes as the multi-headed beast.

(6) Draw a picture of the three-part soul.

Indeed, Plato presents a number of metaphors by which we can understand the three-part soul, which corresponds to the three parts of the city-state. My personal favorite is from the *Phaedrus*, where he describes reason as a charioteer, spirit as “a good horse, noble in frame, well-jointed, with a high neck and regal bearing. His coat is white and he is controllable by word alone.” Appetite, by contrast, is “a great crooked jumble of limbs with a short bull neck, a pug nose, dark skin, bloodshot white eyes, companion to wild beasts and indecency, shaggy around the ears, deaf as a post, barely yielding to the horsewhip and the goad combined.”

1. Plato writes of the process by which the charioteer tries to bring the dark horse into line. Indeed, what the *Republic* describes is a process by which the rational part of ourselves can come to be in control of our spirit and our appetites.
2. Plato tells the story by means of a controlling metaphor, which is that he compares the structure of the human soul to the structure of the city. He says that just as in the human soul, there is reason, there is spirit, and there is appetite, so too, in a well-structured city, there are guardians, those governed by reason; auxiliaries, roughly soldiers, those governed by honor; and a kind of worker, who is governed by appetite.
3. Moving back and forth between the individual and the society, Plato goes on to describe a series of processes through which the wills and the desires and impulses of, on the one hand, the auxiliaries and the workers, and, on the other hand, spirit and the appetites, can be brought into harmony with what reason dictates.

4. This kind of harmony is the answer Plato offers to Glaucon's question about why it is intrinsically valuable to act in a moral way. "One is just who does not allow the various parts within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is his own, and rules himself, puts himself in order, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes on a musical scale. From having been many things, you become entirely one, moderate and harmonious."

5. Socrates points out there are four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. Just as a city is moderate and just when the relations among the people in it are proper, so, too, is an individual moderate or just when the relations among its parts are appropriate and proper.

(7) Provide one clear example of an individual – fictional or real, cartoon character or historical figure – who is predominantly (a) the rational type, (b) the spirited type, and (c) the appetitive type. Here's an example: (a) Barack Obama ("no drama Obama" + his supremely reasoned response to charge during the 2008 campaign that he was a racist who favored black Americans over white Americans), (b) Achilles (the supreme "literary" example of the warrior motivated by honor), and (c) boxer Mike Tyson (at least in that moment when he bit Evander Holyfield's ear). **You must provide sufficient information for me to understand your answer. If you cite a movie character, a character in a song, or a cartoon character, I can almost guarantee that you will need to explain the connection to me. In other words, to me, Obama, Achilles, and Tyson are part of the common fund of knowledge you can expect us to share, and consequently, little explanation is needed (as in "no drama Obama" and Achilles' refusal to fight for the Achaeans after being dishonored by Agamemnon). On the other hand, a teen film star's hedonistic pursuits may be well known on Twitter, but I'm afraid you are going to have to draw me a picture.**

(8) Now, provide one clear example from real life (which includes history, of course), of how one form of government changes into another. Use the governmental form's effects on people. Here's an example: "By degrees the anarchy finds a way into private houses, and ends by getting among the animals and infecting them." This is a description of the change from democracy to tyranny. The passage goes on to talk about the anarchy that reigns when children put themselves on the same level as their parents. I like the example of anarchy "getting among the animals," however. I have a friend who treats her dog as one of the family to the point where she fetches for the dog! Her dog is not a dog, and Plato would definitely have a problem with that. The non-dog is several years old and still goes to the bathroom inside the house – and not because he is incontinent. Because he does not know his proper place in the household/ in the city-state. His education has been deficient.

(9) I want to take on another highly contentious issue in the *Republic*, and that is censorship. "If we want the guardians of our city to think that it's shameful

to be easily provoked into hating one another, then we mustn't allow stories about the gods warring or plotting against one another." So, we are not to be allowed to read stories about gods and heroes engaging in activities we want forbidden. Our society does not "believe" in censorship – certainly not to the extent Plato advocates, but let us try to make sense of what Socrates/ Plato is saying and why. First of all, Socrates/ Plato is not worried about playful imitation. So let's put that aside. What he is concerned about is becoming habituated to modes of non-virtuous behavior. **(10) What non-virtuous behavior are you or your children routinely exposed to in music, on TV, in films, etc.? Do you believe that American citizens (or should I say consumers) regulate their exposure to popular culture in such a way that they are in control of the messages embedded in it, or are they learning from it automatically?** Socrates/ Plato believed that the telling and re-telling of the heroic myths set up – to use the language of contemporary psychology – a misguided repertoire of automatic responses. That is, his fellow citizens had been habituated to the mode of behavior embodied in the warrior ethic of the past. In the Republic, this habituation would be redirected to virtuous behavior. Socrates/Plato did not believe that argument alone is enough to make men good. His utopian society would cultivate in them certain kinds of habits – virtuous habits; and, yes, through what we would call censorship. (Bonus Question) Even if you don't fully subscribe to Socrates/Plato's reasoning, do you agree with him that argument alone is not enough to make men good?