

PART III

Ethics and Egoism

Introduction

Why should we be moral? That is, why should we be moral when it is in our self-interest to be immoral? Or is it always really in our interest to be moral, despite appearances to the contrary? Or is morality only generally in our best interest, so that we may have to decide whether to follow its commands when they become too burdensome?

Egoism is a challenge to morality. It comes in two main forms. The first form, call it "egoism proper," admits that morality consists of a set of objective, altruistic or other-regarding principles but simply denies that we ought always to be moral. If we have good reason to be selfish, we should be so. The egoist admits that sometimes it is in our interest to be moral but asks, "Why should I be moral when it is not in my interest to be so?" This is the kind of egoism with which

Thrasymachus seems to end up (reading I.1) and which Glaucon puts forth as the devil's advocate in our first selection.

The second form, call it "ethical egoism," universalizes the egoist principle, thus making it a moral principle: "Everyone ought always to act in his or her self-interest." In this way the question, "Why be moral?" does not arise. True morality is simply enlightened self-interest. Thomas Hobbes sets forth a contractual theory of ethical egoism in our second reading, and Ayn Rand espouses a more individualist version in our third reading. James Rachels sets out a comprehensive critique of ethical egoism in our fourth reading, and, finally, Howard Kahane develops a theory of egoism within the context of sociobiological thought, arguing for a morality based on reciprocity.

6

Why Should I Be Moral?

PLATO

Glaucon, Plato's older brother, uneasy with Socrates' reply to Thrasymachus (see reading I.1), asks Socrates whether justice is good in itself or only a necessary evil. Glaucon sets forth the hypothesis that egoistic power seeking and pleasure seeking con-

stitute the ideally good life. However, the hypothesis continues, reason alerts us that others might seek the same power, which would greatly interfere with our freedom and result in a state of chaos in which no one was happy. Therefore, we must compromise our quest for power and unmitigated pleasure. Morality constitutes this compromise. As a mutually agreed-upon set of restrictions aimed at preventing others from prospering at our expense, morality has no intrinsic but only instrumental value.

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To illustrate his hypothesis Glaucon relates a myth of Gyges, a shepherd who discovers a ring that enables him to become invisible. Gyges uses the ring to attain the highest reaches of power and pleasure. Glaucon asks whether it is not plausible to suppose that we all would do likewise? Then he offers a thought experiment that compares the life of the seemingly just (but unjust) man who is the epitome of success with that of the seemingly unjust (but just) man who is the epitome of failure. Which would we choose?

In the second part of this reading, we have highlights of Socrates' solution to this question, Why should I be moral?

We enter the dialogue where we left off in selection I.1. Socrates has just shown that the type of egoism advocated by Thrasymachus is contradictory. Socrates is speaking

When I had said this I thought I had done with the discussion, but evidently this was only a prelude. Glaucon on this occasion too showed that boldness which is characteristic of him, and refused to accept Thrasymachus's abandoning the argument. He said: Do you, Socrates want to appear to have persuaded us, or do you want truly to convince us that it is better in every way to be just than unjust?

I would certainly wish to convince you truly, I said, if I could.

Well, he said, you are certainly not attaining your wish. Tell me, do you think there is a kind of good which we welcome not because we desire its consequences but for its own sake: joy, for example, and all the harmless pleasures which have no further consequences beyond the joy which one finds in them?

Certainly, said I, I think there is such a good.

Further, there is the good which we welcome for its own sake and also for its consequences, knowledge for example and sight and health. Such things we somehow welcome on both counts.

Yes, said I.

Are you also aware of a third kind, he asked, such as physical training, being treated when ill,

the practice of medicine, and other ways of making money? We should say that these are wearisome but beneficial to us; we should not want them for their own sake, but because of the rewards and other benefits which result from them.

There is certainly such a third kind, I said, but why do you ask?

Under which of these headings do you put justice? he asked.

I would myself put it in the finest class, I said, that which is to be welcomed both for itself and for its consequences by any man who is to be blessed with happiness.

That is not the opinion of the many, he said; they would put it in the wearisome class, to be pursued for the rewards and popularity which come from a good reputation, but to be avoided in itself as being difficult.

I know that is the general opinion, I said. Justice has now for some time been objected to by Thrasymachus on this score while injustice was extolled, but it seems I am a slow learner.

Come then, he said, listen to me also to see whether you are still of the same opinion, for I think that Thrasymachus gave up before he had to, charmed by you as by a snake charmer. I am not yet satisfied by the demonstration on either side. I am eager to hear the nature of each, of justice and injustice, and what effect its presence has upon the soul. I want to leave out of account the rewards and consequences of each. So, if you agree, I will do the following: I will renew the argument of Thrasymachus; I will first state what people consider the nature and origin of justice; secondly, that all who practice it do so unwillingly as being something necessary but not good; thirdly, that they have good reason to do so, for, according to what people say, the life of the unjust man is much better than that of the just.

It is not that I think so, Socrates, but I am perplexed and my ears are deafened listening to Thrasymachus and innumerable other speakers; I have never heard from anyone the sort of defense of justice that I want to hear, proving that it is better than injustice. I want to hear it praised for

itself, and I think I am most likely to hear this from you. Therefore I am going to speak at length in praise of the unjust life, and in doing so I will show you the way I want to hear you denouncing injustice and praising justice. See whether you want to hear what I suggest.

I want it more than anything else, I said. Indeed, what subject would a man of sense talk and hear about more often with enjoyment?

Splendid, he said, then listen while I deal with the first subject I mentioned: the nature and origin of justice.

They say that to do wrong is naturally good, to be wronged is bad, but the suffering of injury so far exceeds in badness the good of inflicting it that when men have done wrong to each other and suffered it, and have had a taste of both, those who are unable to avoid the latter and practice the former decide that it is profitable to come to an agreement with each other neither to inflict injury nor to suffer it. As a result they begin to make laws and covenants, and the law's command they call lawful and just. This, they say, is the origin and essence of justice; it stands between the best and the worst, the best being to do wrong without paying the penalty and the worst to be wronged without the power of revenge. The just then is a mean between two extremes; it is welcomed and honored because of men's lack of the power to do wrong. The man who has that power, the real man, would not make a compact with anyone not to inflict injury or suffer it. For him that would be madness. This then, Socrates, is, according to their argument, the nature and origin of justice.

Even those who practice justice do so against their will because they lack the power to do wrong. This we could realize very clearly if we imagined ourselves granting to both the just and the unjust the freedom to do whatever they liked. We could then follow both of them and observe where their desires led them, and we would catch the just man redhanded traveling the same road as the unjust. The reason is the desire for undue gain which every organism by nature pursues as a

good, but the law forcibly sidetracks him to honor equality. The freedom I just mentioned would most easily occur if these men had the power which they say the ancestor of the Lydian Gyges possessed. The story is that he was a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. There was a violent rainstorm and an earthquake which broke open the ground and created a chasm at the place where he was tending sheep. Seeing this and marvelling, he went down into it. He saw, besides many other wonders of which we are told, a hollow bronze horse. There were window-like openings in it; he climbed through them and caught sight of a corpse which seemed of more than human stature, wearing nothing but a ring of gold on its finger. This ring the shepherd put on and came out. He arrived at the usual monthly meeting which reported to the king on the state of the flocks, wearing the ring. As he was sitting among the others he happened to twist the hoop of the ring towards himself, to the inside of his hand, and as he did this he became invisible to those sitting near him and they went on talking as if he had gone. He marvelled at this and, fingering the ring, he turned the hoop outward again and became visible. Perceiving this, he tested whether the ring had this power and so it happened: if he turned the hoop inwards he became invisible, but was visible when he turned it outwards. When he realized this, he at once arranged to become one of the messengers to the king. He went, committed adultery with the king's wife, attacked the king with her help, killed him, and took over the kingdom.

Now if there were two such rings, one worn by the just man, the other by the unjust, no one, as these people think, would be so incorruptible that he would stay on the path of justice or bring himself to keep away from other people's property and not touch it, when he could with impunity take whatever he wanted from the market, go into houses and have sexual relations with anyone he wanted, kill anyone, free all those he wished from prison, and do the other things which would make him like a god among men. His actions

would be in no way different from those of the other and they would both follow the same path. This, some would say, is a great proof that no one is just willingly but under compulsion, so that justice is not one's private good, since wherever either thought he could do wrong with impunity he would do so. Every man believes that injustice is much more profitable to himself than justice, and any exponent of this argument will say that he is right. The man who did not wish to do wrong with that opportunity, and did not touch other people's property, would be thought by those who knew it to be very foolish and miserable. They would praise him in public, thus deceiving one another, for fear of being wronged. So much for my second topic.

As for the choice between the lives we are discussing, we shall be able to make a correct judgment about it only if we put the most just man and the most unjust man face to face; otherwise we cannot do so. By face to face I mean this: let us grant to the unjust the fullest degree of injustice and to the just the fullest justice, each being perfect in his own pursuit. First, the unjust man will act as clever craftsmen do—a top navigator, for example, or physician distinguishes what his craft can do and what it cannot; the former he will undertake, the latter he will pass by, and when he slips he can put things right. So the unjust man's correct attempts at wrongdoing must remain secret; the one who is caught must be considered a poor performer, for the extreme of injustice is to have a reputation for justice, and our perfectly unjust man must be granted perfection in injustice. We must not take this from him, but we must allow that, while committing the greatest crimes, he has provided himself with the greatest reputation for justice; if he makes a slip he must be able to put it right; he must be a sufficiently persuasive speaker if some wrongdoing of his is made public; he must be able to use force, where force is needed, with the help of his courage, his strength, and the friends and wealth with which he has provided himself.

Having described such a man, let us now in our

argument put beside him the just man, simple as he is and noble, who, as Aeschylus put it, does not wish to appear just but to be so. We must take away his reputation, for a reputation for justice would bring him honor and rewards, and it would then not be clear whether he is what he is for justice's sake or for the sake of rewards and honor. We must strip him of everything except justice and make him the complete opposite of the other. Though he does no wrong, he must have the greatest reputation for wrongdoing so that he may be tested for justice by not weakening under ill repute and its consequences. Let him go his incorruptible way until death with a reputation for injustice throughout his life, just though he is, so that our two men may reach the extremes, one of justice, the other of injustice, and let them be judged as to which of the two is the happier.

Whew! My dear Glaucon, I said, what a mighty scouring you have given those two characters, as if they were statues in a competition.

I do the best I can, he replied. The two being such as I have described, there should be no difficulty in following the argument through as to what kind of life awaits each of them, but it must be said. And if what I say sounds rather boorish, Socrates, realize that it is not I who speak, but those who praise injustice as preferable to justice. They will say that the just man in these circumstances will be whipped, stretched on the rack, imprisoned, have his eyes burnt out, and, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be impaled and realize that one should not want to be just but to appear so. Indeed, Aeschylus's words are far more correctly applied to the unjust than to the just, for we shall be told that the unjust man pursues a course which is based on truth and not on appearances; he does not want to appear but to be unjust:

He harvests in his heart a deep furrow
from which good counsels grow.

He rules his city because of his reputation for justice, he marries into any family he wants to, he

gives his children in marriage to anyone he wishes, he has contractual and other associations with anyone he may desire, and, beside all these advantages, he benefits in the pursuit of gain because he does not scruple to practice injustice. In any contest, public or private, he is the winner, getting the better of his enemies and accumulating wealth; he benefits his friends and does harm to his enemies. To the gods he offers grand sacrifices and gifts which will satisfy them, he can serve the gods much better than the just man, and also such men as he wants to, with the result that he is likely to be dearer to the gods. This is what they say, Socrates, that both from gods and men the unjust man secures a better life than the just. . . .

The Socratic Solution to the Problem of Why Be Moral?

Socrates has argued that the soul is made up of three parts: a rational part, a spirited part, and an appetitive or passionate part. Justice is defined as a harmony of the soul when each part fulfills its proper function—reason ruling, the spirit courageously serving reason, and the appetites living in temperance, being guided by reason. We join Socrates as he is discussing the relationship of the spirited part to the reasoning part.

These two parts will also most effectively stand on guard on behalf of the whole soul and the body, the one by planning, the other by fighting, following its leader, and by its courage fulfilling his decisions.—That is so.

It is this part which causes us to call an individual brave, when his spirit preserves in the midst of pain and pleasure his belief in the declarations of reason as to what he should fear and what he should not.—Right.

And we shall call him wise because of that small part of himself which ruled in him and made those declarations, which possesses the knowledge of what is beneficial to each part, and of what is to the common advantage of all three.—Quite so.

Further, shall we not call him moderate because of the friendly and harmonious relations between these same parts, when the rulers and the ruled hold a common belief that reason should rule, and they do not rebel against it?—Moderation, he said, is surely just that, both in the individual and the city.

And he will be just in the way we have often described.—Necessarily.

Now, I said, has our notion of justice become at all indistinct? Does it appear to be something different from what it was seen to be in the city?—I do not think so.

If any part of our soul still disputes this, we could altogether confirm it by bringing up common arguments.—What are they?

For example, concerning the city and the man similar to it by nature and training, if we had to come to an agreement whether we think that this man has embezzled a deposit of gold and silver, who, do you think, would consider him to have done this rather than men of a different type?—No one would.

And he would have nothing to do with temple robberies, thefts, or betrayals, either of friends in his private life, or, in public life, of cities?—Nothing.

Further, he would be in no way untrustworthy in keeping an oath or any other agreement.—How could he be?

Adultery too, disrespect for parents, neglect of the gods would suit his character less than any other man's.—Much less.

And the reason for all this is that every part within him fulfills its own function, be that ruling or being ruled?—Certainly that, and nothing else.

Are you still looking for justice to be anything else than this power which produces such men and such cities as we have described?—By Zeus, he said, not I.

We have then completely realized the dream we had when we suspected that, by the grace of god, we came upon a principle and mold of justice right at the beginning of the founding of our city.—Very definitely.

Indeed, Glaucon—and this is why it is useful—it was a sort of image of justice, namely, that it was right for one who is by nature a cobbler to cobble and to do nothing else, and for the carpenter to carpenter, and so with the others.—Apparently.

And justice was in truth, it appears, something like this. It does not lie in a man's external actions, but in the way he acts within himself, really concerned with himself and his inner parts. He does not allow each part of himself to perform the work of another, or the sections of his soul to meddle with one another. He orders what are in the true sense of the word his own affairs well; he is master of himself, puts things in order, is his own friend, harmonizes the three parts like the limiting notes of a musical scale, the high, the low, and the middle, and any others there may be between. He binds them all together, and himself from a plurality becomes a unity. Being thus moderate and harmonious, he now performs any action, be it about the acquisition of wealth, the care of his body, some public actions, or private contract.¹ In all these fields he thinks the just and beautiful action, which he names as such, to be that which preserves this inner harmony and indeed helps to achieve it, wisdom to be the knowledge which oversees this action, an unjust action to be that which always destroys it, and ignorance the belief which oversees that.—Socrates you are altogether right.

Very well, I said, we would then not be thought to be lying if we claim that we have found the just man, the just city, and the justice that is in them.—No, by Zeus, we would not.

Shall we say so then?—Yes, let us.

Let that stand then, I said. After this we must, I think, look for injustice.—Obviously.

Surely it must be a kind of civil war between the three parts, a meddling and a doing of other people's task, a rebellion of one part against the whole soul in order to rule it, though this is not fitting, as the rebelling part is by nature fitted to serve, while the other part is by nature not fit to serve, for it is of the ruling kind. We shall say, I think, that such things, the turmoil and the stray-

ing, are injustice and license and cowardice and ignorance and, in a word, every kind of wickedness.—That is what they are.

If justice and injustice are now sufficiently clear to us, then so are unjust actions and wrongdoing on the one hand, just actions on the other, and all such things.—How so?

Because they are no different from healthy and diseased actions; what those are in the body, these are in the soul.—In what way?

Healthy actions produce health, diseased ones, disease.—Yes.

Therefore, just actions produce justice in a man, and unjust actions, injustice?—Inevitably.

To produce health in the body is to establish the parts of the body as ruler and ruled according to nature, while disease is that they rule and are ruled contrary to nature.—That is so.

Therefore, to produce justice is to establish the parts of the soul as ruler and ruled according to nature, while injustice means they rule and are ruled contrary to nature.—Most certainly.

Excellence then seems to be a kind of health and beauty and well-being of the soul, while vice is disease and ugliness and weakness.—That is so.

Then do not fine pursuits lead one to acquire virtue, ugly ones to acquire vice?—Of necessity.

It is left for us to enquire, it seems, if it is more profitable to act justly, to engage in fine pursuits and be just, whether one is known to be so or not, or to do wrong and be unjust, provided one does not pay the penalty and is not improved by punishment.

But Socrates, he said, this enquiry strikes me as becoming ridiculous now that justice and injustice have been shown to be such as we described. It is generally thought that life is not worth living when the body's nature is ruined, even if every kind of food and drink, every kind of wealth and power are available; yet we are to enquire whether life will be worth living when our soul, the very thing by which we live, is confused and ruined, if only one can do whatever one wishes, except that one cannot do what will

free one from vice and injustice and make one acquire justice and virtue.

Ridiculous indeed. . . . Very well, I said. As we have come to this point in our discussion, let us take up again what was said at first, which has led us to this. It was said at some point that injustice was to the benefit of the completely unjust man who had a reputation for justice, was it not?—It certainly was.

Since we have fully agreed, I said, upon the effect of each, that is, of just and unjust behavior, let us now talk to the man who maintains this point of view.—How?

Let us in our argument fashion an image of the soul, so that he may understand the kind of thing he was saying.—What kind of image?

One of the kind that are told in ancient legends about creatures like the Chimera, Scylla, Cerberus, and many others in whose natures many different kinds had grown into one.—We are told of such creatures.

APPETITES Fashion me then one kind of multiform beast with many heads, a ring of heads of both tame and wild animals, who is able to change these and grow them all out himself.

A work for a clever modeler, he said. However, as words are more malleable than wax and such things, take it as fashioned.

SPIRITS REASON Then one other form, that of a lion, and another of a man, but the first form of all is much the largest, and the second, second.—That is easy and it is done.

Gather the three into one, so that they somehow grow together.—All right.

Model around them on the outside the appearance of being one, a man, so that anyone who cannot see what is inside but only the outside cover will think it is one creature, a man.—Done.

Let us now tell the one who maintains that injustice benefits this man, and that justice brings him no advantage, that his words simply mean that it benefits the man to feed the multiform beast well and make it strong, as well as the lion and all that pertains to him, but to starve and

weaken the man within so that he is dragged along whithersoever one of the other two leads. He does not accustom one part to the other or make them friendly, but he leaves them alone to bite and fight and kill each other.—This is most certainly what one who praises injustice means.

On the other hand, one who maintains that justice is to our advantage would say that all our words and deeds would tend to make the man within the man the strongest. He would look after the many-headed beast as a farmer looks after his animals, fostering and domesticating the gentle heads and preventing the wild ones from growing. With the lion's nature as his ally, he will care for all of them and rear them by making them all friendly with each other and with himself.—This is most definitely the meaning of him who praises justice.

What is said of justice is true in every way, and what is said on the other side is false, whether one examines it from the point of view of pleasure, of good repute, or of advantage; whereas he who condemns justice has nothing sound to say, and he does not know what he is condemning.—I don't think he does at all.

Let us then gently persuade him—he is not willingly wrong—by asking him: “My good sir, should we not say that beautiful and ugly traditions have originated as follows: the beautiful are those which subordinate the beastlike parts of our nature to the human, or perhaps we should say to the divine, while the ugly enslaves the gentler side to the wilder?” Will he agree or what?—He will agree if he takes my advice.

Can it benefit anyone, I said, to acquire gold unjustly if when he takes the gold he enslaves the best part of himself to the most vicious part? Or, if by taking the gold he should make a slave of his son or daughter in the house of wild and evil men, it would certainly not benefit him to acquire even a great deal of gold on those terms.

If then he enslaves the most divine part of himself to the most ungodly and disgusting part and feels no pity for it, is he not wretched and is

he not accepting a bribe of gold for a more terrible death than Eriphyle when she accepted the necklace for her husband's life?—Much more, said Glaucon. I will answer for him.

Then do you think that licentiousness has long been condemned because in a licentious man that terrible, that big, that multiform beast is let loose more than it should be?—Clearly.

Obstinacy and irritability are condemned whenever the lion and snakelike part is increased and stretched disproportionately?—Surely.

Are luxury and softness condemned because the slackening and looseness of this same part produce cowardice?—Of course.

And do not flattery and meanness come when this same spirited part is subordinated to the turbulent beast which accustoms it from youth to being abused for the sake of money and the beast's insatiability, and to become an ape instead of a lion?—Certainly.

Why do you think the mechanical work of one's own hands is subject to reproach? Shall we say that it is so only when the best part of one's soul is naturally weak and cannot rule the animals within but pampers them and can learn nothing except ways to flatter them.—That is likely.

Therefore, in order that such a man be ruled by a principle similar to that which rules the best man, we say he must be enslaved to the best man, who has a divine ruler within himself. It is not to harm the slave that we believe he must be ruled, as Thrasymachus thought subjects should be, but because it is better for everyone to be ruled by divine intelligence. It is best that he should have this within himself, but if he has not, then it must be imposed from outside, so that, as far as possible, we should all be alike and friendly and governed by the same principle.—Quite right.

This, I said, is clearly the aim of the law which is the ally of everyone in the city, and of our rule over children. We should not allow them to be free until we establish a government within them, as we did in the city, fostering the best in them with what is best in ourselves and securing

within the child a similar guardian and ruler, and then let him go free.—The law does make that clear.

How then and by what argument can we maintain, Glaucon, that injustice, licentiousness, and shameful actions are profitable, since they make a man more wicked, though he may acquire more riches or some other form of power?—We cannot.

Or that to do wrong without being discovered and not to pay the penalty is profitable? Does not one who remains undiscovered become even more vicious, whereas within the man who is discovered and punished the beast is calmed down and tamed; his whole soul, settling into its best nature, as it acquires moderation and justice together with wisdom, attains a more honored condition than a strong, beautiful, and healthy body, insofar as the soul is to be honoured more than the body.—Most certainly.

The man of sense then will direct all his efforts to this end; firstly, he will prize such studies as make his soul like this, and he will disregard the others.—Obviously.

Then, I said, he will see to his bodily condition and nurture it in such a way that he does not entrust it to the irrational pleasure of the beast, turn himself that way, and live on that level. It is not even health he aims at, nor does he consider it most important that he should be strong, healthy, or beautiful, unless he acquires moderation as a result, but he will cultivate harmony in his body for the sake of consonance in his soul.—That is altogether true, if he is truly to be a cultured man.

To the same end, there will be order and measure in his acquisition of wealth. He will not be panicked by the numbers of the crowd into accepting their idea of blessedness and increase his wealth without limit, and so have unlimited ills.—I do not think he will do so.

Looking to the government within, I said, he will guard against disturbances being caused there by too much wealth or too little, and he will direct, as far as he can, both the acquiring

and spending of his possessions.—Very definitely.

He will have the same end in view as regards honors. He will share in, and willingly taste, those which he believes will make him a better man, but he will avoid both public and private honors which he believes will destroy the existing condition of his soul.

Note

1. Plato here seems to link his present more psychologically profound definition of justice and injustice as inner states of soul with the more external description of them in the first book. Clearly the unjust man who, in the argument with Thrasymachus, wanted to get the better of everybody is here the man whose appetitive part is out of control and rebels against the ruling reason. His antisocial conduct now follows from this.