

GYGES' DILEMMA: MORALITY AND HAPPINESS

IN HERODOTUS AND PLATO

by

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A THESIS

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## An Abstract of the Thesis of

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Title: GYGES' DILEMMA: MORALITY AND HAPPINESS IN HERODOTUS  
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Herodotus and Plato both tell of the usurpation of the Lydian throne by Gyges, a subject of the king. Both accounts, moreover, may be interpreted as parables reflecting on moral choice, external contingency, and their bearing on human happiness.

Herodotus' Gyges, properly understood, is endowed with the resources and affective responses of a respectable, if ordinary, moral agent. He successfully navigates a pair of perilous dilemmas that will catapult him, without ambition or malevolence, into ultimate power, privilege and, presumably, happiness.

Plato's account teases out, clarifies, and reframes issues implicit in Herodotus' tale, exploring how and why ordinary moral agents may fail in their choices, despite apparently desirable outcomes, visiting ruin on their potential happiness. In the process Plato self-critically illustrates the inefficacy of the Socratic elenchus alone to prevent or

correct the motivational mistakes of such agents, and vigorously expands the role of philosophy in securing human happiness.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

ἢ σμικρὸν οἶει ἐπιχειρεῖν πρᾶγμα διορίζεσθαι, ἀλλ' οὐ βίου διαγωγὴν, ἢ ἂν διαγόμενος  
ἕκαστος ἡμῶν λυσιτελεστάτην ζωὴν ζώη;

‘Or do you suppose that you attempt to determine a small matter, and not the conduct of  
life, by which each of us may live a most profitable life?’  
(Socrates to Thrasymachus, *Republic* 344d7-e3)<sup>1</sup>

How are we to live? πῶς βιωτέον; Implicit in the question, central to Greek ethical thought, are at least two assumptions: (1) that not all ways of living are equally conducive to making a *good* human life, and (2) that we have at least some agency in creating that life. A good life, indeed the best life, is one that attains happiness (*εὐδαιμονία*). As Aristotle writes, ‘As to the name [of the highest good], it is agreed nearly by everyone, for both the masses and the refined say that it is happiness, and suppose that ‘living well’ and ‘doing well’ are the same as ‘being happy’ (*NE* 1095a17-21).<sup>2</sup> But that is not the end of the inquiry, of course: Aristotle continues, ‘but over happiness, what it is, they wrangle’ (*NE* 1095a21-22).

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Stephanus page numbers appearing without title of the work refer to the *Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> The highest good is that which is desired for its own sake, and for the sake of which other things are desired (*NE* 1094a19-23). Cf. *Symposium* 205a2-3: ‘There is no further need to ask why [*ἵνα τί*] one wishes to be happy, as the answer seems to be final.’ No further ground can be sought. It is important to note that the Greek term admits of a somewhat wider application than the English ‘happiness’; some commentators prefer to render it ‘human flourishing’ or ‘well-being.’ I will use all three English terms as the context warrants.

Plato's *Republic* is, among a great deal of other things, a dramatic wrangling over what kind of life secures the greatest happiness. In book one Thrasymachus colorfully extols the life of supreme injustice as that which best serves one's own interests, and hence guarantees the greatest happiness. The happy life is one in which one's desires can be satisfied with the least restraint or limit. Thrasymachus' root position may conveniently be reduced to the proposition that when it comes to the interest of the individual, 'injustice is always more profitable.'<sup>3</sup> Yet for all his bile and bluster, only one counter-instance need be found to refute his claim. Such a counter-example would not be hard to find.<sup>4</sup> But Plato is not simply stuffing some straw-man immoralist to topple. For one counter-example would not show much; one could still aver that 'injustice is *usually* more profitable,' or even more timorously that 'injustice is *sometimes* more profitable,' and *these* approximate what Plato supposes many people surreptitiously think. Accordingly he seeks not to show the contradictory, 'injustice is sometimes not more profitable,' but the *contrary*, 'injustice is never more profitable,' or rather '*justice* is always more profitable,' which is a much stiffer proposition. And indeed he spends the majority of the *Republic* in defense of this seemingly implausible claim. This should alert us that Thrasymachus is not the only, or even the ultimate opponent, but rather the

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<sup>3</sup>More profitable than justice, of course. Conversely stated, *δίκαιος ἀνὴρ ἀδίκου πανταχοῦ ἔλαττον ἔχει*, 'the just man always fares worse than the unjust' (343d). Thrasymachus grants exceptions for petty injustices if they are detected, but the grand injustices, presumably as manifestations of superior strength and cunning, carry no such qualification. His early formulations of justice, couched in political terms, which shift about as Socrates corners him, are all informed by this more fundamental premise about the individual's good.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Herodotus' account (I.96-100) of Deioces, who exploits his reputation for delivering just arbitration to create for himself a kingship among the Medes, to his own great advantage. Less exotically, one can easily think of cases where refraining from injustice for the moment could heighten one's advantage over the long run. The later reformulation of Thrasymachus' position by Glaucon will accommodate these and similar cases.

more prevalent, if less extravagant, moral ambivalence implicit in conventional thought. For Plato's claim, that justice is always more profitable, is the denial of the conventional, if largely unstated, view.

Now of course this claim of Plato's equally can be overturned by one counter-example. Yet furnishing such a case is not as easy as might be imagined, if one grants Plato's elaboration of justice as essentially linked to what we might call 'mental health.'<sup>5</sup> No one, after all, wishes to fall ill, either in body or mind. Nevertheless, I shall argue that such a counter-example seemingly may be found in the pages of Herodotus, in the tale of Gyges the Lydian.

Whatever else it may be, Herodotus' story of Gyges is a reflection on the nature of entangled commitments, moral deliberation, and human happiness. It presents an account of how a reflectively self-interested moral agent might behave under duress, might reluctantly acquiesce in an unjust act, along with an implicit justification for that act. Though it may read more like Aeschylean tragedy than ethical case study, its core impulse cleaves close to a conventional morality, that neither glorifies the immoralist, nor mandates sainthood for moral approbation. In fact, Gyges will turn out to be rather like an ordinary moral agent, not terribly unlike ourselves, who finds the circumstances that frame his difficult choices largely beyond his control. In the end, Gyges appeals to a familiar, if conflicting, set of moral considerations to navigate his dilemmas. But unlike the outcome of our usual garden-variety choices, the unsought for result of his injustice is

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<sup>5</sup> Or 'psychic harmony', as Vlastos coins it, in which condition the soul is 'healthy, beautiful, and in the ontologically correct, hierarchic, internal order.' (Vlastos 1971a, 68-9). The soul, or *ψυχή*, need not be freighted with any religious or metaphysical baggage; as Annas (1981, 123-4) points out, it 'need commit one to no more than talking about something as alive and functioning as a living thing.' The precise nature and effect of justice, as presented in *Republic* book 4 will be discussed below.

limitless wealth and power, of a luster undimmed to the end of his days. Can Plato really deny, in terms that ‘save the appearances’ of our ordinary moral understanding, that Gyges is not better off for his choice?

Now this is an unlikely counter-example, perhaps, but a counter-example nonetheless. Moreover, I shall argue that on Plato’s *own* account of justice in *Republic* 4, Gyges appears to be better off for the act, though naturally Plato attempts to exclude such a result. *Here* is Plato’s quarry, then, *this* his more formidable adversary in his defense of justice. As will be seen, if Plato can meet this challenge, he will have already outmaneuvered the immoralist position of Thrasymachus, for this more extreme position is largely parasitic upon implications nestled within the conventional view.

Yet is there any indication that Plato in fact gave Herodotus’ Gyges any consideration? Plato never explicitly mentions Herodotus’ tale. There is, of course, Plato’s own story of Gyges in *Republic* 2, in which Gyges slays the Lydian king, and takes the queen and kingdom as his own. But apart from this barest sketch, all else of substance diverges: Gyges’ position, his motives, his means, the structure and sympathy of the tales bear little resemblance. Is it not rather more likely that the two authors independently adapted a familiar folktale for their own purposes? After all, taken together the pair has not drawn much attention, even from the lidless gaze of scholars.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Only three such studies that focus on the two Gyges more or less exclusively are known to me: Smith (1902a and 1902b) attempts to reconstruct the common source of the two versions of the story that would have been current in Classical Greece. Davis (2000) provides a loose and impressionistic reflection on Herodotus’ and Plato’s critique of the tyrant’s longing to collapse the distinctions of *nomos* and nature, inside and outside, seeming and being. And Schubert (1997) reads Plato as answering a conception of justice set forth by Herodotus (ultimately traceable to Solon), in particular the inevitability of retribution for violating human limits and the legitimate ways to assume political power. None of these studies will be considered in this paper, as their concerns and approaches are so far removed from this thesis that there are few productive points of contact.

Given the dearth of direct evidence, only an indirect case can be made. I shall endeavor to demonstrate how productive, how pregnant a reading of Herodotus' tale is for Plato's Gyges and the unfolding account of a just moral agent in the *Republic*. Plato disentangles tensions and implications latent in Herodotus' Gyges as he faces his moral dilemmas, showing in book one the ways in which ordinary moral agents can go wrong, and the hazards of leaving conventional thinking unexamined. The traditional, one might say 'tragic,' ethical perspective, while it provides a rich vernacular in which to articulate suffering and loss, does little to help adjudicate the opposing sides of moral conflicts.

But the Socratic elenchus can only take us so far; it may confront us with our own confusion, but it cannot redirect us toward the Good. We too, as reflective subjects, must be properly conditioned, so that we are receptive to reason's insight. Only thus can we reliably perceive where our interest truly lies, where our happiness. Plato would say that Herodotus' Gyges makes the mistake of believing that it is better, at least in his case, to do than to suffer injustice, and so he vitiates his own happiness. Through such mistakes we unwittingly may forsake our happiness; only through the study of philosophy and the correctly attuned character of the just moral agent, Plato argues, can we correctly choose the best ends, and thus reliably secure our happiness.

Even so, in the end we will discover that Plato's account *cannot* meet Herodotus' Gyges' challenge. His account of justice and his agent-centered ethics cannot exclude the possibility that he was indeed happier by his unjust action. Why this is so will be explored in detail. The paper closes with a consideration of how significant an exception

this may be, what options are available to Plato to contend with this, and whether it threatens the entire project of the *Republic*.

A brief discussion of two critical choices in this thesis should be aired at the outset. First, given the thorny problems surrounding the validity of referencing one Platonic dialogue in support of a position in another, wherever possible I have based my textual claims on the *Republic* alone, citing other dialogues only as corroborative evidence, or where a point is expressly made that is implicit in the *Republic*. Second, in presenting Plato's arguments I shall shear some arguments of unnecessary elements that might cloud the argument, or involve us in tangential scholarly squabbles whose mediation this paper need not be concerned. In a work whose aims are as diverse and diffuse as the *Republic*, Plato's attempts to link tightly all the parts together often lead to strain and confusion, if not outright fallacy. It is all too easy to dismiss the heart of an argument if the limbs are poorly articulated. Accordingly, I will not consider Plato's political arguments, either for the ideal state or for suggesting analogies with individuals or souls with respect to virtue.<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny that they have any philosophical interest, but they are inessential to making the best case for justice *in the individual*, which is *our* central concern.

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<sup>7</sup> Plato would have done well here to learn from his pupil Aristotle, whose notion of 'focal meaning' (see Wilson 2000, 116 ff.) would have disabused Plato from the mistaken notion that 'just' means exactly the same thing in all its instances, that the property applies isomorphically to all entities in which it inheres. This is simply mistaken. To take one of Aristotle's favorite examples, the term 'medical' does not *mean* the same thing when applied to a patient, a function, and an instrument, but they are *related* to some one thing (*Metaphysics* Z.4, 1030a28-b3). This does not itself invalidate the theory of Forms, of course; Plato must simply allow for the lack of univocality of terms, and assign Forms not to *words* but to *kinds*: wherever there is a kind, all members of that kind share some nature that make them be of that kind.

## CHAPTER II

## O FORTUNA: CHANCE AND CHOICE FOR HERODOTUS' GYGES

πᾶν ἐστὶ ἄνθρωπος συμφορῆ.

The whole of man is but chance.  
(Solon to Croesus, *Histories* I.32)

The account of Gyges is Herodotus' first vivid historical vignette, is recounted after briefly introducing Croesus, Gyges' descendent on whom retribution falls for Gyges' own injustice. Their stories bear many thematic and structural affinities (best left to a study of its own), yet relevant here is that each present a compressed case study of how a person's mistaken beliefs can lead to seismic consequences for his or her material circumstances and, it is assumed, happiness. But unlike 'tragic error,'<sup>8</sup> such mistakes are not bound by an internal logic that yields only negative consequences. For Gyges and Croesus both err, but while for the latter this leads to the loss of his cherished son, for the former it marks a meteoric rise in fortune.<sup>9</sup> This variance underscores one of Herodotus' ubiquitous themes, the transitory nature of human happiness. After introducing Croesus, Herodotus continues,

I shall go forward in my narrative, equally going over the small and the great cities of men. Cities that formerly were great, most of them have become insignificant, and those that were great in my time were once small. Knowing therefore, that human happiness [εὐδαιμονίην] never remains in the same place, I shall make mention of both equally (*Histories*, I.5).

<sup>8</sup> On which see Sherman, and p. 27 *infra*.

<sup>9</sup> Croesus errs—and provokes retribution [νέμεσις]—in supposing himself to the most happy of all men [ἀνθρώπων πάντων δαβιότατον], on account of his fantastic wealth (*Hist.* I.34).



The role this instability of happiness plays in an ethical framework that might loosely be called ‘tragic’ will be considered after we have followed Gyges in his navigation between his moral dilemmas, all the way to the throne of Lydia.

### Gyges’ First Dilemma

*καὶ ὀρθῶς μοι δοκᾷ Πίνδαρος ποιῆσαι νόμον πάντων βασιλέα φήσας εἶναι.*

Now Pindar seems to me to have poeticized correctly in saying that custom is king of all.  
(Herodotus, *Histories*, III.38)

This Candaules, then, fell in love with his own wife, and since he fell in love he believed that his wife was by far more beautiful than all others. And inasmuch as he believed these things, Candaules praised beyond measure the beauty of his wife to Gyges, son of Dascylus, the favorite of his bodyguard; to this Gyges he entrusted even the most important affairs. After not much time had passed, for it was fated that Candaules come to ill, he said to Gyges such things as follows: ‘Gyges, I do not suppose that you believe me when I speak about the beauty of my wife (for the ears happen to be less trustworthy than the eyes for men);<sup>10</sup> bring it about that you shall see her naked.’ But Gyges, crying aloud, said: ‘Master, what word—insane [*οὐκ ὑγιέα*] word—are you saying, commanding me to behold my mistress naked! Together with her tunic a woman also removes her respectability [*αἰδῶ*]. Long ago, the things that are right [*τὰ καλά*]<sup>11</sup> for men were discovered. from which one must learn—among these there is this one: that one look after one’s own [*σκοπεῖν τινὰ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ*]. I am convinced that your wife is of all most beautiful, and I ask of you not to ask what is unlawful [*ἀνόμων*].’ And so speaking he was resisting such things, fearing lest some evil should happen to him from them (*Histories*, I.8-9).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Heraclitus fr. 101a, *ὀφθαλμοὶ γὰρ τῶν ὧτων ἀκριβέστεροι μάρτυρες*, ‘for eyes are more accurate witnesses than eyes.’

<sup>11</sup> Godley (1931) translates as ‘wise rules,’ Sheets (1993) glosses as ‘fine principles’; Rawlinson more loosely renders the sentence as ‘Our fathers, in time past, distinguished right and wrong plainly enough, and it is our wisdom to submit to be taught by them.’ Long (1987, 25) considers this same sentence ‘a beautiful epigrammatic definition of what a Greek, or perhaps even a Lydian, would have defined as custom.’ *καλός* came to have moral overtones (from the original meaning of ‘beautiful, fine’), especially when opposed to *αἰσχρός* (‘shameful’); this opposition is hinted at with the preceding *αἰδῶ* (which can mean ‘shame’). See Dover (1974, 69-73) for a fuller discussion of the word.

Before considering this first dilemma, a preliminary point must be addressed. It may be thought that the whole affair lies under the shadow of necessity, that the actions and decisions now unfolding are in some way determined: *for it was fated that Candaules come to ill* [χρῆν γὰρ Κανδαύλη γενέσθαι κακῶς]. The argument might run that if Candaules must fall, then he could not but act in the way that he does here act, and that Gyges himself must react in ways consistent with this doom. Otherwise Candaules would escape his fate. If this is the case, then the episode can hardly offer insight into moral deliberation and choice, contrary to the premise of this paper.

One might counter that Herodotus introduces the account as an etiological narrative. Given the (independently known)<sup>12</sup> fact that with Candaules the Lydian dynastic rule of the Heraclidae gave way to the Mermnadae (of which Gyges was the first), this story merely fleshes out what we already know, with historical hindsight, *had to happen*: namely, that Candaules and his line would fall. But surely this is too tepid a reading of ‘fated.’<sup>13</sup> But we may accept a more full-bodied notion of fate without sacrificing human agency (and without, one may add, getting embroiled here in sticky philosophical issues). That Candaules was fated to come to a bad end in no way entails that *this* has to be his end, in just the way it here happens. The agents involved could have acted differently, with different ends issuing. Candaules’ bad end would then have

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<sup>12</sup> From historical sources, including Persian inscriptions (Flory 1987, 31).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *de Interpretatione* 9, who lays out the difficulties that would follow a reading of events in this way.

been met in some other way. The point is that, given the way in which Herodotus articulates this fate, we are not forced to deny the moral agency of the actors.<sup>14</sup>

Now the general nature of this first dilemma<sup>15</sup> is fairly pedestrian, common to a good deal of moral decision-making, even if the circumstances that couch it are not. Gyges is faced with two competing commitments that have claim on him: on the one hand, he is bound by law to obey the command of his lord, while on the other, he is bound by principle ('that one look to one's own', one of *τὰ καλὰ*) not to do what the king bid him do.<sup>16</sup>

Now these competing claims are both related to *νόμος*, which covers the English equivalents of 'law' and 'custom.' This ambiguity might strike the modern ear as a bit slippery, and conducive to false opposition: surely what is enjoined by law has greater claim on us than what is merely conventional; the violation of the former is criminal, that of the latter is simply rude. But that assessment would overlook the degree to which the underlying justification of law is rooted in custom, in a deeply-held communal sense of

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<sup>14</sup> One might rejoin that, though Herodotus' general statement of Candaules' fate does not entail that *this* series of events must lead to his downfall, nevertheless, since Herodotus introduces the clause with the particle *γάρ* 'for it was fated...', a strongly causal sense must be attributed to what follows: *since* it was thus fated, Candaules said such things. But, while this is a possible reading, it cannot be assumed in any non-question-begging way. One might also expect Herodotus to have signaled this with *οὕτως*, 'in this way,' if this were his intended sense.

<sup>15</sup> 'A moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent S morally ought to do A and morally ought to do B but cannot do both, either because B is just not-doing-A or because some contingent feature of the world prevents doing both.' (Gowans 1987, 3) The Kantian overtones to this formulation need not trouble us; Greek tragedy's power is largely predicated upon some understanding, however expressed, of such competing and exclusive claims.

<sup>16</sup> More precisely, the transgression asked of Gyges is two-fold: (1) looking on another man's wife in a way that only the husband is permitted to do; and (2) treating the queen in a manner inconsistent with the dignity of her office. Both aspects hover around the idea of shame and respect (*αἰδώς*). Cf. Williams (1993, 82): 'Even if shame and its motivations always involve in some way or another an idea of a gaze of another, it is important that for many of its operations the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do.'

what is right.<sup>17</sup> Nor is this simply a Greek phenomenon. To some degree, our modern laws are justified ultimately by our societal understanding of justice and fairness; when our understanding of these concepts shifts (as they did, say, regarding racial segregation), our laws eventually are amended to reflect these beliefs. Now while *we* may not want to push this correlation too far, for a Greek the connection between custom and law was more intimate still.<sup>18</sup> What is important here is that Gyges himself considers the violation of this custom, codified in the principle of ‘looking to one’s own,’ to be *ἀνομος*, or ‘unlawful.’ So either way he is left committing an antinomian act: either he must disobey his liege, or violate a binding moral principle.

Gyges reacts as any reasonable person might when asked by a superior to do something morally shocking: he cries out in dismay. His first reaction is horror. The prevailing view among modern commentators is that Gyges is thereby betraying a weak, cravenly nature.<sup>19</sup> I believe that such characterizations are inattentive to, and inconsistent

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<sup>17</sup>See Guthrie (1971, chapter 4): ‘The [sense of ‘custom’] was the earlier use, but was never lost sight of, so that for the Greeks law, however much it might be formulated in writing and enforced by authority, remained dependent upon custom or habit.’ (56) Cf. Aristotle (*Politics* 1269a20): ‘For the law holds no force with respect to being obeyed apart from custom [*τὸ ἔθος*], and custom does not come about but through much time, so that rashly changing from existing laws to different ones in common makes weak the power of the law.’ So also Havelock (1978, 24): ‘[*Nomoi* as a] body of maxims (as they become when incorporated in contrived statements) represents the common consciousness of the group, its sense of what is fitting, decorous, and seemly...It reflects the permanent properties of a society, over against which the particular decisions of a governing body have to be framed.’

<sup>18</sup> ‘For a Greek the equivocation was hard to avoid, since the same word expressed both ideas and the greater part of Greek law was in fact customary, not statutory. Hence the distinction between what is legally enforceable and what is morally right was much less clear-cut among the Greeks than it is with us’ (Dodds 1959, 266).

<sup>19</sup>For example, Flory (1987, 37) characterizes Gyges as ‘not only cowardly, foolish, and clumsy,...he is also remarkably passive’. So also Chiasson (2003, 22), and Long (1987, 19-20) judges him ‘a largely passive figure,’ and ‘an instrument and not an agent in the story.’ It is easy to see how commentators may consider Gyges a mere cipher, preferring either to psychoanalyze Candaules’ idiosyncrasies, or marvel at the masterful cunning and control of Candaules’ wife.

with, Herodotus' purpose, to the extent that this may be ascertained. This will become clearer in the course of our discussion. Now Aristotle, for one, would likely consider this not a cowardly impulse, but the proper affective response of one trained from childhood in how to react to relevantly similar moral situations.<sup>20</sup> Parallels may also be drawn to such figures as Agamemnon who, when confronted with his own baneful choice, along with his brother 'smote the ground with their staves and stifled not their tears.'<sup>21</sup> Surely few would wish to call Agamemnon, on the eve of his expedition to Troy, a coward.

Once Gyges recovers sufficiently from his alarm, he earnestly endeavors to dissuade his master from this apparent folly by appealing to the long-held 'things that are right.' Again, this is exactly how we would expect a reasonable moral agent to proceed, given his disadvantageous circumstances. It is interesting to note two points here. First, Gyges seems to recognize that his choices are not necessarily exhaustive: if he can *persuade* Candaules not to order this of him, he may dissolve the dilemma.<sup>22</sup> In attempting reasoned persuasion, effected by an appeal to commonly held beliefs, Gyges shows himself a more complex figure than simply 'a servant begging with his master.'<sup>23</sup> Second, Gyges seems to recognize that Candaules is not quite himself, that his command is 'unhealthy' [οὐκ ὑγιέα]. Though he will not go so far as to challenge Candaules here,

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<sup>20</sup> 'Wherefore it is necessary to have been brought up, right from early youth, as Plato says, so as to make us take delight and to be pained in the things we ought, for this is the correct education' (NE 1104b11-14).

<sup>21</sup> Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 201-02, trans. H.W. Smith.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. 327c, where Polemarchus playfully enjoins Socrates to either 'prove himself stronger than these men, or stay there,' to which Socrates replies in characteristic fashion, 'Is there still left this alternative: if we persuade you that you must let us go?'

<sup>23</sup> As Long (1987, 19) would have it.

he hopes to show him that by his better lights he ought not ask such things.<sup>24</sup> In short, Gyges has shown himself to be neither unscrupulous opportunist nor hedonistic voyeur. Herodotus has thus far carefully crafted Gyges' persona in a way that might be expected to elicit sympathy from the reader.

Yet Gyges' appeal to principle does not fully express his reason for not wanting to do what the king demands. Initially, it is true, he reacts viscerally to the suggestion that he violate a deeply-held moral principle,<sup>25</sup> as experienced through the immediate moral perception of wrong. Nevertheless he is moved also by considering the *consequences* of such action. We learn this not from Gyges himself but from Herodotus as narrator: 'and so speaking he was resisting such things, *fearing lest some evil should come to him from them*' (my emphasis). This may seem more like an aside than an integral part of the narrative. But this is the fulcrum upon which Gyges' decision turns. As we shall see, it is consequence, not principle, that proves sufficient to motivate his action.

That this is the case may be seen from Candaules' response. He does not challenge Gyges on matters of principle; rather, he rightly perceives where the unspoken yet crucial resistance lies: 'Be of good courage, Gyges, and fear neither me, as if I say this to make trial of you, nor my wife, that some harm may come to you from her.'

Candaules then proceeds to contrive (*μηχανήσομαι*) the means by which Gyges may

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<sup>24</sup> If Gyges had reflected a moment here, he may have wondered whether he is duty-bound to obey every command of his lord, even if it (or *he*) proves unsound. Cf. 331c, where it is agreed that one should not return a lent weapon to one who has fallen mad, as a counter-example to the general premise that one should return what is owed.

<sup>25</sup> We must, of course, allow for the possibility that this moral principle is merely an articulated prohibition of a primeval taboo of the culture (Herodotus later hints at this: 'among the Lydians and nearly all of the barbarians, even for a man to be seen naked bears great shame' *Hist.* I.11), and that Gyges' visceral reaction is thus to the suggestion of violating the taboo, not the principle. Be that as it may, it is to the *principle* that Gyges appeals, as grounds for justification, when attempting to dissuade the king.

observe the queen naked without being detected.<sup>26</sup> He would station Gyges behind the open door of the bedchamber, whence he would be able watch the queen strip off her garments piece by piece, placing them on an adjacent chair. Then, when she turns to go to the bed, Gyges is to slip silently from the room. Candaules is suggesting that if the consequences of the action may be averted, then much of the prohibitive force against doing that action is removed.

Herodotus continues, ‘Now as he was not able to escape, he was ready [ἐτοῖμος].’<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that Gyges has not been persuaded that the proposed action is not wrong, but merely acquiesces in its execution. His situation is as follows: either disobey the king, and suffer the (unstated but no doubt inevitable) consequences thereof, or submit to the king’s command, and act contrary to what is right, and yet—if Candaules’ plan works—escape any adverse consequences. Most moral agents, by this

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<sup>26</sup> Candaules seems to be implying that without such a ruse, Gyges would indeed suffer consequences from the queen, thereby hinting at her formidable character. Schubert (1997, 256-57) observes, in connection with the Gyges account in Plato, that ‘chez Hérodote, le récit tourne également autour l’idée d’invisibilité.’ It is true that invisibility is intended to afford escape from detection in both tales. But there is little to be derived from this fact: for Plato, invisibility reveals Gyges’ own true beliefs and desires; for Herodotus, it is not Gyges’ but Candaules’ desires that are at issue; Gyges has clearly indicated that he would rather have nothing to do with the whole affair. Nothing follows if Gyges *had* escaped detection (which he did, in fact, the second time hiding behind the door); anyway it would have been a much less interesting story, since it would not have led to the second dilemma, which is by far the more important.

<sup>27</sup> This word gave me pause, since it often signifies ‘active, zealous’, or ‘bold.’ These seem rather out of line with Gyges’ reticence a moment ago. But a parallel may be drawn again with Aeschylus’ Agamemnon (though perhaps it is not as snug a fit for Gyges’ mindset), after his initial anguish: ‘But when he donned the yoke of Necessity, with veering of spirit, impious, unholy, unsanctified, from that hour his purpose shifted to resolve that deed of uttermost audacity. For mankind is emboldened by wretched delusion, counselor of ill, primal source of woe. So then he hardened his heart to sacrifice his daughter...’ *Agamemnon* 217-24 (trans. H.W. Smith). On this passage Lesky (1966, 82) writes ‘It might seem a rationally acceptable solution to assume that once Agamemnon has surrendered to the necessity, forces are unleashed in him that make him passionately seek to fulfill his aim. But I wonder whether we should not be reading too much modern psychology into Aeschylus. It seems to me more correct simply to state this union of external coercion and personal readiness, the meaning of this genuinely Aeschylean union is that in this way man, acting out of necessity, has to take upon himself guilt and the need for atonement under the divine order.’

simple calculus of ends, would choose as Gyges does. He would be better off committing than suffering wrong.<sup>28</sup>

Lest one object that it was *fear*, not calculation of consequences, that determined Gyges' choice, let us consider what this would mean. Fear of what?—of what is to come to pass if some course of action, or a different one, be followed. It is doubtful that fear even makes any sense without reference to the future. So while perhaps it need not be calculative, it must nevertheless concern itself with consequences. And while calculation may not have provided the initial impetus, it does provide justification if one is concerned primarily with outcomes. Now it is a tricky business, seeing all ends of actions. As Gyges is about to discover, sometimes things happen that weren't foreseen.

### **Gyges' Second Dilemma**

Candaules did not waste any time executing his plan. That night, he stationed Gyges behind the door of the royal bedchamber, and events unfolded as anticipated: the queen came in, disrobed piece by piece, placing her garments on the chair, and from behind the door Gyges beheld her.<sup>29</sup> Then, as she turned to go to the bed, Gyges slipped from the chamber. *But*—the queen caught sight of Gyges exiting the room. Immediately she understood all. She did not cry out, nor let drop any indication that she was aware of what had just transpired. Rather she plotted, 'having in mind to make Candaules pay.'

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<sup>28</sup> That Gyges would suffer wrong were he to disobey the king is clear, for disregarding an unjust command (assuming that it is unjust) does not carry culpability, and so his punishment would be unwarranted.

<sup>29</sup> We are not told whether Gyges believed the king's report of her beauty once his own eyes had put it to the test.



The next day, after making arrangements with her most trusted servants, she called Gyges to her.

And he, supposing that she knew nothing of what had been done, came when called. For he was accustomed, even before, to visit the queen whenever she would call. And when Gyges came, the lady spoke these words: ‘Now with these two paths before you, Gyges, I give you the choice, whichever one you choose to betake yourself to: either, having killed Candaules, take both me and the throne of Lydia, or you yourself must die on the spot, in order that you may not obey Candaules in the future in all points, and see what you ought not see. But truly either that man, who devised these things must be slain, or you, who committed improper acts by having beheld me naked.’ And for a while Gyges wondered greatly at these words, but afterward besought her not to bind him to the necessity of making such a choice. Now as he failed to persuade her, and as he saw the necessity truly having been placed before him—either to kill his lord or himself be killed by others—he chose himself to survive (*Hist.* I.11).

This dilemma is beautiful in its symmetry, and fearful in its cruelty. Either Candaules or Gyges must die, and it is for Gyges to decide—*now*. Never mind proportionality of consequence to crime. Note, further, that there is no appeal to principle or νόμος, no possible confusion over law or convention. The details are pruned to their bitter minimum. And here the morality and consequences of action are perfectly contraposed: either do wrong and thereby gain everything (life, a queen, and kingdom), or suffer wrong and thereby lose everything, including one’s very life.

There is no avoiding this dilemma: the queen has servants at hand to kill him right then and there, should he refuse to kill his king.<sup>30</sup> Nor will she be dissuaded.

Herodotus makes it clear, as narrator, that Gyges is truly (ἀληθέως) bound by necessity,

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<sup>30</sup> We are told nothing about *their* choices to collaborate in regicide, perhaps (to read into things a bit) because they recognize no moral claim to counter blind obedience. At any rate, their complicity is expedient for the plot, since the queen alone likely would be unable to compel Gyges under the yoke of necessity.

and repeats the nature of the dilemma—to kill or be killed—four times (all in I.11-12).<sup>31</sup>

Though Gyges chooses his own survival (*παριεῖναι*), it is a choice made unwillingly (*οὐκ ἐθέλοντα*). He takes no delight in the prospect of gaining an apparent boon inconceivable to the normal bodyguard—to rise far above one's rank to assume a queen and realm.<sup>32</sup>

The climax of the story is devastating, revealing the terrible brilliance of the queen:

Then Gyges asked her, saying, 'Since you compel me to kill my master against my will, come, let me hear in what manner we shall set upon him.' And she replied, 'The attack will be from the same place whence that man exhibited me naked, and while he is sleeping.' When they had made ready the plot, and night had fallen (for Gyges was not let off, nor was there any escape for him, but it had to be that either he or Candaules perish), he followed the lady to the bedroom. And she, giving him a dagger, conceals him behind the same door. After this, while Candaules was sleeping, Gyges slipped out and slew him, and thus Gyges obtained both his wife and scepter (*Hist.* I. 11-12).

What benefit would there be to Gyges sacrificing himself for a king who has proven his judgment, if not his character, to be flawed, not to mention Herodotus' hint that Candaules had of late been neglecting his duties as sovereign? Moreover, once Gyges assumes the throne, he proves himself a shrewd politician in averting an impending civil war, while at the same time garnering support (and tacit justification) from Delphi itself, on which Gyges lavishes offerings in return.<sup>33</sup> It is true that the Pythia

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<sup>31</sup> Chiasson (2003, 37) disputes this reading of the dilemma, preferring rather to cast it as 'between the honor of noble self-sacrifice and the dishonor of betraying the fealty he owes his master.' While these well may be viable undercurrents, they are surely secondary considerations, as such a reading would sap the story of much of its poignancy. It ignores Herodotus' repeated sign-posting of the *necessity* of killing or being killed; clearly Herodotus thinks (this is *his* narrative), that those other factors are not primary.

<sup>32</sup> The downside, presumably, would be to be married to Candaules' wife.

<sup>33</sup> 'He [Gyges] obtained the throne and was confirmed by the oracle of Delphi. For when the Lydians were indignant at the misfortune of Candaules and took up arms, both the partisans of Gyges and the rest of the Lydians came to an agreement; that if the oracle ordains him to be king of the Lydians, then he will reign

declares that his line will pay for this usurpation in the fifth generation, but Gyges himself does not suffer retribution for this, nor will his descendents down through his great-great grandson; and even if his great-great-great grandson is to lose the throne, is this not in any event better than five generations of spear-bearers? It seems uncontroversial to claim that Gyges would be better off choosing to kill Candaules rather than be killed.

Does Herodotus condone this conclusion? Though not explicitly stated in the text, support may be derived from Gyges' constant portrayal as loyal, trustworthy, and earnestly desiring to do the right thing—*despite* eventually being driven to be disloyal, untrustworthy, and complicit in wrongdoing. This reversal of behavior comes only as the unwelcome issue of dire necessity. Again, he does not exhibit overweening pride or ambition, faults rife throughout Herodotus' *Histories*, for which traits the possessors personally suffer retribution, whether divine or otherwise. He becomes a tyrant, it is true (in the sense of having obtained power through extra-constitutional means), but Herodotus prefers to linger rather over his munificent gifts to Delphi, suggesting righteous (if not fully exculpatory) recompense. He is, in his moral reactions and deliberations at least, a conscientious, ordinary human being. Still, by choosing his own self-interest—no matter how unjust the resulting actions may have been—he emerges not a hired spear but a fantastically wealthy man, not a servant, but a king. Was this not to his advantage? And was he not justified in so acting?

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and be king, but if not, then straightaway he will give back the rule to the Heracleidae [the house of Candaules]. In fact the oracle did so declare and Gyges became king. To such an extent, however, the Pythia said that vengeance will come for the Heracleidae in the fifth generation from Gyges...And Gyges, having become tyrant, sent back not a few dedicatory offerings to Delphi' (*Hist.* I.13-14).

## CHAPTER III

## HERODOTUS AND THE ‘TRAGIC’ VIEW OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

σκοπέιν δὲ χρῆ παντός χρήματος τὴν τελευτήν κῆ ἀποβήσεται · πολλοῖσι γὰρ δὴ  
ὑποδέξις ὄλβον ὁ θεὸς προρρίζους ἀνέτρεψε.

But one must look to the end of each matter, to see in what way it will turn out; for heaven, having given a glimpse of happiness to many, rips them up root and branch.  
(Solon to Croesus, Herodotus’ *Histories*, I.32)

Let us widen the lens a little, and peer behind Gyges’ dilemmas, briefly to consider Herodotus as storyteller. For this story is not that of a dusty annalist; it has the rhythm and immediacy rather of a folktale.<sup>34</sup> What sources could possibly reveal such intimate exchanges in the royal bedchamber—was it the foot of some court chronicler, lurking under Candaules’ bed, that tripped Gyges in his stealth? No, history here is not *opposed* to fiction, but informed by it, shaped most of all by all the angular gestures of tragic poetry. But more than providing a repertoire of stylistic tricks with which to peddle his tales, tragedy provides Herodotus an underlying worldview of the vulnerability of human happiness to forces outside our control.

Nearly sixty years ago, a fragment of papyrus was recovered from oblivion, delivered from the sands of Egypt. On it the scholar E. Lobel found sixteen lines from a

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<sup>34</sup>A commonly observed trait of the tale, e.g. Flory (1987, 32), Cohen (2004, 55), Griffin (2006, 46), Griffiths (2006, 140). Herodotus usually laces his more properly historical narratives with sources and first-person markers. (Chiasson 2003, 24) The few of these we get (I.12, 14) confirm little more than Gyges’ existence and his copious offerings.

lost tragedy, apparently recounting the very tale of Gyges we have been considering.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars first thought that they had found the unknown source for Herodotus' tale, but the prevalent opinion now holds that it is much later, and that in fact it relies heavily upon Herodotus' account (Griffin 2006, 50). Either way it is a tangible point of connection between Herodotus's text and the tragic corpus.

All tragedians have a penchant for dire moral choices, of such a nature as to provoke fear and pity—and their ensuing *catharsis*—in the audience.<sup>36</sup> It is to the work of Aeschylus, however, that Herodotus bears the closest resemblance.<sup>37</sup> For distinctly Aeschylean are the motifs of choice between two evils under external compulsion, and the step-by-step portrayal of the internal struggle of the protagonist in arriving at his or

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<sup>35</sup> The lines, following the translation of D.L. Page, are as follows (the wife of Candaules is speaking): '[When] I saw clearly, not by guess, that it was Gyges, I was afraid of a plot for murder in the palace; for such are the wages of a monarch's state. But when I saw that Candaules was still awake, I knew what had been done and what man had done it. Yet as if ignorant, despite the turmoil in my heart I bridled in silence my dishonor's cry, to be unheard. My night was endless for want of sleep, as in my bed to and fro I turned in anxious thought. And when the brilliant star that brings the dawn arose, forerunner of the first gleam of day, I roused Candaules from bed and sent him forth to deliver law to his people: Persuasion's tale was ready on my lips, the one that forbids a King, the guardian of his people, to sleep the whole night through. And summoners [have gone to call] Gyges to my presence...' (Raubitschek 1955, 48). For an excellent study of this fragment, see Travis (2000).

<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum (1986, 25) says of tragedy that it 'shows good people doing bad things, things otherwise repugnant to their ethical character and commitments, because of circumstances whose origin does not lie with them.' In order to arouse pity and fear, Aristotle says, 'the change of fortune presented must not be...that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy...it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear...Fear [is inspired] by the misfortune of a man like ourselves...There remains, then, the character...of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty' (*Poetics* 1452b34-1453a10, Butcher trans.). Butcher cautions that this must be read with 1448a1-4 and 1454a16-17, which make it clear that the protagonist is not merely of mediocre character: 'while [this character] has its basis in reality, it transcends it by a certain moral elevation' (1911, 317). These passages, incidentally, corroborate the view that Gyges' character is not basely craven (assuming one accepts the tragic outlines of the Gyges tale), but of a basically good moral fabric.

<sup>37</sup> This is not to deny other, non-tragic influences; Homer also looms large in the pages of Herodotus. Even in our tale, the alternation between direct speech and narration is more homeric than tragic. Yet these are not ultimately so divergent. As Griffin remarks (2006, 46), 'tragedy itself is the daughter of homeric epic.'

her choice.<sup>38</sup> Chiasson is surely right—at least with respect to the story of Gyges—to mark Herodotus’ departure from his tragic model in attributing the *source* of that external compulsion; like Socrates bringing philosophy down from heaven, so Herodotus brings down necessity from divine to human agency.<sup>39</sup> There is no oracle, no divine command, which constitutes one of the lemmata of Gyges cruces; on both sides there is naught but flesh and bone, human desires and motives.<sup>40</sup>

Structurally our Gyges story follows a tragic pattern of a succession of episodes, ascending in emotional intensity and dramatic import, leading up to a culminating act of violence, which is reported rather than dramatized. The first dilemma of Gyges, to either disobey his lord or treat his queen contemptibly, is surely far more innocuous than the second. Our earlier discussion focused on the ethical dimension of this dilemma, since for Gyges at least, this was a grave matter. But from a different point of view, Herodotus is almost winking at us here, making compulsory for Gyges what many men fantasize doing, viz., peeping on a beautiful woman *γυμνήν*. Even more amusing is Gyges reaction

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<sup>38</sup> Chiasson (2003, 22) discerns Aeschylean attributes to the Gyges tale. Lesky (1966, 80) notes that Aeschylus ‘elaborates the psychological development of the characters more fully than his successors’; he finds a two-stage process of (1) recognition and (2) decision, where (2) does not quickly or easily follow (1). He acknowledges his debt to Snell, who ‘emphatically placed the personal decision of the human agent at the center of his interpretation of Aeschylus.’ (78)

<sup>39</sup> As Cicero says of Socrates in his *Tusculan Disputations* (V.iv.10). Thus also Chiasson (2003, 23): ‘Herodotus distances himself from the world of Aeschylean tragedy by emphasizing human rather than divine causation, in keeping with his announced topic of events with human origins (*τὰ γινόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων*). Herodotus does not completely eliminate the element of superhuman causation from his story, since he acknowledges at the outset that Candaules “was bound to come to a bad end”...nonetheless, and whatever the precise meaning of this phrase may be, Herodotus’ focus remains on the human actors and factors in this story, especially in his representation of Gyges’ decision to kill or be killed.’ This is not an uncontroversial point, though I believe it is substantially correct.

<sup>40</sup> Griffin (2006, 54-56) compares the account of the battle of Salamis in Aeschylus’ *Persae* with Herodotus’ *Histories*, finding that while the former is sleek, streamlined to convey the core message: ‘the divine led Xerxes into his arrogant venture; it deceived him; and it planned his ruin,’ Herodotus is much messier, teeming with the complexities true to life, engaging more human and natural causes (like the geography around Salamis) for Xerxes’ fall, than divine direction.

of horror, as ethically correct as it may be. One gets the sense that, in this first dilemma, Herodotus is consciously playing with his tragic model, and letting us in on the joke. But more importantly, the touches of levity with which Herodotus accents this first dilemma suggests that Gyges should have reflected more on the nature of his situation: perhaps its necessity was not so severe as he thought, perhaps he was too hasty in abandoning his protestation of the king's request. Now what would have resulted from Gyges refusing Candaules' command? In truth, probably nothing terrible would have happened, barring some unforeseen outburst of royal rage. Most likely Gyges would have fallen into disgrace at the palace and have lost some of his privilege. At any event, whatever the consequences, they would almost certainly have been less dire than finding himself in the second dilemma, which is no laughing matter.

The shift in tone from one dilemma to the next is reflected in the language of Herodotus. 'I ask of you not to ask of me what is *ἀνομος*, contrary to what is right,' said Gyges in the first dilemma, as though these opposing *νόμοι* were a veritable Scylla and Charybdis. But this seems mere piffle and smoke, compared to the grim necessity about to bind him. Stupefied that next morning by the queen's words—that he must commit either murder or suicide— at length Gyges 'as a suppliant begged [the queen] not to bind him to the necessity of deciding such a choice as this.' And as if we had not adequately apprehended the desperation of the situation, Herodotus repeats, 'as he was seeing the necessity truly having been placed before him, either to kill his lord or himself be killed by others.' Herodotus' language, as narrator, now mirrors Gyges own reported words, reinforcing that it is not merely that Gyges *feels* this necessity, but that it *truly* obtains.

Then, with the emotional intensity fully charged, Herodotus delivers Gyges' decision in a phrase so startlingly understated that it catches the reader's breath: 'he chose *to survive* [*περιεῖναι*].' The terms of the dilemma—kill or be killed—have been so driven into the reader's mind, that, in choosing mere *survival*, Gyges' choice is blunted to one that is eminently understandable, even if the *means* of survival are pernicious. This apparent reasonableness continues in Gyges further showing himself unwilling to take the initiative in performing the deed. The queen must devise the plan—this is *her* revenge—and Gyges simply performs his required part. Many commentators consider this passivity;<sup>41</sup> if so it is one which betrays his desires as still contrary to the exigencies of his situation. But more telling against Gyges' ultimate passivity is the fact that Gyges *chose* (*αἰρέεται*): this crucial word Herodotus holds off until the last possible moment. Choice entails rational assent, an agency which accepts responsibility for what follows.

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<sup>41</sup> See n. 19, *supra*.



### Voluntary Action and Responsibility

ὅς ἄν ἐκῶν μηδὲν κακὸν ποιῇ.

No one willingly does anything wrong.  
(Plato, *Protagoras* 345d)

Yet the modern reader may wonder whether assent under duress can truly be called *voluntary*, and whether culpability attaches to compulsory actions. After all, Herodotus harps on the real necessity (*ἀναγκαίην ἀληθέως*) binding Gyges. Is the compulsion of so great a force as to vitiate choice? Would we consider that one who suffers the travail of torture *willingly* does what is asked of him or her? And if we grant that in this case one does not act voluntarily, is not Gyges' case, where he faces not pain but death, even less voluntary? Now even if we insist that the action is in some way voluntary, would not the necessity remove the stain of culpability from the compelled act? These questions are pertinent to our inquiry because only actions that are voluntary demonstrate the agency required to make them ethically relevant.<sup>42</sup> So if Gyges' actions turn out to be involuntary, then treating his situation as though it has ethical import apparently would be mistaken.

Now what would make an action involuntary? Generally speaking, actions are involuntary if they are done either under compulsion or through ignorance.<sup>43</sup> Yet this does not itself say much, as both of these criteria admit of different glosses such that the same action may be either voluntary or involuntary, depending on which interpretation one follows. Compulsion is, strictly speaking, the application of a force which lies entirely

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<sup>42</sup> As Aristotle says, 'Virtue is concerned with emotions [*πάθη*] and actions, and praise and blame arise for voluntary actions, but for involuntary actions condonation, and sometimes pity...' (*NE* 1109b30-33).

<sup>43</sup> This analysis follows Aristotle's distinction at *NE* 1109b35ff.

outside the agent, as when a sailor forcibly is carried off by a storm or by pirates. Clearly Gyges does not face this sort of compulsion. His coercion was imposed rather by an exclusive disjunction, wherein he was constrained to do either *A* or *B*, but the choice rested with him. In each of his dilemmas he chose according to which he thought offered the better consequences, or at least avoided the worse evil.<sup>44</sup> Now given this *choice*, however limited, it would seem that Gyges' actions are at least to that extent voluntary. Indeed, seen from a different angle, had Gyges plead, 'he made me look at her naked,' or, 'she made me kill him,' few would grant that these excuses sufficiently capture Gyges' own role in his actions. It would appear, then, that Gyges cannot claim that his actions were involuntary due to compulsion.

But could Gyges plead that *ignorance*, the other source of involuntary action, led him to act involuntarily? This does not seem relevant to the second dilemma, where the clarity of its horns was essential to its staggering power. What about the first dilemma? There are three ways in which we may understand Gyges to have acted through ignorance, to have erred, in the first dilemma. It is worth noting that each mistake, though perhaps relatively insignificant in itself, precipitates the next, and ultimately lands him before queen's crux. First, he should have given less weight to the king's command, understanding that the duty to obey his lord may not, in certain conditions, be binding; this enabled the dilemma to emerge in the first place. Second, on the other side of the

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<sup>44</sup> Aristotle addresses kinds of case similar to Gyges: 'But such actions as are done on account of fear of greater evils...whether they are involuntary [*ἀκούσια*] or voluntary [*ἐκούσια*], is a topic of dispute...Acts such as these are 'mixed' [*μικταί*], but more like voluntary ones. For they are chosen at the very time when they are done...and the origin of these acts is in the agent himself. Such actions, then, are voluntary, though perhaps involuntary when considered absolutely [*ἀπλῶς*], since no one would choose any action of this sort in itself' (*NE* 1110a4-20).

dilemma, Gyges demonstrated an insufficient grasp of the significance of his moral principle ‘looking to one’s own;’ he could (correctly) appeal to principle, with which he could expect Candaules to agree, but once the king did not acknowledge this claim, he was unable to defend it in any serious way. This in turn led to the swift railroading of his objections when the ground shifted from principle to consequence. Finally, Gyges inadequately perceived the consequences of his alternatives; minimally, he overestimated the consequences of disobeying the king, and underestimated the consequences of crossing the queen.<sup>45</sup>

Now would any of these mistakes be sufficient to claim ignorance, and thus render his action involuntary? The most he can claim is that his first two mistakes follow from an incomplete or unclear grasp of what is morally salient or morally required. As such, they have much in common with wrongdoing in general, and so cannot be excused on this ground.<sup>46</sup> The kind of ignorance that makes an action involuntary is one wherein the agent is ignorant of the particular circumstances in which the action is made (*NE* 1111a1-2).<sup>47</sup> Since Gyges clearly doesn’t demonstrate this kind of ignorance, he cannot eschew the inherently voluntary, and hence culpable, nature of his decision.

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<sup>45</sup>To some degree, of course, all human endeavor is blind to the ultimate outcome of our actions. But unless we are willing to thereby call all action involuntary, Gyges cannot claim ignorance for *this* reason. Plato might add that Gyges failed to see how the consequences related to his overall good.

<sup>46</sup> His mistake was not as glaring as ‘I didn’t know that *X* was wrong,’ which of course is no excuse at all. (Cf. the modern view that ignorance of the law no excuse for a crime.) Aristotle likewise asserts that ignorance right and wrong, or of one’s true interests does not qualify as involuntary (*NE* 1110b28-1111a1).

<sup>47</sup> For example, imagine running to the aid of an elderly woman screaming that she is being mugged. You tackle the mugger, and the woman escapes unscathed into the crowd; it turns out, however, that *she* was the one who robbed the man at gunpoint. Clearly you were ignorant of the circumstances, and thus (on Aristotle’s notion) involuntarily aided a thief.

Yet granted that his actions are voluntary, do not the dire circumstances in which he made them warrant understanding, even pity, and mitigated culpability? After all, Gyges surely would not have chosen to do these things if not under coercive duress. Certainly there are cases that most people would recognize as deserving leniency.<sup>48</sup> Now whether or not Gyges' second dilemma qualifies as an action of this type is an open question. It is doubtful that any sharp distinctions can be made *a priori* by which to separate cleanly those actions that deserve leniency from those that do not. However that may be, the way in which Herodotus presents the tale suggests that he, at least, would likely consider Gyges to merit some pardon.

We have expended some effort to understand the degree to which Gyges' exhibits true agency, with all that that entails, because the way our actions, our choices—even our mistakes—relate to our overall well-being is of fundamental concern. Both Herodotus and Plato reflect on this question in light of their shared tragic tradition. Herodotus is an observer of man's foolishness and man's fall, or their contraries, but links happiness only loosely to choice. Plato, as we shall see, will claim a far more robust role for choice in the success or failure of our lives as a whole. Both views entail consequences for how we should conduct our lives.

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<sup>48</sup> As Aristotle says, 'when someone does something he ought not do, on account of such things as strain human nature to the limit, and no one could abide,' these may be met with leniency (*συγγνώμη*) (*NE* 1110a23-26). It should be noted that this view of mitigated responsibility is at odds with that presented in tragedy. Indeed, the poignancy of the tragic situation depends on the belief that the agent bears full responsibility for an action imposed by some necessity: 'If one makes a clear logical distinction, of course, one will say: 'a man who acts under necessity is not acting voluntarily.' But to insist on logical consistency would mean that we should have to reject considerable parts of Aeschylus' tragedies, for many of the tragic situations he presents do, in fact, spring from the rationally indivisible fusion of necessity and personal will' (Lesky 1966, 82).

The tragic patrimony bequeathed to Herodotus and Plato presents a world of darkly obscure forces, where men and women, driven beneath the yoke of necessity, labor to satisfy a divine mandate; but by the very act of carrying it out may be perpetrating criminal, if not morally outrageous, deeds for which they are nonetheless responsible.<sup>49</sup> We have already examined how Herodotus preserves this dynamic of constrained choice while confining it largely to the human realm. Much of what drives a tragic narrative is what befalls a human being, what happens to us that falls outside our control. Such *παθήματα*, ‘things suffered,’ often are seen to undermine rational control of our own well-being.

Yet an equally important inheritance is the role of *ἀμαρτία* or ‘error.’<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, in his discussion of tragedy, makes it clear that reversals of fortune must not be entirely capricious: ‘[the proper tragic character] falls into misfortune, not on account of wickedness or depravity, but on account of some error [*δι’ ἀμαρτίαν τινά*]’ (*Poetics* 1453a8-10). Here again Herodotus displays a mindfulness of his tragic trope, and embodies it rather in an anti-tragic hero: Gyges, for all his hand wringing and *ἀμαρτίαι*, emerges not covered in ashes but wreathed in gold.

What are we to make of all of this? Specifically, may we distill some view of human happiness from the variegated mass of Herodotus’ history, of which the Gyges tale is emblematic?

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<sup>49</sup> So Lesky (1966, 85) notes ‘[the same act] can be the fulfilment of duty, obedience to a divine order, and yet at the same time be a dreadful crime.’

<sup>50</sup> As Sherman remarks (1992, 177-78), ‘what engages us most as tragic spectators is not simply...what befalls the protagonist...Rather, it is how the tragic figure contributes to her own misfortunes. Even where the action is performed under duress as the result of an external conflict, agency (or causal responsibility) is still implicated.’

### Herodotus' Heraclitean Happiness

*ἐκεῖνο πρῶτον μάθε, ὡς κύκλος τῶν ἀνθρωπῆϊων ἐστὶ πρηγμάτων, περιφερόμενος δὲ οὐκ ἔῃ αἰεὶ τοὺς αὐτοὺς εὐτυχέειν.*

Learn this first and foremost: just like a wheel are the affairs of men, and whorling around it does not suffer the same men to be ever fortunate.  
(Croesus to Cyrus, Herodotus' *Histories*, I.207)

The most salient feature of Herodotus' happiness is its transience. His statement at I.5, quoted on page 7, where he observes that 'human happiness never stays in the same place,' is played out in countless variations throughout his sprawling work.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps Herodotus would mouth the mantra attributed to Heraclitus—*πάντα ῥεῖ*, 'everything flows'—but pare its scope from ontological principle to inductive synopsis of the panorama of human fortunes. Moreover, as the tale of Gyges shows us, such reversals bear no *necessary* connection with how skillfully one navigates life's difficult choices.<sup>52</sup> But happiness is not completely untethered from our choices and actions; it is just determined largely by other factors.

Happiness lacks stability because the components of which it is comprised are equally unstable. Not surprisingly, Herodotus does not give us a convenient catalogue of

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<sup>51</sup> See also the introductory quotes to chapters two and three. Cf. VII.45-47: Xerxes, viewing his vast army and fleet, first declared himself happy, but then wept when he considered the shortness of human life, that none of those amassed before him would be alive in a hundred years. Artabanus, his uncle and advisor, replied, 'Other things, more pitiable than this, we have suffered in the course of life. For in a life as short as ours, no man is by nature so happy, either among those here or others, for whom not once but many times it has come into his head to wish himself dead rather than alive. For with disasters falling upon us and illnesses harassing us, even this brief life they make seem long.'

<sup>52</sup> Save the glaring exception for *ὑβρις*, or over-weening pride, as exhibited in, e.g., Croesus and (most notably) Xerxes. This fault of striving to exalt oneself beyond the natural limits afforded human being is reliably followed by a fall.

all and only those factors that contribute to happiness. In the passage at I.5 we get a vague connection between *greatness* and happiness: cities great and small equally will be surveyed, Herodotus tells us, since human happiness never stays in the same place. But what makes a city, or an individual, great? Certainly *κλέος*, or ‘glory,’ is relevant. This thoroughly Homeric value emerges right at the beginning of the *Histories*. Herodotus has set forth his work ‘in order that neither the deeds wrought by men be effaced through the passage of time, nor works, great and wondrous, those displayed both by Greeks and barbarians, be without fame [*ἀκλεῖν*]’ (*Hist.* I.1). Works and deeds—*actions*, then—are among the things that bring honor. But we have seen that actions are fraught with uncertainty, and choices that bring action are darkened with potential error. More than that, though, glory is emptily evaluative, it does not itself specify the actions and choices that warrant it. So we are left facing the same question: what constitutes happiness?

While Herodotus does not give us an answer in the story of Gyges, he does the next best thing. Recall that when Delphi confirmed Gyges as king, it was foretold that the fifth descendent from Gyges would pay for his usurpation.<sup>53</sup> Now Croesus was this descendent, and in the course of his story the reader is privy to a conversation between him and the sage Solon on this very subject. Croesus’ own story, like Gyges’, has many affinities with tragedy; they both err, they both undergo spectacular reversals, but Croesus loses the very things Gyges gained: seemingly limitless wealth and power, and very nearly his life. This inverted equipollence rounds out the arc of men’s fortunes, here

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<sup>53</sup> See n. 33, *supra*.

traced small what cities and empires inscribe on broader parchment. Croesus' discussion of happiness at his apogee renders his fall all the more powerful, and is a testament to Herodotus' deft control of his material.<sup>54</sup>

Upon arriving at Croesus' palace, we are told, Solon was duly entertained and given an extensive tour of the royal treasury's splendors.<sup>55</sup> Croesus, eager to hear confirmation of his superb grandeur from such an illustrious guest, later asked Solon whether he were not the happiest man (*ὀβιωτάτος*) he had ever seen. Before moving to Solon's response, let us be clear as to what Croesus is asking. The Greek *ὄβιος*, like *εὐδαίμων*, can be used both of one's external prosperity and of what we might call true happiness. One may wonder whether this whole query is not predicated upon Croesus' conflation of these two senses. But two things tell against this reading. First, though Croesus does seem to think that wealth is (the greatest part of) happiness, and that to the degree that one has wealth one has happiness; nevertheless, it is clear that he is not asking simply whether he is the wealthiest man Solon has ever seen. If this were all he was asking, then he would have asked an accountant, not a sage. What Croesus is looking for is a judgment, not a balance sheet. Second, as we shall see, Solon understands Croesus' question to be, at heart, about the nature of happiness, and he answers accordingly. Croesus will reject his answer, but he will give no indication that he thinks Solon misunderstood the question.

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<sup>54</sup> This dynamic is repeated in book one of the *Republic*, where Socrates converses with Cephalus and his son Polemarchus, while they yet live in wealth and comfort. The reader knows that shortly thereafter this family would face utter ruin, their wealth plundered and Polemarchus executed.

<sup>55</sup> The full narrative is found at *Hist.* I.30-33. There is general scholarly consensus that this entire episode is fabricated by Herodotus, and does not necessarily reflect the position of the historical Solon.



To return to the story, Solon replied by giving one, then another, case of men he considered happier than Croesus. No doubt he could have continued in this fashion had the king not impetuously cut him off, waxing wroth in his tarnished glory. The particulars of these cases are not as important (for our purposes) as the kinds of laudable attribute they express. As a set, they are thoroughly conventional: birth in an illustrious city, into a respected (if not noble) family, the good repute of the individuals themselves, and possessed of sufficient wealth;<sup>56</sup> if they reach a ripe age, flourishing offspring; but most crucially, perishing in a manner worthy of memory long after their passing. These goods do not necessarily provide an exhaustive list of the components of happiness. Solon later adds comeliness and a life free from deformity and disease. He grants that it is unlikely that one person will possess all components, whatever they are, at the same time, but suggests that a certain aggregate can prove sufficient for happiness, if and only if one can preserve them to the very end his or her life (*Hist.* I.32).<sup>57</sup>

Solon's view of the components of happiness, then, is *retentive*. But it is clear that these factors depend, to a significant degree, upon the vicissitudes of fortune, and so to that extent lay outside our control. If one possesses these things at some point in his or her life, by Solon's lights one is merely *fortunate*; somewhat paradoxically, one can only

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<sup>56</sup> At least enough resources to meet one's daily needs. Solon does grant some benefit to wealth. The wealthy man may more easily satisfy his desires, and he is able to bear calamity more easily. (*Hist.* I.32) But he considers these of less substance than good fortune, since wealth (as Croesus' own case will show) is a paltry salve in severe misfortune.

<sup>57</sup> Curiously virtue is not listed among the goods that make life happy. It is unclear how much may be inferred from this. The list, as mentioned, is not exhaustive; virtue likely would factor in somewhere here, but presumably in a subsidiary manner. Certainly the historical Solon would have deemed it relevant. 'In order to promote the interests of the [Athenian] polis, Solon criticized the greed and injustice of both rich and poor, and he urged that self-restraint and fair-mindedness were central virtues of a political life in common' (Balot 2001, 79). Nor should we infer that Herodotus despised it; see Havelock (1978, 296-307).

be called *happy* from the very moment of death. Aristotle considers, and rejects, this very position attributed to Solon, calling it παντελῶς ἄτοπον, ‘altogether strange’ (*NE* 1099b13). Yet the considerations by which Solon arrives at this bizarre conclusion are not so exotic. After calculating the limit of a man’s life to be twenty-six thousand two hundred fifty days, he drives home his point: ‘Each of these days is entirely different in what it brings; thus, O Croesus, is the whole of man but chance’ (*Hist.* I.32). This is not to say that there is no continuity in our lives, but that whatever we strive to cultivate in our lives—whether wealth, or honor, or anything else of the sort mentioned above—hang perpetually under the inscrutable shadow of fortune.

Does this view, put in the mouth of Solon, reflect Herodotus’ own perspective? It has long been assumed that this episode is programmatic for the *Histories* as a whole.<sup>58</sup> Herodotus provides no less than eighteen passages in which the transience of fortune, and hence happiness, is either stated or implied.<sup>59</sup> There is no reason to doubt, moreover, that the plurality of goods which comprise this happiness (however transient) are considered by Herodotus to be worthy components of the good life. And by this account, we may infer that to Herodotus, Gyges was not only fortunate, but *happy*; for he carried the boon won at Candaules’ expense to the end of his life. These goods are not, we might note, all that different from those esteemed by our own conventional values. In fact, the basic architecture of this happiness has newly been buttressed by a defense of its underlying

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<sup>58</sup> Shapiro (1996, 348) gives a partial bibliography for ‘the many adherents of this view.’ Shapiro herself will renew the defense of this reading against recent challenges.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 357. Shapiro further argues that the mechanism behind this ephemerality, which Solon says is divine jealousy, is also attributable to Herodotus. But this further claim is not without controversy; all that is needed for our purposes is the view that the stability the goods that contribute to happiness is prone to forces external to our control, whether of divine origin or not.

supports. While Herodotus' Gyges offers a counter-example to Plato's defense of justice, this newcomer defends this counter-example's assumptions about the human condition, directly challenging Plato's conception of the flourishing human life in the *Republic*.

### The Fragility of Goodness: Nussbaum's Challenge

*Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?  
Hwær cwom maþþungyfa?  
Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?  
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!  
Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat,  
genap under nihthelm swa heo no wære.*

*Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne,  
her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne.  
Eal þis eorþan gesteal idel weorþeð.*

Where has the horse gone? Where the kinsman? Where has the treasure-giver gone? Where the places of banquet? Where are the hall pleasures? O bright cup! O the mailed warrior! O the glory of princes! How that time has passed away, grown dark under the cover of night as if it had never been.

Here is loaned wealth, here is loaned friend, here is loaned man, here is loaned kinsman; all this foundation of earth becomes desolate.  
(anonymous Old English elegy *The Wanderer*, ll. 92-96, 108-110)

Martha Nussbaum's work, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, crafts a thoughtful and compelling defense of what we have called the 'tragic' perspective. The basic tenet of her position is that the vulnerability of happiness is one of the features that make it distinctly, and beautifully, *human* (Nussbaum 1986, 2).<sup>60</sup> Any attempt to sequester happiness from its inherent insecurity is

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<sup>60</sup>I cannot do detailed justice to Nussbaum's powerful book here; only those general features that dovetail with the tragic and Herodotean view, and the broad strokes of her trenchant critique of Plato (especially the *Republic*) will be considered. This corresponds to the first five chapters of *Fragility*.

bound to sacrifice many of what we consider worthwhile components of the good life. A corollary to this is that the components, the *values*, that comprise human happiness form an irreducible plurality. And as we saw in previous sections, the things we value are prone to shifts in *luck*, that is, to what happens to us (*παθήματα*) rather than what is of our own making (*πράγματα*).

Nussbaum presents her account as faithful to the way our intuitive practical reasoning functions when we consider how to live our lives (10).<sup>61</sup> For the Greek, as for our vernacular understanding, of the good life, no subset of values can be granted even a *prima facie* priority. In particular, she claims that assuming *moral* values have priority over non-moral ones, is not only dissonant with the Greek way of apprehending the matter, but also prejudices the inquiry in a question-begging way (4-6, 28-30).<sup>62</sup> Both kinds of value contribute essentially to our overall well-being, weaving a rich tableau of interests and commitments. It follows that acting morally, preserving certain moral

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<sup>61</sup> She designates her approach as roughly Aristotelian: ‘ethical theorizing proceeds by way of a reflective dialogue between the intuitions and beliefs of the interlocutor, or reader, and a series of complex ethical conceptions, presented for exploration.’ This method has considerable overlap with Socrates’ elenchus, with which he investigated the beliefs of his fellows. Nussbaum, *pace* Aristotle, adds that this theorizing can only be responsive to those who already hold certain values and commitments.

<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum is here thinking primarily of the Kantian approach, for which only moral values are relevant in our choices. She gives two reasons for her own distrust of dividing conflicts into moral and non-moral instances: (1) it is rarely clear what is meant when a conflict is labeled ‘moral,’ as there is no agreement as to what this distinction amounts to; (2) even if (1) is granted, the categories of moral and non-moral do not divide neatly or cleanly (28-29). This second point is particularly weak, as borderline cases do not invalidate distinctions (this fallacy is rife in contemporary critical theory): the fact that I can’t tell exactly where orange separates from red or yellow does not mean that there is no valid distinction between orange, red, and yellow. As to the first point, the fact that there is disagreement on what ‘moral’ means, that is, what makes a moral conflict moral, does not mean that there is not significant agreement on what cases qualify as ‘moral,’ whatever that may mean. Nussbaum seems to be suggesting that intensional disagreement entails extensional disagreement (which is false), or that extensional agreement yields nothing of significance. Yet from the set of agreed cases much can be inferred, however provisionally. Even if her reasons seem wanting, that does not mean that her broader point is not justifiable on other grounds.

values, does not necessarily enhance well-being, since this depends not only on moral, but also on non-moral, values. If I act in accordance with my moral values, but thereby forfeit a host of goods reflecting non-moral values, this may actually decrease my overall well-being.<sup>63</sup> The fundamental parity of value clarifies how, on this view, Gyges may be justified in acquiescing in slaying Candaules, and reaping the rewards.<sup>64</sup> In the totality of values he holds, some are moral, others non-moral; he acts in a way to preserve that subset which (in his assessment of consequences) will contribute most to his overall well-being.

If there is no intrinsic hierarchy to one's values, then it is clear that there will be conflicts in which one will have to choose among competing interests, where they cannot be simultaneously satisfied. Inevitably, then, such dilemmas will bring loss and even regret, regardless of one's choice, since in choosing one interest another is sacrificed (27).<sup>65</sup> And if one's happiness is tied to such values, then it follows that some loss of

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<sup>63</sup> Now the range of particular values, and the goods which are their objects, can also be articulated in terms of *interest*. The goods I pursue will reflect how I conceive my interests, on the assumption that my interests (as expression of my values) contribute to my happiness. As we shall see, the Greeks understood moral considerations as frequently opposed to one's true interests, and serving as an irksome, if socially useful, check on pursuit of one's personal advantage.

<sup>64</sup> It is doubtful that Nussbaum would wish to admit this, but it appears that her account cannot exclude this possibility. Now the lack of priority among values does not entail that we desire all goods exactly the same. Our particular circumstances, history, and disposition make for different gravitational pulls toward different objects of value; but in themselves there is no essential variation of value.

<sup>65</sup> Chapter 2 explores several conflicts from tragedy that follow along these lines. One of the most promising strands that Nussbaum develops is the role of the emotions in navigating difficult circumstances. She advocates considering ethical concerns through tragedy, because 'our cognitive activity...centrally involves emotional response. We discover what we think about these events partly by noticing how we feel; our investigation of our emotional geography is a major part of our search for self-knowledge' (15). Nussbaum goes on to castigate Plato for severing the intellect completely from the other human faculties (see especially chapters four and five). But here she is far too impatient to fit Plato into her predetermined plan; for, as will become clear, Plato does not seek to revile or repress emotive responses, but rather to harmonize them with an understanding of one's true interests.

happiness is unavoidable. Until fairly recently the philosophical tradition generally has not welcomed such dilemmas, however frequently they may crop up in life and literature, constructing procedures to reduce or eliminate them wherever possible.<sup>66</sup> The basic impulse that resists such dilemmas can be summarized (albeit crudely) by the dictum ‘ought implies can:’ if the moral agent faces two equally-weighted (moral) claims, both of which one ought to do, but both of which *cannot* be done, then it cannot be that they *both* ought to be done.<sup>67</sup> The tragic worldview not only embraces such conflicts as inherent to our choices, but further, by implication, it denies that reason can disentangle our values in such a way that it consistently preserves what we value without loss.

This gets to the heart of Nussbaum’s challenge. One of the basic claims of her book is that Plato, in pointed reaction to the tragic tradition, attempts to render the happy life *self-sufficient*, that is, impervious to the assaults of fortune, through the appropriate exercise of reason.<sup>68</sup> It is not difficult to anticipate Nussbaum’s central objections to this project, based on what has gone before: rational self-sufficiency is illusory since so many of our commitments and values are bound up with what lies outside of our control.

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<sup>66</sup> Generally speaking philosophers only worry about conflicts of *belief*, not *attitude*. See Gowans (1987, 4 ff.) for a discussion of how moral theories have historically dealt with moral dilemmas. One common way to eliminate them is *monism*, wherein a ‘theory attempts to reduce moral considerations to a single dimension [e.g. utility] and thereby attempts to eliminate all apparent moral conflicts’ (10).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Plato’s *Euthyphro*, where an account of ‘the pious’ is rejected on the basis of such a conflict (7a ff.): if the pious is simply ‘what the gods love,’ then, since different gods may love different things, one and the same thing may be thus rendered both pious and impious, and this (Socrates concludes) is absurd.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Nothing has emerged more clearly for me during my work on this book than the importance of viewing Plato’s thought, in particular, as a response to this [tragic] complex cultural tradition, motivated by its problems and preoccupations’ (13). And more specifically, ‘The need of human beings for philosophy is, for [Plato], deeply connected with their exposure to luck; the elimination of this exposure is the primary task of the philosophical art as he conceives it’ (90). This position, Nussbaum contends, Plato defends through the middle dialogues, including the *Republic*; but will be revised in his later dialogues to admit to the good life elements that are intrinsically fragile. Our concern is limited to Plato of the *Republic*.

And giving up all those contingent goods would leave a life that is hardly happy, let alone human. It would seem that husking happiness of its risky elements to leave a hard kernel of invulnerability would yield a result akin to Eos' request that Tithonus, her human lover, be granted immortality: she forgot to ask in addition that he be ageless, so over time he slipped ever further into deathless dotage, until he could not even move his limbs, and was eventually laid out in a room where immobile, he babbles on endlessly to himself (*Hymn to Aphrodite*, 218-38). Would anyone be willing to pay such a price for a life without risk of death? Would anyone, by the same token, really consider such a meager happiness worthwhile?

Furthermore, Plato's project does not adequately reflect our complex nature as human beings. Our rationality only accounts for one aspect of our human constitution. Emotions, passions, desires—these too are part of what makes us who we are, and these elements are fully implicated in the world of the contingent (Nussbaum 1986, 141 ff.). How is it possible to lead a fully good life without acknowledging the values associated with these faculties? Nussbaum understands the *Republic* to deny any intrinsic value to such non-rational feelings and desires, and as such their objects would not be components of happiness (144 ff.).<sup>69</sup> Thus does Plato, on Nussbaum's reading, elaborate an account of human nature and human values that rips out, root and branch, all those elements that cannot preemptively be put out of reach of fortune's grasp.

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<sup>69</sup> Nussbaum supports her reading with passages from the *Phaedo* and *Gorgias*, among other dialogues; I do not think (and will later argue) that the *Republic* alone does not univocally support this interpretation.

This thumbnail sketch of Nussbaum's critique readies us for Plato's defense.

Minimally, he must defend two fronts: (1) he must show why acting justly always promotes our happiness better than acting unjustly, and thus demonstrate that Herodotus' Gyges is in fact *not* better off for choosing as he did; (2) he must explain how reason, or philosophy, can inform our interests in a way that does not simply repress our other feelings and desires, and can create a flourishing life that is truly worth living.



## CHAPTER IV

PLATO'S PROGRESS: UNPACKING HERODOTUS IN *REPUBLIC* I

δεῑτοι βαθείας φροντίδος σωτηρίου,  
 δίκην κολυμβητῆρος, ἐς βυθὸν μολεῖν  
 δεδορκὸς ὄμμα, μηδ' ἄγαν ζῶνωμένον.

Surely there is need of deep and salutary counsel;  
 need for a keen-sighted eye, not o'ermuch confused,  
 to descend, like some diver, into the depths.  
 (Aeschylus, *Suppliant Maidens*, 407-9, trans. H.W. Smyth)

And so Socrates went down, at the beginning of the *Republic*, to Piraeus, in order to take in festivities with his fellow Athenians. Soon enough, as chance would have it, he became engrossed in a lengthy discussion on the nature and utility of justice (*δικαιοσύνη*). Three interlocutors and thirty Stephanus pages in, Socrates has managed to reduce even fierce Thrasymachus to a nodding, if defiant, submission. But no one—least of all Socrates himself—is satisfied with their progress, ‘from our discussion it turns out for me that I know nothing’ (354b9-c1).<sup>70</sup> The casual reader may be inclined to take Thrasymachus’ cue that all this eristic swashbuckling has been part of the festival’s entertainment, a pantomimed preamble to the serious business of rest of the *Republic* (354a10-11).<sup>71</sup> This chapter will attempt to show that book one accomplishes some significant work, dramatically demonstrating how ordinary moral agents can err, can go

<sup>70</sup> The similarity of the end of book one with the earlier, so-called Socratic dialogues, has often been remarked. For this classically Socratic egress in ignorance, cf., for example, the end of the *Charmides*, *Lysias*, *Protagoras*. Here, as throughout, ‘Socrates’ should be understood as the Platonic Socrates.

<sup>71</sup> Aristotle likens the Socratic dialogues to mimes at *Poetics* 1447b9-11.

wrong in their deliberations, and how the Socratic elenchus is of limited help in setting them aright. It will turn out that the ways in which Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus each miss the mark correspond to one of the knotted threads discernable in Herodotus' Gyges, each one now disentangled and laid out for consideration.

### **Cephalus' Dark Dreams**

Il se joue un jeu...où il arrivera croix ou pile. Que gagerez-vous?

There is a game on...where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager?  
(Pascal, *Pensées*, 223)

The aged Cephalus, the first of Socrates' interlocutors, is perhaps neither so pious, nor so morally complacent as variously interpreted.<sup>72</sup> His congenial and breezy demeanor belie his clear (if somewhat myopic) grasp of the questions put to him, and his early departure may signal little more than that he has learned, through long acquaintance with Socrates, to flee while he may before Athens' gadfly.<sup>73</sup> Socrates first asks him whether he finds old age grievous, wishing to learn from Cephalus' life experience.<sup>74</sup> Cephalus acknowledges that most of his peers vituperate their hoary senility, and lament youthful pleasures lost,<sup>75</sup> as though now they were but shades of their former substance,

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<sup>72</sup> Annas (1981, 18-23) maintains the latter interpretation, Reeve (1988, 5-7) the former. But many commentators pass right over him without much comment. Broadly I agree with Irwin's reading (1995, 170-71) of him.

<sup>73</sup> Though I will suggest a further reason for his departure.

<sup>74</sup> A common scenario in the early dialogues. The presumption is that one who has experience in a field will best be able to give an account of it (e.g. Gorgias the rhetor of rhetoric, Laches the general of courage, Euthyphro, who claims knowledge of things divine, of piety).

<sup>75</sup> The usual suspects: 'sex, wine, feasts, and such things that pertain to these...' (329a4-6).

deprived of all that made life worthwhile. Yet these pleasures cannot carry such intrinsic value as to alone make a good life, Cephalus counters, since he, for one, is relieved to have escaped them, ‘as if fleeing some raving and savage master’ (329c3-4).<sup>76</sup> No, it is rather the character of a man that determines how he finds old age: if he is moderate and good tempered, then old age is only moderately toilsome; but if not, then both youth and old age will be difficult.

Already Cephalus has said much that Socrates readily would grant. And he has exhibited some critical chops as well: he is able casually to dissect his contemporaries’ view that life bereft of youthful pleasures is necessarily wretched, on their assumption that pleasure is what makes a good life good, while at the same time he points to what he considers the true cause of hardship, an ill-ordered character.<sup>77</sup> For those pleasures are neither necessary nor sufficient for faring well in any period of life. Though Cephalus is suggesting that good character is necessary, he has given no indication that it is sufficient.

Socrates follows up by asking Cephalus whether it is not really his wealth, rather than his character, that enables him gracefully to accommodate his old age. Cephalus readily grants that even a good man, if both old and impoverished, would not be altogether untroubled, but adds that wealth without good character will never produce tranquility. So wealth, if conjoined with the right character, can prove beneficial.

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<sup>76</sup> Cephalus is here quoting Sophocles, whom he once overheard talking about such matters.

<sup>77</sup> *μία τις αἰτία ἐστίν, οὐ τὸ γῆρας, ἀλλ’ ὁ τρόπος τῶν ἀνθρώπων*, ‘There is some one cause, and not old age, but men’s way of life’ *Rep.* 329d3-4. Even at the outset we find a theme suggestively sketched that will be rendered in detail in the course of the dialogue.

Wealth is primarily useful, Cephalus tells Socrates, in order to pay any outstanding debt, any recompense due for past wrongdoing, be it to a god or a man.

For when a man supposes that he is near to death, fear and concern come to him regarding his past affairs, which did not bother him before. And those tales told about the underworld, how the man who is unjust here must pay the penalty there; and though he derided these tales in the past, at that point they torture his soul should they prove true...So he becomes filled with fear and at that point reckons up and looks to whether he has wronged anyone. And the one discovering in his own life many wrongs, like a child he often starts up from his sleep and is afraid, and lives with the expectation of evil to come (330d5-331a1).

Wealth's chief benefit, then, is to hedge one's bets against punishment, if not in this life then in the next. But surely even good men sometimes err and do wrong, and would find wealth useful. Since Cephalus considers himself a basically good man, and finds wealth beneficial, he acknowledges such mistakes as his own; for a life without wrongdoing would have little need of these resources.<sup>78</sup>

Socrates does not follow up on the instrumental value of wealth suggested here, but we may well pause to consider it. For it does not seem entirely consistent with what Cephalus said earlier.<sup>79</sup> For if wealth is the good through which one can barter right for wrong, then *wealth*—however obtained—would seem the best insurance against judgment. If those nocturnal nightmares, those somnolent signs of an uneasy conscience, may be allayed through the appropriate application of wealth, then why should one trouble with the toil of forming a good character? Why not, rather, grasp wealth by whatever means available, and thereby enjoy both comfort in this life, and, through the

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<sup>78</sup> That he considers himself just is implied in his using himself as a counter-example to his fellows who consider the loss of youthful pleasures a bane. It should be noted that Cephalus' valuation of wealth differs in its object from the money-making man described at 554a ff., whose pecuniary desires bend all his efforts to the accumulation of wealth for its own sake.

<sup>79</sup> Cp. Harrison (2002, 28-29): 'the whole treatment of Cephalus is eminently consistent in all its careful detail.'

appropriate sacrifices, secure serenity with regard to the next? Indeed, Herodotus' Gyges seems not to have shunned injustice's profit: recall that after slaying the king and ascending to the throne, he sent lavish offerings to Delphi in atonement for his injustice.<sup>80</sup>

Now Cephalus' ambivalence about the relative importance of character and wealth with respect to one's well-being turns on his underlying belief that an upright character, however praiseworthy, is only weakly connected to securing one's best overall end.<sup>81</sup> Adequate resources play a crucial role, if only they are put to the appropriate use. However much he may champion the virtues of character, his life spent recuperating the family wealth betrays his primary preoccupation.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Cephalus, just like Gyges, is motivated by fear of consequences. This fear is buried beneath his placid exterior, but it drives his twilight offerings, and occludes any openness to realigning his fundamental commitments. The consequences Cephalus fears are not those born of a single moment's choice, the issue of the particular situation, as they were for Gyges. They are rather weighed on the balance of one's life as a whole, and so far more significant. Looking back on his life, and forward to possible consequences, then, for Cephalus involves the need to perform certain actions to hedge against an uncertain future, and thus secure the best overall well-being for himself.

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<sup>80</sup> Adeimantus will pick up and expand this line of thought in book two: 'These same [authorities] say that the gods are persuaded and induced by sacrifices and kindly vows and votive offerings...So if they are to be trusted, we ought to act unjustly and to make sacrifices from the ill-gotten gains' (365e2-366a1).

<sup>81</sup> Herodotus accepts the same principle, but for a reason contrary to Cephalus: for Herodotus, our choices are only weakly linked to our happiness because of the caprice of fortune; for Cephalus, the link is weak because of ability of wealth to amend whatever fortune or, indeed, choice, has wrought. Plato would expect the reader, naturally, to think ahead to the family's catastrophic fall some years after the close of the dialogue; they would foresee that wealth could not forestall it.

<sup>82</sup> Cephalus discusses his family's affairs at 330b1-7. He has labored to restore the patrimony amassed by his grandfather and squandered by his father.

Socrates surely has seen the difficulties inherent in Cephalus' view. Distilling from Cephalus' comments, Socrates asks, 'But are we to affirm that this thing itself, justice, is thus without qualification truthfulness and giving back whatever one has received from another, or is it possible that these very actions are sometimes just and other times unjust?'<sup>83</sup> Of course Cephalus did not intend to give an account of the nature of justice. Yet Socrates foists this on him because Cephalus' position suggests that justice is *performative*, that is, carried out in the performance of certain actions.<sup>84</sup> By challenging the conventional view that justice is reducible to a set of actions, specifiable by rules, Socrates would clear the way for resituating justice as primarily a property of moral agents, not actions.<sup>85</sup>

Socrates does not await Cephalus' answer, he instead gives an example of why this account cannot be right: if a friend loans you weapons, but subsequently goes raving mad, then surely it would not be just to tell him the truth and give him back his weapons.<sup>86</sup> Cephalus readily concedes this, but he does not remain to have his views further examined. Instead he exits with a laugh, handing the argument over to his son

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<sup>83</sup> 331c1-5. Shorey (1946, 1: 19) remarks on this passage that 'it is a Platonic Doctrine that no act is *per se* good or bad.' Cf. *Statesman* 294b: 'Because law could never, by determining exactly what is noblest and most just for one and all, enjoin upon them that which is best; for the differences of men and of actions and the fact that nothing, I may say, in human affairs is ever at rest, forbid any science whatsoever to promulgate any imple rule for everything and for all time.' (trans. Fowler) What is said there about law is equally applicable to moral rules.

<sup>84</sup> The transition is less jarring in Greek, as second part of the expression *διδόναι δίκην*, 'to pay a penalty,' mentioned by Cephalus in his description of what the unjust must do in Hades (330d8), is cognate with *δικαιοσύνη*, 'justice.' See Havelock (1978) for an interesting study on the evolution of the notion of justice.

<sup>85</sup> Pace Annas (1981, 22).

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Herodotus' Gyges inability to discern factors that would yield exceptions to the generally binding claim of king's commands.

Polemarchus, and heads off to the sacrifices. For Cephalus has made his wager, as Pascal might put it, and seems to believe that it is better, at this late hour of his life, to heed the tales of post-mortem punishment and perform the requisite sacrifices; if the stories prove untrue, then he will have lost little, but if they *are* true, then he has everything to gain.<sup>87</sup>

### Polemarchus and the Risks of Refutation

*ἀξίνετοι ἀκούσαντες κωφοῖσιν εὐίκασι· φάτις αὐτοῖσι μαρτυρεῖ παρεόντας ἀπεῖναι.*

They are void of understanding, although having heard [the truth]<sup>88</sup> they are like unto the deaf. The saying ‘absent while present’ bears witness to them.  
(Heraclitus, fr. 34)

We shall consider Polemarchus primarily as representative of the kind of ordinary moral agent that appeals to canonical thinkers or beliefs to justify a claim, but without being able to assess adequately the strengths and weaknesses of the precepts on their own merits.<sup>89</sup> Even if there is merit to these beliefs, they will hold limited benefit for the uncritical adherent; for it leaves his or her beliefs prone to attack and upheaval by one more clever in the arts of argument and persuasion. And once these beliefs are

<sup>87</sup> *Pensées*, 223. Reeve (1988, 9) implausibly claims that ‘Cephalus cannot benefit from the elenchus because his character is already as good as Socrates’. Cephalus does not benefit from it rather because fear of uncertainty ultimately precludes him rethinking his deeply-held values, and how they relate to one another. R. Robinson notes (1966, 7) that Cephalus is one of the only cases that Socrates converses with someone without refuting him; of course this is simply because he doesn’t give Socrates the chance.

<sup>88</sup> Following T.M. Robinson’s (1987) conjecture.

<sup>89</sup> By limiting our perspective we will not elaborate other aspects of the discussion between Socrates and Polemarchus, because they relate only peripherally to the concerns of this paper. It is worth noting, in passing, that here we find (if we follow Cross and Woollsey (1966, 13 ff.), whom I think get it right) Plato’s critique of his own use of the craft (*τέχνη*) analogy, on the ground that skills, unlike the virtues, can admit of contrary valuations, can confer either benefit or harm. Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1129a11-17, where he asserts that justice cannot be a faculty (*δύναμις*) or a science for this very reason. Kahn (1996, 148) argues that craft becomes dialectic (*διαλεκτική*), the philosopher’s master art, in the central books of the *Republic*.

unanchored, and the moral agent is left adrift in the grey expanse of doubt, then there is potential—depending, perhaps, on whether the untethering influence is that of a Socrates or a Thrasymachus—for the agent to realign his or her commitments narrowly to satisfy selfish interests and desires.<sup>90</sup> Polemarchus does not come to this end, but it is no accident that his place in the discussion is taken over by Thrasymachus, who fully evinces this model.

Polemarchus defends the account of justice that Socrates has just overturned by a simple appeal to authority: ‘By all means it is so, Socrates, at least if we must have confidence in Simonides’ (331d4-5).<sup>91</sup> Now to one who would grant the unquestionable authority of Simonides, the only remaining issue would be whether or not Simonides actually says what is attributed to him. But Socrates prods Polemarchus to interpret and defend his authority, rather than just genuflect before it. Accordingly Polemarchus offers that Simonides means that ‘it is just to render to each one what is due [*ὀφειλόμενα*]’ (331e3-4). Yet again Socrates presses Polemarchus to specify what this means, since presumably it cannot mean what was just refuted, namely, that one return borrowed weapons to a madman. Moreover, the notion of ‘what is due’ is vague enough to admit

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<sup>90</sup> This kind of person is discussed in book seven (538c6-539a1): ‘We have, I suppose, beliefs from our childhood concerning just and fine things in which we have been reared, just as children by parents, obeying and honoring them...When a questioner comes and asks a man of this type, ‘What is the fine [*τὸ καλόν*]?,’ and having answered what he heard from the lawgiver, the argument refutes him, and both frequent and diverse refutations overthrow him, so that a thing is no more fine than shameful, and similarly concerning the just and the good and those things which he most of all held in honor...Then, when he no longer considers these things honorable and proper, as he did before, and is unable to discover the truth, is it possible that, in all likelihood, he will go over to any other sort of life other than the one that flatters his desires?’

<sup>91</sup> Poets were the traditional moral teachers of the Greeks. Simonides was a Greek poet to whose authority, like Homer’s, it was common to appeal. Plato constantly plays with this poetic tradition, and often ironically affirms the wisdom of poets, as seen in Socrates’ reply: ‘But surely it is not easy to disbelieve Simonides, for he is a wise and inspired man’ (331e5-6). Cf. 334a10-b5.



several articulations, some of which Socrates would embrace, but others reject.<sup>92</sup> Finally Polemarchus settles on the traditional formula that one ought to help friends and harm enemies.<sup>93</sup> He has not strayed far from the proverbial tree.

Working from this traditional account of justice, Socrates, quickly puts Polemarchus back on his heels. His first two arguments, the details of which are not important here, exploit the assumed similarity of acting justly to the exercise of other skills or crafts; by the end of the first Socrates leads Polemarchus to conclude that the unique domain of justice is so narrow as to be nearly useless; by the end of the second, Polemarchus admits that the just man is skilled equally in acts of injustice as he is in acts of justice.<sup>94</sup> Neither of these arguments is very convincing, and one has the distinct impression that a sharper opponent would have challenged Socrates on a number of points that Polemarchus concedes. At any rate, when Socrates asks him whether this was what he meant by his original claim, Polemarchus exclaims, ‘Not at all, by Zeus! But I no longer know what I meant.’ And yet, for all his bewilderment, he adds, ‘Nevertheless I still believe this: justice is helping one’s friends, and harming one’s enemies’ (334b7-9). Polemarchus is not yet shaken from his position because the first two arguments

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<sup>92</sup> Socrates makes a similar manoeuvre at 338c5-339b7. Thrasymachus has defined justice as ‘the advantage of the stronger,’ and Socrates seeks similar clarification, ‘since I also agree that the just is some sort of advantage.’ See Dougherty (2007) for an analysis of this passage, and a discussion of how what may seem an eristic move on Socrates’ part is merely a goad to get his interlocutor to clarify an equivocal term.

<sup>93</sup> See Blundell (1989, chapter 2): ‘Greek popular thought is pervaded by the assumption that one should help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies’ (26).

<sup>94</sup> Both of these arguments exhibit an inductive component, which Kraut (1983, 59-60) rightly notes as frequently part of the Socratic elenchus. This is a corrective to Vlastos’ (1983) account of the elenchus, which will be discussed shortly.

depend on premises that he holds with less conviction than his original thesis and his firm, if conventional, belief that justice must be a good.<sup>95</sup>

Before turning to Socrates' next move, let us disengage from the passage and consider the Socratic elenchus itself, in its assumptions and application. Some understanding the basic outlines of the method will enable us to see its limitations, and prepare the way for Plato's methodological shift.<sup>96</sup> The term 'elenchus' is related to the verb *ἐλέγχειν*, 'to cross-examine, question; to disprove, confute.' Socrates himself does not systematically discuss his method; it is left to the reader to reconstruct and analyze. Two aspects of the elenchus will concern us: the conditions and assumptions necessary to get it off the ground, and the method's basic procedure which almost inevitably ends in refutation.

The elenchus may be described roughly as an evaluation of an individual's beliefs, effected through the interplay of short questions and answers, seeking moral truth.<sup>97</sup> It is fundamentally social by nature, flexible and responsive in the manner peculiar to conversation.<sup>98</sup> In principle anyone who shows an interest in such matters

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<sup>95</sup> Socrates appeals directly to a related assumption about justice at 335c4: 'And is not justice the excellence proper to human beings?' Polemarchus readily grants it. This is worth noting, because Thrasymachus will deny the conventional view that justice is a good, which makes his refutation more difficult (348e5-349a3).

<sup>96</sup> This brief sketch cannot aspire to completeness. Fuller treatment of the elenchus may be found in R. Robinson (1966) and Vlastos (1983).

<sup>97</sup> For this last feature, which is not wholly uncontroversial, see Vlastos (1983, 32-34). The pursuit of the truth is one feature (another is saying only what one believes) that distinguishes the elenchus from eristic, which seeks only argumentative victory, by whatever means.

<sup>98</sup> Unlike the written word: 'You would think that they speak as though having intelligence, but if you ask something of the words, wishing to understand them, they always signify one and the same thing. And once

may be subject to Socrates' examination,<sup>99</sup> but in practice he usually engages those who have some expertise, some pretense to knowledge. Socrates, of course, claims only to know that he knows nothing.<sup>100</sup> Though his examination is always of some individual's beliefs, it is equally concerned with articulating the best life for a human being.<sup>101</sup> The presumption is that everyone desires to live the best life afforded mortals, and that if this life can clearly be set out, of what the happy life consists, then *by that very understanding* one should be motivated to attain it. Knowledge, then, yields not only justification, but also motivation for living a certain kind of life. This is why Socrates insists that his interlocutor always say what he truly believes, in order that, by overturning false beliefs, he may effect a therapeutic result that amounts to nothing short of a conversion to the pursuit of the best human life.<sup>102</sup>

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it is written, every word is tossed about everywhere, equally among those who understand, and similarly among those who have no interest in the matter, and it does not know to whom it should speak or not; and when it is wronged or unfairly reviled it always stands in need of its father as a source of help; for it has no power to protect or help itself' (*Phaedrus*, 275d-e). Socrates, in the *Apology*, likens his defense, which cannot proceed by question and answer, to 'fighting with shadows' (18d). Speeches are little better, as set speech opposed to set speech requires not only the speakers, but also judges to decide between them. Conversation requires only the persons involved, their own beliefs and own admissions (348a1-b7).

<sup>99</sup> 'I shall never stop philosophizing and exhorting you, and pointing out [the truth] to anyone of you whom I happen upon...who says that he does care [about virtue]...' (*Apology* 29d-e).

<sup>100</sup> So says Socrates at the end of book one (353b9-c1): 'From our discussion it thus turns out for me that I know nothing.' Cf. *Gorgias* 509a4-6, *Apology* 21d2-6. The Platonic Socrates, though, will of course seem to have a number of beliefs he considers true through the course of the *Republic*.

<sup>101</sup> See the quote heading the introduction. Cf. *Gorgias* 500c3-4.

<sup>102</sup> Which life, for Socrates, is the life of virtue. Later in book one (346a3-4), Socrates urges Trasymachus, 'Do not answer contrary to your belief, in order that we may accomplish something.' Cf. *Gorgias* 500b, *Crito* 49d. Sesonske (1961, 34) misses this connection between truth and motivation when he claims that 'the essential characteristic for Socrates of oral argument is not truth but *conviction*.' There is a strong cognitive component to virtue for Socrates and Plato, where knowledge of, say, justice, is necessary for being truly just.

The elenchus is able to proceed when Socrates' interlocutor has put forward some thesis, usually in answer to a 'what is  $X$ ?' question, which seeks the essential nature of the concept under consideration.<sup>103</sup> Socrates, after clarifying the thesis, then asks his interlocutor whether he would grant certain additional premises; these are not themselves argued for, but accepted as true.<sup>104</sup> (These additional premises are usually those that Socrates himself would grant, though this is neither made explicit nor essential to the argument.) From these additional premises the denial of the original thesis is derived, and Socrates' interlocutor admits that this contradiction follows from the argument.

At this point there are two choices available to Socrates' interlocutor. He has conceded that his set of beliefs is inconsistent, that his beliefs cannot together be true. So one or more of the beliefs must be rejected or modified; either he can withdraw his initial thesis, or he may reject one (or more) of the additional premises. Socrates does not himself indicate what his interlocutor should do.<sup>105</sup> One might expect an obstinate opponent to reject one of the additional premises to preserve his original thesis and his

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<sup>103</sup> This corresponds to what we might call a 'real definition.' See Moore (1966, 8) for kinds of definition, R. Robinson (1966, chapter 6) for the 'what is  $x$ ?' question. Examples are 'what is piety?' (*Euthyphro*), 'what is courage?' (*Laches*), and in the *Republic*, 'what is justice?'; here the question is reached in a rather backdoor manner, as we have seen in the discussion of Cephalus.

<sup>104</sup> Vlastos (1983, 40-41) points out that these are not accepted because they are self-evident truths, or because they necessarily represent the most widely-accepted belief on the subject; Socrates is only concerned with whether his interlocutor will accept them. This pattern here presented roughly follows Vlastos' 'standard elenchus' (39), but trimmed of the more controversial (and as I think, less plausible) features.

<sup>105</sup> Though Vlastos (39) thinks that Socrates claims to have proven the denial of the thesis true, and the thesis itself false. This view is also supported by Irwin (1995), see n. 107, *infra*. A weaker version will do for our purposes (whatever Socrates may have thought): that *this* argument cannot be used to show the truth of the thesis. For other arguments could be proffered in support of the thesis; we could claim that one argument has invalidated them all only if the other premises are necessary or self-evident truths, and so cannot reasonably be rejected.

pride. But usually the premise to be dropped is the thesis itself.<sup>106</sup> This is presumably because the honest interlocutor will see that, upon reflection, his thesis has less plausibility, or is less bound up with other deeply-held beliefs, than the other premises.<sup>107</sup> If the thesis is abandoned, then another may be offered; but against each subsequent definition the elenchus is renewed, until, at last, the interlocutor disengages in puzzlement over the essential nature he thought he knew.<sup>108</sup>

Let us return now to the text, and consider a case of the elenchus in action.<sup>109</sup>

Recall that Polemarchus has clung to his thesis that justice consists in helping friends and harming enemies. Socrates then gains assent for three additional premises: (1) that by ‘friends,’ Polemarchus means those whom a person deems good, and by ‘enemies’ those deemed bad; (2) that people can make mistakes on this matter, so that many seeming

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<sup>106</sup> As Cephalus gave up his “definition.” Polemarchus on the other hand, retained his definition, because it is a piece of received wisdom that was more deeply engrained than the other premises. Thrasymachus will try to save his thesis by modifying a seemingly incontrovertible premise.

<sup>107</sup> The problem as to which premise to reject has vexed many commentators, and is closely related to Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge. See Fine (1999, 2: 2-5) for a survey of solutions. Irwin (1995, 17-21) defends the view that Socrates believes he can derive positive conclusions from the elenchus because he accepts the following two assumptions: (1) that his interlocutors will ultimately keep and reject the same premises as other reflective moral agents would; (2) these judgments and decisions are justified. Since we are concerned here not with what Socrates may or may not know, but with the beliefs of his interlocutors, we need not delve into this debate. Socrates is (as he himself said at *Theatetus* 149a ff.) merely the midwife; his interlocutors must take ownership of their own beliefs.

<sup>108</sup> Many scholars hesitate to attribute to the elenchus only a negative function, of showing that the interlocutor’s beliefs are inconsistent. See, for example, Kahn (1996, 137-142), Irwin (1995, 20-21). As R. Robinson (1966, 14) drolly remarks, ‘Socrates was certainly a unique reformer if he hoped to make men virtuous by logic.’

<sup>109</sup> The elenchi in *Republic* 1, although mainly exhibiting the standard form, differ from many other examples in the dialogues at least in this respect: Plato gives us good reason to suspect many of these cases are in some way fallacious or at least unsound, which inadequacies are to be rectified by the constructive, largely non-elenctic argument of the rest of the work.

good are in fact bad, and *vice versa*; (3) those who are good are just. Socrates then draws the net to a close, yielding the following elenchus:

- (0) It is just to benefit friends and harm enemies.
- (1) A friend is whomever one thinks good; an enemy whomever one thinks bad.
- (2) It is possible to mistake a good person for a bad, and a bad person for a good.
- (3) A good person is just (and a bad person unjust).
- (4) Thus it is possible (if one errs) justly to harm a good person, and benefit a bad.
- (5) Therefore it is possible justly to benefit one's enemies and harm one's friends (334b1-d6).

Polemarchus sees, once Socrates reaches (4), that argument has gone awry, even before it reaches the formal contradiction of his thesis in the conclusion. But this concern is not because he thinks the argument is invalid, but because (4) entails a proposition that runs contrary to his (unstated) belief that it is not the part of justice to harm those who are good. Upon considering the premise set, he thinks that he should modify (1) to make a friend one who not only seems, but is, good, and the one who seems, but is not really, a friend, an enemy.<sup>110</sup>

It is worth noting that two important themes for the *Republic* are introduced in the above elenchus. First, human beings are liable to make mistakes about what is of real value, whether we're talking about relationships or other interests. Polemarchus does not challenge this premise; it is an empirical fact evidenced in everyday life. This mistake regarding true value was also made by Herodotus' Gyges, and may be seen in any of a number of examples from tragedy.<sup>111</sup> Second, and related to the first, is the distinction between seeming and being, so fundamental to Plato's ethics, metaphysics, and

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<sup>110</sup> Note that among the premises (1) through (3), (2) and (3) are premises almost anyone would grant.

<sup>111</sup> For example, Creon in *Antigone*.

epistemology.<sup>112</sup> The interconnectedness of these two themes is manifest in Polemarchus' attempt to elude the elenchus' conclusion. By reformulating (1) he may preserve his thesis for the moment, but it does not solve the epistemological problem that it raises, it just shifts it to a different quarter: if, as Polemarchus now supposes, an enemy is one who may seem a friend, but is not really so, then of course it is still possible to mistake him for a friend. For unless one has some further criterion to determine the true state of affairs, the being behind the seeming, the fact that both friend and enemy *seem* friendly is no help at all.

From here Socrates constructs a final argument that will lead Polemarchus to admit that a just person does not harm anyone, whether friend or enemy. The argument is particularly weak;<sup>113</sup> the fact the Polemarchus so quickly buckles before it underscores his lack of skill and experience in argument.<sup>114</sup> Yet *he* believes that he has been given sufficient reason to abandon his original thesis; since he values justice, he has been shown (as he thinks) why it is in his interest not to harm anyone. From this point forward, Polemarchus falls into the background of the dialogue, brushed aside by the impatient Thrasymachus. Polemarchus has been purged of his conventional belief about

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<sup>112</sup> Its bearing on ethics will be seen in Glaucon's challenge; the metaphysical and epistemological distinctions between appearance and reality, opinion and knowledge, as brought out in the central books of the *Republic*, will only tangentially be discussed.

<sup>113</sup> On the problems with this argument, see Allen (2002, 25), Cross and Woosley (1966, 21-22), and Annas (1981, 31-33), who calls it 'the most dubious.' The argument is basically this: (1) To harm anything is to make it worse with respect to its particular excellence (*ἀρετή*). (2) So to harm a man makes him worse with respect to his particular excellence. (3) Man's particular excellence is justice. (4) Therefore, to harm a man makes him less just, or unjust. (5) Therefore, Polemarchus' justice can make a man unjust.

<sup>114</sup> Plato is surely aware that these arguments are fallacious. As Reeve (1988, 8) observes, 'Socrates' refutation of Polemarchus is flagged by Plato as trading on transparent misinterpretation, which Polemarchus in neither sharp enough nor well trained enough to detect.'

justice, but it is clear that he lacks the resources to replace it with a better account of its nature. Had the dialogue ended with book one, Socrates' elenchus unwittingly may have cracked the door to moral skepticism for Polemarchus.<sup>115</sup> Even had Polemarchus' conventional notion of justice been substantially correct, his inability to defend it adequately before an adroit opponent likely would have led to the same result. Herodotus' Gyges is not all that dissimilar to Polemarchus in this respect: both proved impotent to defend adequately their deeply held, but shallowly understood, conventional principles; moreover, their principles were set aside because they were persuaded that it was in their best interest to do so.

### **Thrasymachus and Elenctic Decline**

Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given to them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question incapacity to act on any...Indeed it is generally the case that men are readier to call rogues clever than simpletons honest, and are as ashamed of being the second as they are proud of being the first.  
(Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, III.82, trans. Crawley)

As the conversation between Socrates and Polemarchus reaches an aporetic pause, Thrasymachus erupts and overruns the discussion, his companions unable to restrain his billowing frustration any longer, and he rains down spite and scorn upon the

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<sup>115</sup> So Reeve (1988, 9) thinks, adding that 'Polemarchus can only be harmed by [the elenchus] because his character is not yet fully formed.' Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1095 ff.



interlocutors, who fly asunder before his onslaught. Impetuous and clever, he pillories the simple-minded morality embraced by Polemarchus and Cephalus (and, we might add, Herodotus' Gyges). From one perspective, he may be understood as isolating and invigorating elements latent in these earlier figures, particularly the preoccupation with consequences that promote one's perceived interests, separating them off from those precepts of conventional morality with which they uncomfortably chafe. He represents, in short, the logical end to which one may come, for whom the anchoring cords of traditional morality have been cut. In opposition to the dully-moralizing Hesiod, the canonical champion of justice, who blathers incessantly about the prosperity of the just and wretched diminution of the unjust, Thrasymachus offers a view (he thinks) grounded in *reality*, in the way the world actually works.<sup>116</sup> He offers no blandly prudent gnomes, no fairytale rewards, no bedtime terrors; he offers only an unblinking view of one's interests, and how to seize them.

Thrasymachus in fact offers three different formulations of the nature of justice, which may or may not be logically consistent with one another.<sup>117</sup> But more important than these accounts are two beliefs underlying them, namely, that 'injustice is stronger, freer, and more masterful than justice,' and 'the just man always and everywhere fares

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<sup>116</sup> Hesiod claims, for instance, 'Neither famine nor disaster ever haunt men who do true justice...They flourish continually with all good things...But for those who practice violence and cruel deeds far-seeing Zeus, the son of Chronos, ordains a punishment. Often even a whole city suffers for a bad man who sins and devises presumptuous deeds, and the son of Chronos lays great trouble upon the people, famine and plague together, so that the men perish away, and their women do not bear children, and their houses become few, through the contriving of Olympian Zeus' (*Works and Days*, 230-245, trans. Evelyn-White).

<sup>117</sup> They are (1) justice is the advantage of the stronger (*κρείττονος*, 338c2-3); (2) justice is the advantage of the rulers of an established government (338e6-339a2); (3) justice is the good of another (343c3-4). The consistency of these propositions have been debated at length. See, e.g. Chappell (1993), who gives a brief overview of the positions scholars have staked out. Given the right qualifications, it seems to me that they can be made consistent with one another, though nothing hinges on this reading for this paper.

worse than the unjust man.’<sup>118</sup> Here we have the bare assertion of the immoralist, enrobed in the finery of *Realpolitik*. Apart from fear of getting caught, the Thrasymachan agent countenances no reason to be just. And if these beliefs are correct, then he has warrant to pursue his injustice as far as his strength will permit.<sup>119</sup> Justice is no longer a virtue and a good for its possessor, but rather ‘an altogether noble simplicity,’ and injustice ‘good and prudent counsel.’<sup>120</sup> So contrary to the normal valence and significance of these terms, injustice now usurps the mantle of wisdom and virtue, and becomes dispenser of all good things.

While Thrasymachus may alter the usage of these terms to reflect his understanding of how the world actually works, it tasks Socrates with a heightened challenge. Polemarchus’ refutation was due in no small part to his implicit agreement that justice is a virtue and a good, and Socrates was able to appeal to his moral intuition at critical points in the discussion. But any argument with Thrasymachus cannot proceed

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<sup>118</sup> 344c5-7, 343d3, respectively. To the first belief he adds the qualification that it be practiced on a sufficiently grand scale.

<sup>119</sup> Thrasymachus was not alone in these beliefs. Thucydides has the Athenian envoys to the Spartan assembly state that ‘it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger. Besides, we believed ourselves to be worthy of our position [of empire], and so you thought us till now, when calculations of interest have made you take of the cry of justice—a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had the chance of gaining anything by might’ (I.76, trans. Crawley). Note that, on this view, appeal to justice only arises when the strength of injustice fails. This point is developed into the origins of a contractualist justice by Glaucon in book two.

<sup>120</sup> *πάνν γενναίαν εὐήθειαν* and *εὐβουλίαν*, respectively (348c12, d2).

‘speaking according to conventional beliefs.’<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Socrates is willing to treat Thrasymachus’ claims seriously, assuming that he is still voicing his own beliefs.<sup>122</sup>

The two beliefs mentioned above cap an encomium to injustice that Thrasymachus forcefully delivers, after having been drawn—much to his dismay—into contradiction by Socrates. One of the elenctic arguments that led to this point is worth considering here (339b9 ff.), as it connects with Socrates’ prior discussion with Polemarchus, and points forward to a distinction that Plato himself embraces and develops later in the *Republic*, which will be crucial to his defense of justice.

In elaboration of his first account of justice as the advantage of the stronger, Thrasymachus avers that it is the stronger that rule, and as rulers, they craft laws that preserve their advantage. Now since it is generally understood that it is just to obey the laws under which one lives, it turns out that it is just for the ruled to do what is to the advantage of the stronger, their rulers. This all seems plausible enough. Yet this account of justice lies open to the very same difficulty Polemarchus encountered:<sup>123</sup> is it not possible for the rulers to err, to legislate what they think is to their advantage, but that actually results in their disadvantage? Surprisingly Thrasymachus grants this without apparently seeing its consequence, and Socrates immediately draws the inference that it is

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<sup>121</sup> κατὰ τὰ νομιζόμενα λέγοντες (348e8-9).

<sup>122</sup> Thrasymachus does not place any value on this feature of the elenchus, and the motivation of moral reform behind it. He seems to relish the thrust and parry of debate only with a view to victory. In response to Socrates’ expressed hope that he is speaking in earnest, he replies, ‘What difference does this make to you, whether it seems thus to me or not? Why not just examine the argument?’ (349a9-10)

<sup>123</sup> See p. 53 *supra*.

just not only to do what is advantageous, but also what is disadvantageous, for the rulers. So justice cannot simply be the advantage of the stronger.

The first to acknowledge the contradiction is Polemarchus, who chimes in, ‘Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, the conclusion is absolutely clear’ (340a1-2). By choosing Polemarchus to reenter the conversation briefly to corroborate the difficulty, we are reminded that he too was stuck on this point; Plato is making the broader observation that the possibility of error leaves a measure of insecurity in our judgments and plans, in the very methods we use to reach for the good life. Polemarchus attempted to close this gap; his attempt failed, though he did not recognize the failure, and Socrates did not press the point.

Thrasymachus decidedly rejects a similar maneuver, offered by Cleitophon; instead he saves his thesis by offering a clever amendment of the premise that landed him in this discomfort: rulers to do not err *insofar as they are rulers* (340d1-341a4). When rulers make a mistake, they are not called rulers with respect to this error; rulers, insofar as they are rulers, never err. The same thing applies to experts in any discipline—physicians, accountant, grammarians, and the like. So while rulers are ruling they make no mistakes, but when they fail in their knowledge, and no longer are true craftsmen, then they go astray. It is just our loose manner of speaking that attributes error to rulers or other experts. Given that this distinction comes from the mouth of Thrasymachus, one may suppose that he engages in logic chopping only as a means to avoid refutation. This may well be the case. But Plato will pick up on this notion of the true ruler, one of a

philosophic nature and training, whose knowledge would prevent him or her from falling into the kinds of error we've seen exhibited in this paper thus far.<sup>124</sup>

In the end, however, despite his twists and turns, Thrasymachus again gets caught in the elenctic web. He is clearly frustrated: he had jumped into the fray expecting glory, and has found that his prize is refutation. His own admissions have reduced him to a sweating, blushing—yet still defiant—advocate of injustice (350c12 ff.). He claims he still can meet Socrates' arguments, if only he be rid of all this back and forth, question and answer, and be allowed to harangue at length. If Socrates insists on questioning him further, he will answer 'as we do for old women telling tales, and say 'very well,' and nod and shake my head' (350e2-4). In short, he refuses to answer according to his beliefs as the elenchus requires. To his discredit, Socrates continues on, and rams home his "refutation." The arguments he proffers are uneven, at best. And not surprisingly, no one is satisfied when Socrates finally proclaims justice more profitable than injustice.

By the end of book one, the Socratic elenchus has unraveled, and its shortcomings laid bare for the reader to see. Most fundamentally, the elenchus has proven ineffective for its stated purpose.<sup>125</sup> Not a single one of Socrates' interlocutors, either here elsewhere, has experienced a conversion to the pursuit of virtue by means of elenctic refutation. Thrasymachus is perhaps the most spectacular failure on this front.

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<sup>124</sup> Our interest will not be with the ruler *per se* (since we will not consider Plato's political ideas), but with the philosopher; these two are identical in Plato's ideal city.

<sup>125</sup> See earlier discussion, pp. 49-52, *supra*. Cf. *Apology* 36c5-7, where Socrates proclaims to the Athenians: 'I attempted to persuade each of you not to care for his possessions before caring for himself, that he should be as good and wise as possible...' And again, *Apology* 38a1-6: 'You will not believe me, as though I were speaking ironically, if I say again that this happens to be the greatest good for man: to talk about virtue every day, and other things, concerning which you hear me speaking and examining myself and others, and that the unexamined life is not worth living for mankind.'

Another problem is that the elenchus can only guarantee valid, not sound, arguments. The first book of the *Republic* offers several elenctic arguments that rely on dubious, or at least uncertain, premises. If the purpose of the elenchus is to persuade an interlocutor to emend his beliefs through argument, it seems that Socrates himself can at times get in the way. As Adeimantus later says,

No one, Socrates, would be able to controvert these statements of yours. But, all the same, those who occasionally hear you argue feel in this way: They think that owing to their inexperience in the game of question and answer they are at every question led astray a little bit by the argument, and when these bits are accumulated at the conclusion of the discussion mighty is their fall and the apparent contradiction of what they at first said; and that just as by expert draught-players the unskilled are finally shut in and cannot make a move, so they are finally blocked and have their mouths stopped by this other game of draughts played not with counters but with words; yet the truth is not affected by the outcome (487b1-c4, trans. Shorey).<sup>126</sup>

Under such conditions the respondent inevitably loses his or her receptiveness to the elenchus' therapeutic function. Even if one is convinced by an unsound elenchus, it is unlikely that it will prove of lasting effect. We have all been persuaded by a speaker or an argument at some time, but afterward, upon reflecting on the matter anew, once we come to realize that the reasoning was faulty or unclear in some way, then its power and effect evaporate, and the previous opinion likely reasserts itself. Consider Polemarchus: he was brought finally to relinquish his hold on his conviction that the just harm their enemies. Yet even should the proposition that the just never harm anyone have merit, the doubtful nature of the argument confuses the issue, and the inexperienced thinker may easily mistake a poor argument for a poor conclusion.

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<sup>126</sup> Cf. Sesonske (1961, 34): 'The men, young and old, to whom Socrates brings his mission usually mean what they say at the outset of the discussion; they begin with sincere assertions of their convictions. And Socrates insistently solicits agreement for each step of the developing argument. But somehow, unaccountably, conviction drains off along the way.'

A third reason the elenchus ultimately fails is because each of Socrates' interlocutors brings a different disposition, upbringing, life experience, and rational acuity to the conversation, which undoubtedly clouds or conditions the elenchus' effectiveness. Hence Cephalus runs off to the sacrifices, unphased by Socrates' questioning, Thrasymachus smoulders recalcitrantly, and Polemarchus is left an empty vessel, purged of its contents but without replenishment. Now even if an elenchus proceeds flawlessly to its end, these other contingent factors largely determine how the interlocutor will modify his or her beliefs relative to other commitments and values.<sup>127</sup>

Plato will not abandon the elenchus all together. But he comes to understand that it is only one part of the puzzle of nurturing virtuous and happy human beings. In a later dialogue, the elenchus is described as preliminary to a broader educational program; like a physician who purges the patient's body before other treatment may begin, so the elenchus is a purgative of one's false beliefs, and prepares the way for true knowledge (*Sophist* 229e-230e).

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<sup>127</sup> '[The elenchus] only tells you *that* you are wrong, and does not also tell you *why*' (R. Robinson, 1966, 17).

## CHAPTER V

## PLATO'S GYGES

κῶς δ' ἂν εἴη χρῆμα κατηρημένον μοναρχίῃ, τῇ ἕξεστι ἀνευθύνῳ ποιέειν τ βούλεται; καὶ γὰρ ἂν τὸν ἄριστον ἀνδρῶν πάντων σπάντα ἐς ταύτην ἐκτὸς τῶν ἐωθότων νοημάτων στήσειε. ἐγγίνεται μὲν γὰρ οἱ ὕβρις ὑπὸ τῶν παρεόντων ἀγαθῶν, φθόνος δὲ ἀρχῆθεν ἐμφύεται ἀνθρώπῳ. δύο δ' ἔχων ταῦτα ἔχει πᾶσαν κακότητα· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὕβρι κεκορημένος ἔρδει πολλά καὶ ἀτάσθαλα.

How indeed is it possible that monarchy should be a well-adjusted thing, when it allows a man to do as he likes without being answerable? Such license is enough to stir strange and unwonted thoughts in the heart of the worthiest of men. Give a person this power, and straightaway his manifold good things puff him up with pride, while envy is so natural to human kind that it cannot but arise in him. But pride and envy together include all wickedness; both leading on to deeds of savage violence.  
(Herodotus, *Histories*, III.80, trans. Rawlinson)

Now Glaucon, who quietly followed the discussion to this point, would not let the matter rest. For he perceived that, though Thrasymachus may have been 'charmed like a serpent,' the best statement of his position was not refuted (358b2-3). Accordingly, he articulates a new defense of injustice, though it does not reflect his own beliefs, which he challenges Socrates to overturn.<sup>128</sup> Despite taking the form of a renewed defense of injustice, it is perhaps better recognized as the beginning of Plato's response, since the way in which the challenge is framed influences, to a significant extent, the shape of the rebuttal.

<sup>128</sup> Glaucon makes it clear that Thrasymachus is not the only adherent of his so-called pragmatism: 'It does not at all seem thus to me, Socrates. And yet I am at a loss when my ears are deafened by hearing Thrasymachus' arguments and those of countless others' (358c6-d1).



As a preliminary to his defense, Glaucon introduces a three-fold division of goods. Goods may be desired (1) only for their own sake (*αὐτὸ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα*), (2) only for the sake of their consequences, (3) both for themselves and for their consequences.<sup>129</sup> Some clarification is needed here. By (1), he means ‘what power [*δύναμιν*] each one has in itself [*αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό*] dwelling in the soul’ (358b5-6). This signals that the distinction between the first two classes is not quite that of our modern division of intrinsic and extrinsic worth; for not all consequences are excluded from (1).<sup>130</sup> The consequences of justice or injustice may be conceived as falling into two kinds: either those derived *internally* from the thing itself, through its own nature (included in class 1), or those derived *externally* from being perceived by other people as being just or unjust (class 2). Most people, Glaucon continues, would place justice in the ‘toilsome category of goods [i.e. class 2], which must be practiced for the sake of rewards and good reputation based on the opinion of others, but that in its own right it ought to be avoided, since it is grievous’ (358a4-6).<sup>131</sup> Socrates, on the other hand, while he grants the existence of these three classes, places justice in the third, which he considers the finest.

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<sup>129</sup> 357b4-d2, presented in a slightly different order. In (1) Glaucon places such goods as joy and harmless pleasures that result in nothing other than their enjoyment; in (2) we find goods that are in themselves onerous, but chosen for their benefits, e.g., exercise, medical treatment, moneymaking; (3) contains such goods as wisdom, health, and sight.

<sup>130</sup> And so this corresponds neither to a strictly utilitarian nor deontological demarcation, into which modern ethical theories tend to divide.

<sup>131</sup> It is worth noting that ‘the many’ view justice as some kind of good, albeit an instrumental one, contrary to Thrasymachus, who would not openly affirm this. Yet, as perhaps Glaucon saw, it was implicit in his view: surely the ruled derive some benefit, some good, from obeying the laws of their rulers, in the form of social stability and the rule of law (however skewed to the favor of the rulers as it may be).

On behalf of a strictly instrumental justice, Glaucon develops his defense along three fronts. First, he gives an account of the origin and nature of justice; then, he furnishes a ‘great proof’ [μέγα τεκμήριον] that no one practices justice willingly, but only from necessity; and finally, he justifies this practice on the grounds that the unjust person is better off by far than the just (358b8-c5, d5 ff.).

### **The Origin and Nature of Justice**

Justice, Glaucon proposes, is nothing other than a grand compromise between greed and fear. By nature, everyone desires to perpetrate injustice as a good, but fears the even greater evil of suffering injustice at the hands of others (358e4 ff.).<sup>132</sup> One’s ability to do the former but avoid that latter depends on strength, as Thrasymachus suggested; yet since most people lack the force to reliably press their advantage, they consider it to their overall benefit to agree with one another neither to commit nor suffer injustice. In this way laws and institutions sprang forth, and so too justice, for this is its origin, and its nature nothing but a second-best safeguard.

Describing the essential nature of justice is a crucial preliminary to understanding its power and benefit. This was one of the glaring inadequacies of book one, where, since Socrates and Thrasymachus could not agree on the nature of justice, any discussion

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<sup>132</sup> Glaucon is here making use of the then-widespread distinction between νόμος and φύσις, between convention (or law) and nature, to explain the origins of the social contract. On this distinction, see Guthrie (1971, 55-130). Cf. also *Gorgias* 492c, and *Protagoras* 322b for use of the same distinction, but with opposing valence (Callicles promotes brutish nature, and Protagoras civilizing law). Life without just institutions may resemble what Plato later says in a different context: ‘with eyes ever bent upon the earth and heads bowed down over their tables people feast like cattle, grazing and copulating, ever greedy for more of these delights; and in their greed kicking and butting one another with horns and hooves of iron they slay one another in sateless avidity...’ (586a6-b3, trans. Shorey).

as to whether it was a good or not, or more or less a benefit than injustice to its possessor, was severely undermined. Socrates compares their failure to take the inquiry in the proper order to be ‘like gluttons, with their grabbing hands, always tasting whatever is passed along before adequately enjoying the preceding dish’ (354b1-3).<sup>133</sup> Indeed, this priority of definition will be one of the salient features of Socrates’ defense.

### Gyges and his Ring

Next Glaucon offers a thought experiment as proof that, even with the above social contract in force, anyone afforded sufficient strength or stealth to commit injustice would *choose* injustice over justice (359b7 ff.).<sup>134</sup> Imagine that two people, one just and the other unjust, are granted the power or license (*ἐξουσίαν*) to do whatever they desire. Glaucon imagines, by way of digression, this license to be of the sort that came by chance to Gyges the Lydian (359d1 ff.).<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Glaucon’s working account of justice presented here, however loose and incomplete it may be, is sufficient for his purposes; he is anticipating that Socrates will provide a different, and better, definition in his defense.

<sup>134</sup> The minor theme of force and stealth appear occasionally throughout the dialogue, e.g., when Thasymachus told Socrates that he would never get the best of him in argument, by force or stealth (341a9-b2); it also occurs throughout Herodotus, where all sorts of stratagems succeed where strength alone is insufficient.

<sup>135</sup> Some scholars deny that this refers to the same Gyges of the Herodotus tale, but rather his ancestor. The OCT text edited by Slings (2003) here reads *τῷ Γύγον τοῦ Ἀνδοῦ προγόνῳ*, ‘to the ancestor of Gyges the Lydian.’ See Adam’s (1965) appendix to book two for support of this reading. A variant reading in Proclus and various manuscripts, and followed by Shorey (1946), is *τῷ γύγι*, ‘to Gyges, the ancestor of the Lydian,’ the Lydian presumably being Croesus. Shubert (1997, 256, 258) drops the *Γύγον*, ‘of Gyges,’ which was also bracketed by Ross, the former editor of the OCT text. I follow Shorey’s text here, and claim that this is the same person as Herodotus’ Gyges, based in part on the fact that Plato refers to ‘Gyges’ ring’ later, at 612b2, and in part because if we assume they are different, then we have two individuals (either named or related to a Gyges), both of whom overthrew a king and thereby gained the Lydian throne and queen. And this would be a coincidence beyond the realm of plausibility. Either way, it seems clear that Plato is making reference to the Herodotus tale, whether or not we identify the characters or not. Naturally, Plato is not presenting his tale as history, so we need not sharpen our knives over the identity of the two.

Now Gyges, the story goes, was a shepherd in the service of the Lydian king. One day, after heavy rains and an earthquake opened a chasm in the earth near where he was shepherding, he went down and beheld many wonders, among which was a golden ring on the finger of a huge corpse. Gyges slipped off the ring, and ascended out from the pit. Later, at meeting of the shepherds, as he fumbled with the ring, he discovered that if he turned the collet of the ring inward, he became invisible, as made clear by his companions speaking of him as though absent. After experimenting with the ring for a time, in order to ascertain its power, Gyges contrived to be sent as a messenger to deliver the monthly shepherds' report to the king. Once there, he seduced the queen, then with her complicity slew the king and seized the kingdom.

Returning to our just and unjust subjects, Glaucon bids us suppose that each is given a ring similar to Gyges' in power, and that we follow each of them in imagination, to wherever their desires take them. Glaucon supposes that the just and unjust alike would gravitate to injustice, 'because of the grasping self-interest [*πλεονεξίαν*] which by nature people of every disposition pursue as a good, but by law perforce are diverted to honor fairness (359c4-6).' In other words, but for the constraining force of law and social convention, any person granted such power would run after injustice, just as Gyges did, under the belief that it was to their own profit. In public all praise law, but in secret every heart yearns for more.

### The Choice of Lives

But Glaucon wants more than a *descriptive* account, he also offers a *prescriptive* one; that is, his challenge is not only to show that human beings do in fact behave in a certain way, but also that they are justified in so acting. To this end he offers the so-called Choice of Lives, a second thought experiment, in order to compare the life of the most completely just and most completely unjust man, each the perfect (*τέλειον*) representation of his kind, and see which one fares better in the course of their lives (360d8 ff.).

Imagine first the completely unjust man. Let him be like a clever craftsman, who knows the capabilities and limits of his art; he skillfully plies his craft of injustice without getting caught, or if he does make some mistake, he is able, by persuasion or by force, to correct it. But most of all, he must *seem* just even while perpetrating the greatest injustices; he must reap the reputation and rewards that normally accrue to the just person: wealth and friends, and all other such good things.

Next imagine the completely just man, Glaucon continues, ‘a sincere and refined man who, as Aeschylus says, desires not to seem but to be good; now take away the seeming’ (361b6-c1). All benefits that are laid upon the just by others must be removed, transferred to his unjust counterpart, because otherwise it would not be clear whether the just person chooses justice for itself or for these extraneous rewards. But even worse, let the just man be assigned a reputation for the worst injustices, though he has done none, even to the point of suffering torture and death.

From these two cases, Glaucon concludes, it becomes clear that it is the *seeming* that matters, not the *being*, at least when it comes to acting according to virtue. It is open to the shrewd unjust man, the champions of injustice say,

first to rule in his city, by seeming to be just, then to gain a wife from whatever family he wishes, and to give his children to whomever he desires, to engage and form partnerships with whomever he wishes, and in all these affairs to derive profit and advantage, since he does not scorn committing injustice. Moreover, entering into struggles, whether public or private, he prevails and claims a larger share than his opponents; and, since he gains more, he is rich, and helps his friends and harms his enemies, and renders sacrifices and sets up votive offerings to the gods in a fitting and magnificent manner, and courts the gods and those among men whom he wishes, far better than the just man, so that it is likely that he is more dear to the gods than the just man. So much better, they say, Socrates, is the life provided for the unjust man from gods and men than that for the just man (362b2-c8).

Thus does Glaucon bring his argument to a close, on behalf of those who praise injustice.

### **Analysis of Glaucon's Challenge**

The introductory three-fold division of goods contains several points that Plato will unpack in his defense. Perhaps its most salient feature is the relation posited between the taxonomy of goods and happiness. The reader familiar with Aristotle's hierarchy of ends may have been surprised to find that Socrates claims priority for the third category of goods, that justice is valued not only for its own sake, but also for its externally derived consequences. Aristotle would place his highest good, happiness, in the first, since it is chosen for itself, but not for the sake of anything else (*NE* 1094a18 ff.).<sup>136</sup> And indeed Socrates will expend the bulk of his effort arguing that justice is to be

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<sup>136</sup> See also n. 2, *supra*. Vlastos (1991, 108) christens this the Eudaimonist Axiom, everywhere assumed but nowhere argued: 'Happiness is desired by all human beings as the ultimate end of all their rational acts.' Devereux (2004) challenges the prevailing consensus that Plato is an eudaimonist; but it is difficult

desired in itself,<sup>137</sup> since most people already grant that it is also desired for its external consequences. Yet it may seem particularly odd that happiness itself does not appear in the highest category. Is this not, after all, the greatest good, the prize after which justice and injustice are vying? True enough; but the reason for its absence is that happiness stands beyond the three-fold division, toward which all other goods incline.<sup>138</sup> This is indicated (albeit without much clarity) by Socrates when he says, ‘I suppose that [justice] belongs in the finest class, which must be loved by one who would be happy, both on account of itself, and on account the things that come from it.’<sup>139</sup>

From this comment of Socrates we may also discern an implicit hierarchy of goods. The third class Socrates marks as the finest; it also is singled out as especially relevant for attaining happiness, although which class (or subset of a class) contributes

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to see how his position can make sense of the central challenge of the *Republic*, namely, to show that justice promotes our happiness better than injustice.

<sup>137</sup> In the sense specified on p. 64 *supra*, which includes consequences that derive from its own power, as opposed to those derived from the approbrium or disapproval of others.

<sup>138</sup> Thus Irwin (1999, 165): ‘The threefold division presupposes the supremacy of happiness, and the subordination of all three classes of goods to happiness, since they are all chosen for the sake of happiness.’ For Plato, as for Aristotle and later Hellenistic thinkers, there is no real tension between choosing virtue both for itself *and* for the sake of happiness, and need not imply a psychological egoism. See Annas (1993, 127 ff.) for a discussion of this point.

<sup>139</sup> Ἐγὼ μὲν οἶμαι, ἦν δ’ ἐγὼ, ἐν τῷ καλλίστῳ, ὃ καὶ δι’ αὐτὸ καὶ διὰ τὰ γηγνώμενα ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἀγαπητέον τῷ μέλλοντι μακαρίῳ ἕσθαι (358a1-3). Precisely what kind of relationship Socrates is positing between justice and happiness has been the topic of much wrangling. The two main camps are (1) those claiming that the relationship is *causal* (e.g., White 1984, Sachs 1963), and (2) those maintaining that justice is the most important *part* of happiness, a dominant good that may not be alone sufficient for happiness, but that at least makes just people happier than unjust (e.g., Irwin 1999, Kirwain 1965). I have adopted the latter characterization of goods as parts of happiness, though on both accounts, happiness in some way is the *consequence* of justice. For further discussion of this relationship, see pp. 86 ff., *infra*. See also Vlastos (1991, 109).

most to happiness is precisely what is at issue.<sup>140</sup> This is significant because it amounts to a denial of Nussbaum's assumption that there is no class of goods that has an even *prima facie* priority in determining one's happiness.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, he is offering happiness itself as the criterion for determining priority (since everyone desires happiness most of all); whatever contributes most to it *ought* to be privileged. Note that the taxonomy is not a distinction between moral and non-moral goods; Plato is not illicitly trading off any presumption of precedence for justice, *because* it is a moral good, in making his case.<sup>142</sup> In this respect, Plato is accepting the challenge to show that, even if one's interest is the only consideration, that agent still has reason to choose justice over injustice, as the best way to secure happiness. His answer is, then, equally relevant to the case of Herodotus' Gyges, whose misconstrual of interest led to his unjust action. Of course Socrates still has to make his case; how he goes about arguing to this conclusion is the topic of the next chapter.

Glaucon's first thought experiment, that of Gyges and his ring, naturally seeks points of contact with its Herodotean predecessor.<sup>143</sup> And indeed it seems to have

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<sup>140</sup> Glaucon cites wisdom, sight, and health as other goods of this class, though there are certainly others (357c2-4).

<sup>141</sup> See pp. 35 ff., *supra*. Happiness, again, is not simply a subjective emotional state, but rather represents the best life, the most flourishing life, available for a human being.

<sup>142</sup> Even though Socrates himself believes this, and many people would grant it; he wants to make an argument that even Thrasymachus would not be able to dismiss, and so uses premises recognized by all.

<sup>143</sup> Williams (2006a, 100-1) objects to this counterfactual on two grounds: (1) it is not very plausible, as 'the motivations of justice will be sufficiently internalized not to evaporate instantaneously if the agent discovers invisibility;' (2) it is not clear how relevant this thought experiment is to real life; it is merely comparing reality with fantasy. Both of these objections can be met. As to (1), there is nothing that prevents the decline into immorality to occur over time. Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine a person



features in common with Gyges' first dilemma in Herodotus. Each Gyges is presented with a choice to do either what he believes right or what he believes wrong. Both choose the latter course, but only once certain inhibiting adverse consequences are removed. Plato places special emphasis on the freedom of choice because it clarifies the desires and motivations of the agent. In the case of Herodotus' Gyges, as we have seen, his first dilemma was not nearly so oppressed by necessity as he thought; he chose with relative freedom what he thought was in his best overall interest, though reluctant even to the end to abandon principle. The duress that Herodotus' Gyges faced disappears with the introduction of the ring, as Plato recognizes that fear or other intense emotions can cloud an ordinary agent's moral deliberations, and so may have muddied (Herodotus') Gyges' motivations.<sup>144</sup> Yet in both cases, the injustice seems to have brought rewards sufficient to justify their actions.

Now there are some apparent differences between the two Gyges. Plato's version is an unapologetic opportunist, who exhibits no qualms with pursuing injustice, while Herodotus' is a basically decent moral agent. The fact that Herodotus' Gyges chose as he did in the first dilemma does not entail that he does not care at all about justice in its own right. If this is right, then even though each Gyges chose injustice on the basis of consequence, it does not follow (contrary to Glaucon's claim) that anyone acting in a

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that is always looking to gain his or her own advantage, to 'milk the system' as we might say, for whom the plunge *would* be nearly instantaneous (cf. the Herodotus quote at the head of this chapter). As to (2), the counterfactual is relevant because it clarifies the agent's desires that are more obscure in daily life. We all can construct plausible scenarios wherein an agent can exploit an almost certain freedom from detection. Calling it 'fantasy' is not particularly relevant; many of the thought experiments in, for example, physics, proceed on premises that are equally unrooted in reality as we know it (e.g., 'Imagine you are in a space ship in the Andromeda Galaxy traveling at light speed...'). It does not follow that nothing useful can be inferred from them on this basis.

<sup>144</sup> Plato's moral psychology will be discussed in the next chapter.

similar manner values justice *only* as an instrumental good. But it does suggest that considering the whole range of one's values, justice is only one commitment among many, and so may reasonably be swept aside in order to achieve one's best overall good.

The second thought experiment, the Choice of Lives, brings out this point even more clearly. Again, it may be read with the Herodotus account, but here as a resetting of Gyges' second dilemma, expanded from one fearsome tragic moment to a way of life. Again the artificial confines of the tragic motif are abandoned since dread necessity potentially confuses the issue of choice. In both the Choice of Lives and Gyges' second dilemma, the choice is between justice on the one hand, and the most important (non-moral) goods on the other. At the end of the Choice of Lives, Glaucon catalogues many of the goods that the completely unjust man acquires: power, riches, an illustrious wife, for starters.<sup>145</sup> Were these not precisely the goods that Herodotus' Gyges gained?

But more than this, Glaucon catalogues those goods conventionally attached to justice, and for which reason most people value justice, but now as won through injustice: the ability to help friends and harm enemies (Polemarchus' account of justice), winning favor of the gods through sacrifices and offerings (cf. Herodotus' Gyges and Cephalus), and the approval and friendship of men.<sup>146</sup> In short, in view of the whole range of human values—relationships, material goods, securing divine favor—these all can be achieved through perfect injustice. So, what possible reason is there to be just? Only an unjust

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<sup>145</sup> See quotation pp. 68-69, *supra*.

<sup>146</sup> Though not discussed earlier, one of the benefits of justice that Polemarchus suggests is in partnerships and associations (333b-c); here too, the unjust man comes out ahead.

death awaits the just man.<sup>147</sup> Who, then, would think it better, even on reflection, to suffer than to commit injustice?

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<sup>147</sup> No doubt Plato has Socrates' own fate in mind.

## CHAPTER VI

## PLATO'S DEFENSE OF JUSTICE

ἡμῖν δ', ἐπειδὴ ὁ λόγος οὕτως αἰρεῖ, μὴ οὐδὲν ἄλλο σκεπτόν ἢ... πότερον δίκαια πράξομεν... ἢ τῆ ἀληθείᾳ ἀδικήσομεν πάντα ταῦτα ποιοῦντες· κἂν φαινώμεθα ἄδικα αὐτὰ ἐργαζόμενοι, μὴ οὐδέη ὑπολογίζεσθαι οὐτ' εἰ ἀποθνήσκειν δεῖ... οὔτε ἄλλο ὅτιοῦν πάσχειν πρὸ τοῦ ἀδικεῖν.

But for us, since the argument thus constrains us, we must look to nothing other than...whether we shall act justly...or, in truth, we shall be acting unjustly in doing all these things; and if it appears, in doing them, that these things are unjust, then we should not take any account of whether I should die...or should suffer anything else whatsoever, when the alternative is acting unjustly.  
(Socrates in *Crito* 48c6-d5)

Plato's response to Glaucon's challenge (and by extension, to Herodotus' Gyges), to demonstrate that the just man is happier than the unjust, is first articulated not as an argument but as an analogy: justice is to the soul what health is to the body.<sup>148</sup> If this is granted, then the further question of whether it is better to be just or unjust, is, as Glaucon remarks, ridiculous (445a5-b4). For if the body is ruined, then all the delights that attend it are meaningless; so too for the soul, if it is corrupted by injustice, what real profit would Gyges derive from his ring? This analogy, taken alone, manifestly begs the question. Thrasymachus would certainly not grant it, as Plato is well aware. In order to fill out this glimpse of an answer, and determine the strength of its fully-elaborated form, we need to consider (1) Plato's account of the nature of justice, (2) its relation to his

<sup>148</sup> '[Just and unjust actions] are not at all different for the soul than healthy and diseased things are for the body' (444c6-7). And again: 'Virtue, then, as it seems, would be a kind of health, beauty, and vigorous state of the soul, while vice is sickness, ugliness, and weakness' (444d12). For an earlier appearance of this analogy, see *Crito* 47e6 ff.

underlying moral psychology, (3) how justice fits into the overall scheme of goods relative to happiness, and (4) how reason, and in particular philosophy, is essential to the just agent's happiness.<sup>149</sup>

### Justice

The analogy with health turns on the assumption that the soul, like the body, is composed of parts which, if properly arranged, attain a harmony of purpose and function, and constitute a unity that reflects its optimal condition.<sup>150</sup> The soul is found to have three parts: the reasoning part (*τὸ λογιστικόν*), the appetitive part (*τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν*), by which the soul 'loves, hungers, thirsts, and flutters over the other desires,' and the spirited part (*τὸ θυμοειδές*), by which the soul feels righteous indignation (439d4 ff.).<sup>151</sup> By nature each of these parts has its own proper function; and justice, it turns out, is nothing other than each part *τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν*, 'doing its own.'<sup>152</sup>

The essential nature of justice, then, is 'doing one's own,' but attaches properly to an *internal*, not external, state of affairs:

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<sup>149</sup> This paper will not examine the arguments presented in book nine (580d ff.) to prove that justice is also more *pleasant* than injustice, as this further question is, strictly speaking, extraneous to the central question of happiness. They are likely offered as further proofs against those who misjudge the good to be pleasure (505b-c), intended to show that, even by their own criterion of pleasure, the just life turns out to be better than the unjust life.

<sup>150</sup> A more detailed analysis of this assumption follows in the next section, but a proleptic synopsis of certain aspects will render Plato's account of justice more intelligible.

<sup>151</sup> The modern reader need not be concerned over antiquated notions of souls and their parts; in more contemporary vernacular, one could replace 'soul' with 'psyche;' Freud, too, would divide his psyche into parts, though they do not neatly align with Plato's division.

<sup>152</sup> 'We must remember, then, that each of us in whom each part performs its own [function], that man will be just and will mind his own affairs [*τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν*]' (441d11-e1). The same account of justice was applied earlier to the ideal just city (432b ff.), but it is explicitly stated that the moral properties belong primarily to individuals, and only derivatively applied to cities (435e).

Justice...is not [primarily] concerned with the doing of one's own externally, but with doing his own within and with what is truly himself and his own; one who does not suffer each part in his soul to do each the work of another or allow the different kinds in him to meddle with one another, but arranges well what is truly his own. He rules and orders himself and is his own friend, harmonizing the three elements in him...and from many he becomes one, moderate and properly attuned. Thus harmonized, only at this point, does he act (443c10-e3).

In revealing justice a feature of souls, first and foremost, Plato's ethics may be understood as *agent-centered*, and not *act-centered*.<sup>153</sup> Actions are not irrelevant, though, since they may promote and preserve a just (or, indeed, an unjust) state of the soul (443e6-7). Yet a single just act, or unconnected assortment of such acts, naturally cannot a just person make.<sup>154</sup> One's character is the stable disposition to act in certain ways, as reflected in habits developed over the course of life.

Now this internal conception of justice is unconventional. As we have seen, traditional justice is concerned with actions. But if one interprets 'doing one's own' as equivalent to performing certain actions, it is clear that for any given action, it is possible to perform it without having a corresponding inner harmony. Any such act, however just it may seem, may be done with unjust motives. Although Plato needs to elucidate precisely why this internal harmony matters, it does not seem wholly implausible. Even a marginally reflective person believes that *motives* matter; to take two commonplace

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<sup>153</sup> There is broad agreement on this point, e.g., Annas (1981, 20-22), Mabbot (1937, 474), and Vlastos (1971a, 67). According to an agent-centered ethics, the key question is 'what kind of character does the moral agent have?;' whereas to an act-centered theory the question is 'what kind of action is it?' On the former account, just actions are the kinds of action just agents would do; on the latter, agents are just because their actions are just.

<sup>154</sup> Vlastos (67, n. 6): 'that *any* just act, or arbitrarily selected set of just acts, must "pay" would be patently false (except perhaps for an egoistic utilitarian who might so define 'just act' as to make it true); and that Plato would think it false is distinctly implied in the *Republic*, e.g., in the portrait of the 'oligarchic' man (553e ff.): though unjust (he defrauds orphans), this man has a fine reputation for justice in his business; so there would be stretches of his life during which he performs only just acts, and if just acts *per se* made one happy he would have stretches of happiness; but Plato pictures him as never happy (554c-d).'

examples, a gift given with dubious motives is received with suspicion, not gratitude; similarly, someone may perform a just action only from fear of getting caught committing injustice. In addition, as we have seen, expiatory acts of justice prescribed by traditional Greek morality serve as a better measure of a person's wealth than his or her character.

But this is not to deny that there are significant points of contact between conventional and Platonic (internal) justice: Plato thinks that an internally just agent in fact performs many acts that are conventionally just. He applies cases commonly agreed to be instances of unjust action to see whether or not his internally just man would act in this way, and with Glaucon's assent finds that he would refrain from such actions (442e-443a). Some scholars have inferred that Plato believes that if an action is Platonically just, then it will also be conventionally just.<sup>155</sup>

What about the converse of this conditional—if an action is conventionally just will it also be Platonically just? Certainly Plato would reject this, and with good reason. The dialogues are littered with conventional moral agents whose moral beliefs are inconsistent, and so at least in part false. But this lack of co-extensionality has led some to cry foul. It has been claimed that Plato has agreed to demonstrate that an agent is better off if he or she is conventionally just, but goes on to show that he or she is better off if *Platonically* just.<sup>156</sup> In other words, Plato commits the fallacy of irrelevancy

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<sup>155</sup> Sachs (1963, 46) and his followers think Plato maintains this. Yet while Socrates and Glaucon consider a range of cases in which this obtains, it seems doubtful that Plato would endorse this conditional. For if conventional justice harbors mistaken assumptions, such as that it is just not to harm one's enemies, then if it is Platonically just not to harm one's enemies, the conditional is false.

<sup>156</sup> Sachs ignited this controversy; see Dahl (1991) for a more recent treatment of this question.

because he changes the subject. On this objection, Plato's answer is relevant only if both a Platonically just person is also conventionally just, and a conventionally just person is Platonically just.

This objection, though intelligible, is puzzling. For if the range of just actions must be co-extensive for Platonic and conventional justice, then Socrates' entire mission becomes obscure: he was not exhorting his fellow Athenians simply to follow conventional justice, questioning only whether their individual actions are truly cases of conventional justice; rather, he tried to get them to examine and clarify their conventional beliefs about justice in a way that better captures what it means to be virtuous. But even if one concedes that the objection has some force, Plato cannot be accused of simply pulling a 'bait and switch.' In posing his challenge to Socrates, Glaucon clearly states that most people believe that justice is an instrumental, that is, an external good; he wants Socrates also to show that it is a good in itself, by its own power in the soul—that is, that it is an *internal* good (358b). So if there is a fallacy here, it is not surreptitiously slipped into the answer, but follows from how the issue is framed.

The objection of irrelevancy can be met if Plato's theory of justice is taken as *explanatory* of certain features of conventional justice.<sup>157</sup> The breakdown of psychic harmony is taken to explain some forms of commonly recognized unjust behavior (590a6 ff.), to show how and why the agent has gone wrong. Moreover, an internal conception

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<sup>157</sup> Pace Annas (1981, 161-63). See also Vlastos (1971a) who addresses this objection by arguing that Plato endeavors to prove that in fact having a harmonious soul is what being a just man *means*. 'What a man does is for Plato only an 'image' of what he is; his 'external' conduct is only a manifestation of his 'inner' life, which is the life of the 'real' man, the soul; and since he thinks that a definition of *F* as a statement of what *F* 'really is,' he could only count the psychological formula as the true definition of an individual's justice.' (82)



of justice provides the mechanism by which the just person is happier than the unjust—the true quarry of the investigation—a mechanism which conventional justice, as we have seen, can only weakly and contingently provide.<sup>158</sup> But these issues are best treated in the following section.

Before turning to Plato's moral psychology, though, let us review Plato's answer thus far. The bald outline of his answer, the justification of which is still to come, is that justice produces a psychic harmony in the soul akin to health in the body. This justice, moreover, consists of each part of the soul 'doing its own.' Now it is curious how similar this formulation of justice is to the earlier accounts of how one should act, whether or not they were specifically articulated as definitions of justice. Recall that Herodotus' Gyges appeals to the principle of 'looking to one's own' as a principle of right conduct; for Cephalus, justice is looking to one's own affairs, to ensure due payment is made for any wrong committed, either to a god or man; for Polemarchus, justice means looking to one's own in terms of helping one's friends; and finally, for Thrasymachus, who did not consider justice a good at all, nevertheless espoused a principle of looking to one's own, by which he means looking to one's own interests to the extent that one's strength or stealth can procure them. The point here is not simply that 'looking to one's own' is a rather malleable idea, but that moral agents can possess roughly the right principle, but unless they truly appreciate its meaning, they can go catastrophically wrong in their moral deliberations and actions. Getting it right involves more than the right disposition or right upbringing, or even being able to cite a sound

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<sup>158</sup> Since, as Glaucon's challenge shows, injustice (under certain conditions) is consistent with those advantages conventionally attached to justice.

moral principle; for Plato, it requires possession of the kind of knowledge that only philosophy can provide.

### **Plato's Moral Psychology**

Unpacking Plato's metaphor of psychic harmony will show why he thinks his analogy with bodily health is legitimate. To do this, a clearer understanding of each of the soul's parts and their proper relation to one another is necessary. Conversely, once the structure of this harmony is explained, it will be possible to see how the breakdown of psychological harmony results in injustice and wrongdoing in general.

Plato's division of the soul into three parts amounts to the theory that there are three irreducible determinants of choice and action.<sup>159</sup> Each part not only has its own function, but also its own corresponding desires and ability to motivate (580d). But let us take each part in turn. The rational part's function is twofold: to seek out and learn the truth and to rule the other parts of the soul (441e3-5, 442c4-7). Now to these functions there attaches the desire for truth and wisdom, and so this part is called a 'lover of learning' and 'lover of wisdom' (581b6-11). The spirited part, whose function is righteous anger, is a natural ally of the reasoning part in keeping the soul's appetites in check, and serves as the prick of conscience when one falls into wrongdoing (439e-441c).

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<sup>159</sup> Plato's argument for the three parts proceeds from an application of the principle of non-contradiction; having identified three basic functions (learning, feeling righteous anger, desiring pleasures and other appetites), and having posited that one may feel attraction and repulsion to the same object, he states 'it is clear that the same thing will be unable do or suffer opposites [*τὰναντία*] in the same respect and with regard to the same thing at the same time, so that if we ever find this come to pass in the soul, we shall know that it was not the same function but a plurality' (436b9-c2). Plato himself proceeds with this division as a hypothesis, suggesting that if it proves false, then whatever depends on it will need to be rethought (437a). Cooper (1984) argues convincingly that Plato's tri-partite soul captures many facts about our psychological makeup that later theories (including Aristotle's two-part division) do not. I shall focus on the rational and appetitive parts, however, as these are most relevant to our purposes.

This part strains after honor and competitive victory, as is thus called ‘honor loving’ and ‘victory loving’ (581a9-b1); in modern terms, this part is related to our sense of self-esteem.<sup>160</sup> The appetitive part is less sharply defined, but contains all those appetites that pertain to the pleasures of the body, both natural and harmful, and whatever accompanies these.<sup>161</sup> ‘Money loving’ this part is called, because money is the chief means by which such appetites are satisfied (580e5-581a1).<sup>162</sup>

Given these three parts, then, why should reason rule? Moreover, is not the rule of reason compatible with Glaucon’s completely unjust man, who cleverly perpetrates injustice like a master craftsman? Even Thrasymachus would embrace such a “justice.” As to the first question, owing to its desire for knowledge and wisdom, reason is the only part which knows ‘what is advantageous for each and for the whole, which is the community of the three’ (442c4-7). The other two parts desire each its own objects, but without any regard for the others, or to what is best for the person as a whole. It is easy to imagine how an intense desire for victory, say, or certain pleasures, if pursued doggedly without any concern for one’s other values and commitments, could be eminently self-destructive. Further, the reasoning part makes this determination based, at

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<sup>160</sup> Thus Cooper (1984, 135), who also notes that this part of the soul is particularly dependent upon the contingencies of our upbringing and life experiences.

<sup>161</sup> ‘But the third part, on account of its many forms, we could not designate by one name proper to it, but that which is biggest and strongest in it, by this we name it: we have called it the appetitive part on account of the intensity of its desires concerning food and drink and sex and all such things that go with them’ (580d10-e5).

<sup>162</sup> This designation has led Annas (1981, 130) to suggest that the appetitive part can also reason independently, at least in a limited means-ends way: it desires money because it is an instrument by which appetites may be satisfied. But it is possible, strictly speaking, for it to desire money simply because it is reliably *associated* with the desired pleasures. If one thinks of some of the behavioral studies done in the mid-twentieth century, it is clear that (in Humean terms) the constant conjunction of money with the satisfaction of desires may lead to the extension of desire from the object to that which usually accompanies it.

least in part, on its intuition of the good (505e). Of course different people will intuit this more or less clearly, but Plato believes that this desire for the good is built into human nature.<sup>163</sup> Now as to the second question, the answer is related to the first. In the soul of the unjust person, however clever, reason is simply a passive, instrumental faculty, merely sorting out how to best achieve the wishes and desires of the other parts of the soul. He may seek to organize his entire life around such pleasures, but this stunts his rational pursuit for truth, and jeopardizes his connection to reality, which compromises his overall well-being.<sup>164</sup>

Reason, when it rules, strives to organize one's life as a whole, in a way that does not simply repress the soul's other components. Anticipating Freud, Plato suggests that one whose soul is thus in disarray finds their dreams populated with repressed longings, perpetrating in sleep what they desire but dare not do in waking (571c-d). This is not to say that Plato countenances every appetite. He distinguishes between so-called necessary and unnecessary appetites (558d-559b); while we would likely conceive these categories less ascetically than Plato, the point here is that Plato does not debase appetite *per se*; each part of the soul is essential and integral to the whole human being.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> '[The Good is] that which every soul, without exception, pursues and for the sake of which it acts, having some intuition of its reality, but being at a loss and not having a sufficient grasp of what on earth it is' (505e1-3).

<sup>164</sup> How this is so will be considered momentarily.

<sup>165</sup> This conclusion follows from the formal elements of the harmonized soul as presented in book four, and augmented from books eight and nine. To be sure, there are passages—especially elsewhere, such as the *Phaedo*, but even in the *Republic*—that seem to give no value to appetites of any kind. But the view of the harmonious soul in *Republic* book four clearly accommodates them, even if in a limited and subsidiary role.

Perhaps Plato should get the last word on this topic. In book nine (588c ff.) he imagines the soul like some mythological beast, in the composite form of a man and lion, but also with a ring of other heads, some savage and others tame; these correspond to the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts, respectively. Now the just man, he continues, is like a farmer, ‘training and nurturing the tame heads, but hindering the growth of the wild ones, and making an ally of the lion’s nature, and caring for all of them in common, having made them friendly to one another and to himself, he will thus enable them all to thrive’ (589b2-6).

But of course it is often the case that this psychic harmony is not maintained or ever achieved. As Aristotle says about virtue generally, there is only one way to hit the mark, but many ways to go wrong. In books eight and nine, Plato gives four accounts of the progressive moral degeneration of individuals, the rational structure of whose souls breaks down.<sup>166</sup> The upshot of these models is that when reason, with its interest in truth and reality, is subsumed to the ends of the other parts, the individual (as part of that reality) loses—to his or her detriment—important contact with the way the world really is. Now it is not difficult to imagine how a life without any governing rational principle, whether of an instrumental quality or not, would be constantly frustrated by forces outside his or her control. But this does not address the challenge of Glaucon’s

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<sup>166</sup> The account given here will connect only loosely to Plato’s. His account is determined, to an unfortunate degree, by his correlate degenerate states from the ideal state. The extended analogy becomes very tenuous indeed, becoming forced and caricature-like at points. But Plato gives enough indications to make a case for his general point independent of his political analogy. This territory has already been explored by Annas (2005); I will partly follow her insightful treatment.

completely unjust man, as to why his reason, being dominated by one or both of the non-rational parts, fails to deliver a well-rounded, good life.

Let us consider an example of how a person may suffer from an inadequate connection with the way things are. The following is adapted from Annas (2005, 4), and corresponds to what Plato would consider the predominance of the ‘honor loving’ part, though a parallel example could be drawn for one governed by his or her appetites. Imagine a brilliant young scholar who enters academia with a desire for understanding in his particular discipline. Soon enough, he has developed a theory that he believes is true, and resolves many of the outstanding difficulties in the field. For a while, his theory enthalls his peers, but eventually a new generation of clever scholars brings serious and valid objections to the theory. Our scholar now becomes protective of his theory, and strains to show either that the objections are mistaken, or that his theory can actually accommodate them. As the debate intensifies, the scholar becomes more deeply entrenched, and considers other theories only as they relate to his own. To the end, our scholar defends his paper citadel against all volleys and siege engines, and ultimately congratulates himself in never having had to retract his theory.

Now this example shows a certain degeneration of our scholar that may be recognized as one kind of failure of reason. Our scholar has become increasingly narrow in his scope of rationality: at first, he desired only the expansive horizons of truth, but later, clouded by his desire for prestige, his gaze narrowly focuses on himself, on the maintenance of his own theory. Fair criticisms become malicious positions to attack; the more importance our scholar invests in his own theory, rather than in the truth, the more

he becomes blinded to other alternatives (Annas, 4-5).<sup>167</sup> It is plain that our scholar is reasoning poorly. But this is not a failure in *instrumental* reason; if anything, the very success of instrumental reasoning cripples our scholar's overall rationality. In this case, subsuming reason to reputation yields a certain myopic self-delusion, unable to see how his vanity actually interferes with other commitments and values that he holds.<sup>168</sup>

From this case, it is possible to see the limitations of a purely instrumental rationality. Assuming that an agent cares about more than one thing (the best life is agreed to countenance a range of values), the constriction of focus sacrifices other values the agent holds dear. If the rational part does not maintain vigilance over the whole range of values, then it actually makes the agent *more* vulnerable to external contingencies. One blinkered by the singular craving for, say, honor, or pleasure, or any of a number of ends not harmoniously integrated by reason, loses sight of other values, obviously exposing them to otherwise preventable risks. Few would grant that such a single-minded purpose could produce the best overall life; *this* kind of unity only impoverishes one's well-being. Even if our scholar's theory had remained preeminent, and so too his honor, we still feel as though he has sacrificed something valuable along the way. Justice, then, as the harmonious organization of one's overall good, confers a benefit to the whole person.

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<sup>167</sup> This kind of hardening in his pride is an example of what Plato says at 485d6-8, 'But for whomever the desires incline vehemently to some one thing, we know, I suppose, that they are weakened for other things, just like a stream diverted to another channel.' Such strengthened desired become more difficult to resist the more they are satisfied, and are likely to influence an agent's conception of his or her good.

<sup>168</sup> Socrates, on the other hand, exhibiting an honesty that few are courageous enough to embrace, sought out refutation, on the belief that it would make him a better person by purging error from his soul (e.g., 336e-337a, d).

### Justice as a Good

Assuming that the value of justice, of the life governed by the rational element, has been made sufficiently clear, how are we to rate its possession relative to other, non-moral goods in attaining happiness? It bears repeating that Plato *does* recognize the value of other goods, regardless of the occasional moral fervor of his rhetoric that seems to point to the contrary. Other values are implied in the very nature of the tri-partite soul. The non-rational components each have their proper non-moral objects, whose possession, under the watchful direction of reason, must be admitted to count as goods.<sup>169</sup>

Now if there are other, non-moral goods that are related to the non-rational parts of the soul, then it seems that happiness must consist in more than virtue alone. Moreover, it suggests that, due to the needs of these other parts of the soul, which are bound inextricably to external contingencies, there is an irreducible element of vulnerability to happiness, even for the most virtuous agent. If this is so, then justice cannot be *sufficient* for happiness. If we think back on Glaucon's Choice of Lives, the perfectly just man is deprived of all normal benefits accruing to justice, and hounded unfairly even unto torture and death. Surely such a man is not happy.<sup>170</sup> But this does

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<sup>169</sup> Cf. *Euthydemus* 279a-b, where a number of non-moral goods are entertained. In our example of the scholar, the difficulty is not that honor is not a good—Plato would recognize that it is; the problem is the bloated role that honor is given relative to other values in his life. When, at 495a7, Plato refers to wealth and other 'so-called goods,' he is not denying that they are goods, but only that they are not unqualifiedly so: there may be circumstances when in fact they are not beneficial, as a good must be.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *NE* 1153b19-21: 'Thus those who say that, if a man is good, he is happy when being tortured and having fallen into the greatest misfortunes, either willingly or unwillingly are speaking nonsense.' Burnet thinks the Cynics are likely the target of this comment, but it applies equally here.



not yet settle the comparative question—our question—as to whether such a person is *happier* than his unjust counterpart possessed of all other goods.

In order for that to obtain, justice would have to be a good of such magnitude that its presence in the soul of its possessor is greater than any other combination of goods, if these are accompanied by injustice.<sup>171</sup> Justice, then, for Plato, is a *dominant* good, such that ‘being just guarantees by itself that just people will be happier than any unjust people, even if the just people are not happy, and even if all the goods that are distinct from justice belong to unjust people.’<sup>172</sup> Now Plato thinks that he has given us reason to suppose that this is so, given the kind of psychic health that the soul fosters. Justice is a good that arranges other goods such that they all can be enjoyed harmoniously, in a way that insures the pursuit of any other particular good does not impinge on the pursuit and enjoyment of other legitimate goods.<sup>173</sup> Conversely, as we have seen, the absence of this internal harmony prohibits the agent to enjoy fully the range the goods that he or she does possess.<sup>174</sup>

This, then, is Plato’s answer to Glaucon’s challenge. Having elaborated the role of justice in the psyche, and having shown the inner instability of one who lacks this

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<sup>171</sup> ‘But what each of them is in itself, by its own power when present in the soul of its possessor and when its presence escapes both gods and men, no one has sufficiently argued...that [injustice] is the greatest of evils which the soul contains, and that justice is its greatest good’ (366e5-367a1).

<sup>172</sup> Thus Irwin (1999, 176); cf. Vlastos’ (1971a, 1991) their positions reflect a general agreement on Plato’s view on the kind of good justice must be.

<sup>173</sup> Plato summarizes this thought in a turn of phrase than anticipates Aristotle’s account of virtue (*NE* 1104a11 ff.): ‘[the just man] always knows how to choose the life [situated] in the mean and to escape the excesses on either side...for in this way does a man become most happy’ (619a5-b1).

<sup>174</sup> This view turns out to approximate that of Cephalus in *Republic* 1, who maintains that wealth is useful only to one of good character (see p. 42, *supra*). Plato often comments (e.g., *Statesman* 277d) that ordinary moral agents often know (loosely speaking) a thing in a way, but only as ‘through a glass, darkly.’

harmony and unity, his introductory analogy of justice to health is made clear. Glaucon, at any rate, is completely satisfied with this account, and pronounces the fully just agent happier than any of his rivals (580b-c). But if this holds for such an extreme counterfactual as presented in the Choice of Lives, then under the normal conditions of life, where the externally conferred benefits of justice accrue, the just man is *a fortiori* far better off than the unjust man, whose internal dissention is further compounded by fears of detection and punishment.

Likewise, we are in a position now to see how Plato would answer the challenge of the ‘tragic’ viewpoint, as set forth by Nussbaum.<sup>175</sup> Part of her claim is that Plato, in his attempt to make life invulnerable to fortune, sequesters happiness to the austere realm of reason. In this way, her contention holds, Plato sacrifices much of what we would rightly deem part of the good life. Now it is clear that, at least in his account of the structure and proper arrangement of the soul in *Republic* book four, Plato in fact not only recognizes such vulnerability as an ineradicable aspect of human life, he also *embraces* it. Nor is this characterization empty hyperbole. It follows from his view of justice. If justice is the greatest good a person can possess short of happiness, and justice is the proper arrangement of the soul, each part ‘doing its own,’ then—since the soul is not only rationality—the health of the non-rational parts of the soul (whose objects are vulnerable to fortune) are an essential part of Plato’s dominant good. And since justice contributes most of all to happiness, these elements factor into one’s overall well-being, as part of

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<sup>175</sup> See pp. 34 ff., *supra*.

this greatest of goods.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, Plato has demonstrated, even in terms limited to *interest*, that there is good reason to privilege justice over other goods in considering one's life as a whole. Part of being just, as it turns out, *is* looking at one's life as a whole, to determine how best to flourish as a human being. The opposition of interest and justice, then, is a false one.

Much of the response to Glaucon and Nussbaum apply equally to the challenge of Herodotus' Gyges. One more element is required, though, before Plato's full response can be weighed. We need an understanding of the role of philosophy in securing the good life.

### **The Just Man and the Philosopher**

Many seem to me to fall into [contradiction] even against their wills, and suppose not that they are wrangling [*ἐρίζειν*], but arguing, on account of not being able to examine what has been said by dividing it in accordance with the Forms.  
(*Republic* 454a4-6)

We have seen how a moral agent can jeopardize his or her overall good when one of the non-rational elements predominates in the soul. Excessive desire for honor or pleasure, for example, can distort one's priorities and pursuits. But there is another way for a moral agent to go wrong: he or she can make an intellectual mistake. A person's appetites and desires may be properly under the guidance of reason, but reason itself may err. Plato thinks that everyone desires the good, but clearly—even among those in whom

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<sup>176</sup> I suspect (if I may conjecture) that Nussbaum does not give Plato's analysis of the soul proper consideration because she is concerned to fit the *Republic* into a larger arc of development both within Plato's works, and as a part of a teleological narrative ending at Aristotle.

reason is supreme—there are differences in opinion.<sup>177</sup> Variations in people’s native intelligence and training (to name but two factors) are likely to lead to different conclusions about what is good. Consider Herodotus’ Gyges: he appears to have properly ordered priorities and desires, but he nevertheless makes mistakes in his moral deliberations that could easily have led to catastrophic results. What is needed, then, is some science or body of knowledge that can reliably assist the moral agent in his or her deliberations. What is needed, in short, is philosophy.

Plato lavishes great care on the education of his ideal philosopher, whose rigorous training is measured in decades rather than years (374e ff., 521-25).<sup>178</sup> Philosophy, naturally, works upon the rational part of the soul, which was called ‘wisdom loving’ (581b6-11). The ideal philosopher is one who has knowledge of the Forms, the eternal and unchanging essential natures that make particular things to be of a kind (484b, 596a).<sup>179</sup> Now to possess this knowledge, of course, entails that one cannot be mistaken;

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<sup>177</sup> See n. 163, *supra*. The masses usually misconstrue pleasure for the Good (505b).

<sup>178</sup> In part this is because they are the rulers in his ideal city, which we do not consider here. Plato’s dim view of the intellectual capacity of most people is not essential to his characterization of the philosopher or his defense of justice. We may, then, charitably leave the set of philosophers underdetermined, to include whoever proves capable of the kind of thought described. Plato thinks the perfect philosopher ‘appears but rarely among men and are few’ (491b1-2). His perfect philosopher, like his perfect city, is an ideal, and the former is largely a product of the latter. But he also recognizes philosophers live in imperfect and even corrupt cities, where their value is not generally recognized, and where ‘he keeps quiet and minds his own affairs [τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν], as such a one in a storm of dust and spray driven by the wind stands beneath a wall, [the philosopher,] seeing others filled with delight of lawlessness, is satisfied if perchance he himself will be able to live a life here free from doing injustice and impiety, and depart from it with fair hope, gentle and well-disposed’ (496d6-e3).

<sup>179</sup> For example, for the set of all beautiful things, there corresponds some single nature of Beauty itself, by which the multiplicity all beautiful things are beautiful. The ability to rise from particulars to the Form is the major point that divides philosophers from non-philosophers.

if one is mistaken, then it is not knowledge that one possesses, but opinion.<sup>180</sup> These stable natures are also the objects of elenctic argument, which seeks answers to the ‘what is *X*?’ question discussed earlier. Knowledge of the Forms is important in part because knowledge of what it is to be just, or temperate, or brave, or any of a number of things, requires knowledge of what justice, temperance, bravery, etc., essentially *is*.<sup>181</sup>

Moreover, a complete understanding includes knowledge of the Form of the Good, ‘by reference to which just things and the others become useful and beneficial’ (505a3-4). But Socrates’ own account of the Good is thin and suffused with metaphor, and in fact he admits having an inadequate knowledge of it (505a4-6); it is sufficient for our purposes to indicate that the ideal philosopher will have knowledge of this as well (506d ff.).

So if a just person, whose soul is governed by the ‘wisdom loving’ part, further undertakes training in philosophy, to gain knowledge of the Forms, and so reliably hits upon what is truly good, then, Plato thinks, the just agent can deliberate without fear of error. The philosopher’s soul exhibits the perfect manifestation of what it means for the

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<sup>180</sup> Plato divides knowledge from opinion even more strongly (and, one might add, dubiously): according to 477b-478a, knowledge and opinion correspond to different mental faculties, and so also different objects. Part of the reason Plato seems to deny that particular things, as opposed to Forms, are the proper objects of knowledge is because they admit compresence of opposites, and so never unqualifiedly exhibit properties (479). For a more complete discussion of knowledge and opinion, and their objects, as well as analysis of the provocative (if difficult) analogy of the Divided Line, see Ross (1951, 37-82), Reeve (1988, 52-70), Annas (1981, 190-271).

<sup>181</sup> This epistemic requirement, perhaps more clearly exhibited in the earlier dialogues, is widely recognized: ‘[The Platonic Socrates] believes that you cannot really be virtuous unless you have a philosophical understanding of the definition of virtue’ (R. Robinson, 14). Cf. Irwin (1995, 21ff., 235 ff.). An example from another dialogue is *Charmides* 158e7-59a10, where Socrates tells Charmides that if he possesses temperance, he will have some awareness of it, and should be able to give an account of it.

rational part to rule.<sup>182</sup> It is no accident that, once the ideal philosopher is distinguished, Socrates then claims that such a well-ordered person (*ὁ κόσμιος*) could never prove unjust (486b6-8), and thereafter the philosopher takes the place of the just man in the argument, up until the point that Glaucon must choose among the perfectly just man (represented by the philosopher) and various unjust lives, culminating in the completely unjust man (represented by the tyrant), for the palm of happiness (580c).

So here, finally, is the remainder of Plato's answer to Herodotus' Gyges. Gyges failed not because of his avarice or pride, but because he erred in his deliberations. He failed to see that injustice, even in his dire situation, is never preferable to justice, since whatever bounty he gained through injustice does not equal the lost value of justice. What Gyges lacked was sufficient development of his rational faculties that could have prophylactically prevented his mistakes. He should have said, with Sophocles' Neoptolemus, 'I would rather fail in acting nobly, than win in a base manner' (*Philoctetes* 94-95).

### **Plato's Predicament**

So now, at last, what do we make of the argument, 'after winding a long and weary way,' as Plato says (484a1-2, trans. Shorey)? What are we to make of his defense, that justice is always more profitable than injustice? Plato ultimately fails. This is because, despite his efforts to the contrary, he cannot preclude the just person from

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<sup>182</sup> Kraut (1992a) argues that knowledge of the Forms, the desire for which is innate to the rational part of the soul, is not merely intellectual but *transformative*: the philosopher seeks 'to imitate the Forms by molding human character in their likeness' (328).

falling into error, and thereby acting unjustly; and yet this error does not always entail a diminution of happiness. Let us retrace Plato's steps to see how this obtains.

In book four, as we have seen, Plato gives his schematic answer, that internal harmony is to the soul what health is to the body. Justice, 'doing one's own,' means that each part of the soul does its own function, under the direction of reason. Moreover, since Plato's theory is agent-centered, it is not individual acts that matter as much as stable states of character. Actions, then, are secondary, as reflective of character; single actions do not overturn a settled disposition: one would not, e.g., consider a criminal a fine character for one act of charity. Since justice is the dominant good in happiness, the just person will always be happier than the unjust.

Now Herodotus' Gyges would seem to exhibit a just character. His appetites and desires, his sense of honor and self-esteem, all seem to be in proper harmony with his reason. He recoils at Candaules' command to do wrong, he tries (however impotently) to dissuade him from the proposed course of action; later, under the queen's dilemma he again expresses his horror at the thought of committing injustice, again tries without success to turn her purpose; even in his acquiescence, he does not demonstrate any untoward thirst for power, honor, wealth, or any other misguided ends. In sum, he gives every indication that he has a just character. And yet he errs, he makes mistakes in his moral deliberations that lead him to act unjustly.

But doesn't this injustice, even if cloaked in error, nonetheless make Gyges unjust, and hence diminish his happiness? On Plato's own account, the answer must be 'no.' As isolated just acts cannot make an unjust person just, so too isolated unjust acts

cannot make a just person unjust.<sup>183</sup> At least Plato has given us no reason why we should think that this is the case. Besides, his error was not weakness of will, in the sense of knowing the best thing to do, but nevertheless doing something else from some countervailing desire. He simply mistook what was truly in his interest. Plato's view of character, then, together with his formal description of justice, yields that Gyges' mistakes (even apart from considerations of duress) do not corrupt his essentially just disposition. If this is so, then Gyges emerges from his difficulties in the best possible condition: his justice intact (if not entirely unscathed), he unwittingly reaps the rewards of staggering wealth and power. In this case, as unlikely as it may seem, injustice proves more profitable than justice.

Plato cannot escape this conclusion by suggesting that by 'justice' and 'injustice,' he means exclusively those settled states of character, not isolated actions. On this interpretation, he means that the just *character* is always better than its unjust counterpart. But this will not do, since it could lead to the possibility of basically just agents calculating isolated but extravagant acts of injustice when the rewards are sufficiently high. But did Gyges not act through error, not calculation? Is this distinction not relevant? Well, yes—and no: that his unjust action was precipitated by error and not some resurgent desire clarifies his case such that we can say that he in fact is an essentially just character; but on his view of character, the source of the isolated actions of contrary valence is not strictly relevant: in either case they do not themselves overturn a stable disposition.

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<sup>183</sup> See n. 154, *supra*.



Now I suspect that Plato in fact perceived and was troubled by the possibility of error causing the just agent to stumble into unjust actions. This is one explanation for the focus shifting from the just agent to the philosopher, with all the added epistemic qualifications that the philosopher brings to the argument. Although not strictly required by his formal account of the just arrangement of the soul, Plato now superimposes the philosopher's grasp of the Form of justice as part of the requirement for being just. One must know what justice essentially is in order to be fully just.<sup>184</sup>

There are two difficulties with this maneuver. First, very few can claim knowledge of the Forms. This does not appear to have troubled Plato much, perhaps because of his pessimistic view of most people's cognitive capabilities.<sup>185</sup> But even apart from the problems associated with his elitism, it harbors consequences that even he would not likely embrace. If few can know the Form of justice, and so be fully just, then few can be happy, if justice is indeed the dominant good in happiness. One might think that Plato would accept this conclusion. But the very terms of Glaucon's challenge was universal: Glaucon tasks Socrates with showing—not that for an intellectual elite, that they are better off if they are just—that anyone, even Gyges, whether the lowly shepherd of Glaucon's counterfactual or Herodotus' spear-bearer, has reason to be just.

But there is another, more virulent, difficulty with these additional epistemic qualities. If, as Plato suggests, it is generally true that in order to be truly *X* one must have knowledge of the Form *X*-ness (e.g. to be just one must know what justice essentially is), then not only does it limit the ranks of the just, it *also* limits the ranks of

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<sup>184</sup> See p. 92 and n. 181, *supra*.

<sup>185</sup> 'Philosophy is not possible for the majority' (494a) Cf. Bobonich (2002, 51-57).

the unjust. In other words, if this principle holds, then the converse case must also be true: in order for one to be truly unjust, one must know what injustice essentially is. If there are such epistemic requirements for injustice, then it would seem that there are far fewer unjust people roaming the earth that we (and Plato) thought. Plato does not suggest or imply that Gyges has any such knowledge. Now it might be countered that Plato considers injustice a kind of *ignorance*, not knowledge—which is precisely what Socrates argues to in *Republic* 1 against Thrasymachus.<sup>186</sup> But even apart from the questionable nature of this argument, later, when Glaucon is laying out his Choice of Lives, the unjust man is explicitly described as a sort of clever craftsman of injustice, whose skill allows him to perpetrate the worst injustices while seeming just.<sup>187</sup> So injustice cannot simply be ignorance.

Therefore, Plato finds himself in a predicament. Not only does Herodotus' Gyges present a counterexample to his thesis, upsetting his defense, but his own account also entails consequences that neither he nor his reader would embrace.

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<sup>186</sup> 'So then it seems, I said, that while the just man is wise and good, the unjust man is wicked and ignorant' (350c4-5).

<sup>187</sup> See p. 68, *supra*.

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

*Ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα εἰπὼν ᾤμην λόγου ἀπηλλάχθαι· τὸ δ' ἦν ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικε, προοίμιον.*

Now when I had said these things, I supposed that I was done with the discussion, but it was apparently only a beginning.  
(*Republic* 357a1-2)

And so it is for us too, the reader of the *Republic*. Plato's argument has not quite convinced us of his thesis, that justice is always more profitable than injustice. And these questions have preoccupied philosophy ever since. But has Plato, just like Thrasymachus, left off his argument too soon? What options remain open to Plato, by which he may salvage his argument? He may alter one of three features of his defense in order to have the argument come out that justice is always better than injustice: (1) his account of the essential nature of justice; (2) the role of justice as the dominant good in happiness; (3) his agent-centered ethics. Now I would suggest that, in the end, Plato would not wish to alter any of these features, as such changes would lead to other difficulties of equal or greater magnitude. Let us consider these options in turn.

First, Plato could constrict and strengthen his formal account of justice, wherein each part of the soul 'does its own' under the rational part's direction, by further narrowing justice so that it depends solely on the rational part. This, however, would leave a hyper-intellectualized justice that would bear little contact with our commonsense notion, and so lose its ability to explain our vernacular justice. Without this connection,

few would find Plato's argument compelling, and would (correctly) believe him to be defining his terms in such a way as to prejudice the outcome.

Related to this maneuver would be his second option, to strengthen justice from a dominant, to a *sufficient*, good with respect to one's happiness. On this view (not unlike the later Cynics and certain strains of Stoicism), justice (virtue) alone is sufficient to make one happy. There are two problems with this. First, it seems obviously untrue. It narrows happiness to such a point that it becomes unrecognizable. It would then fall prey to Nussbaum's objection, namely, that it would sacrifice much that we think is valuable in human life and human happiness. Such an austere happiness would be rightly rejected. Second, if all other goods make no difference as to our happiness, then it would leave us with no rational basis for choosing alternatives that are equally consistent with justice. Since happiness is the final end toward which all our decisions ultimately incline, if justice is the only relevant factor to that end, then it leaves most of our choices and actions without any justification whatsoever (Vlastos 1991, 128-29). This would preclude making sense of one's life as a whole; as such, Plato would eschew this maneuver.

Finally, he might choose to abandon his agent-centered ethics in favor of an act-centered theory, whereby individual actions carry far more weight, so that Herodotus' Gyges' injustice cannot count as a counter-example. But then his entire critique of the traditional (performative) notion of justice collapses. Motives would then be subsumed to action, and there would be only weak grounds for not following in Gyges' footsteps. In short, none of these alternatives would be appealing to Plato, and for good reason.

If Plato's defense has failed, then, what has he accomplished? Even if Plato cannot maintain that justice is *always* more profitable than injustice, he has shown convincingly how internal dissonance can frustrate our happiness. It is commonly recognized that neither wealth, nor power, nor pleasure, nor any of a number of other goods, are in themselves sufficient for happiness. Plato has helped us understand why that is so, and provides a motive to rethink our desires and actions. He has, in sum, provided a defense of the examined life.

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