



Philosophy: Morality and Justice - Audio

Plato on justice and self interest

Winifred

Hello. I'm Winifred Robinson.

In this recording you will hear Alex Barber, the author of Book Three ask Angela Hobbs, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Senior Fellow in the Public Understanding of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, about Glaucon's challenge to Socrates in Plato's Republic.

Alex Barber

Angie, in the Republic Glaucon and Socrates are discussing what Glaucon calls the common view or the received view of justice. Can you say what the view is and whether it really was a common or popular view?

Angela Hobbs

Okay. So what Glaucon is doing here is he's using a three-fold classification of good's. And he says things can be good in one of three ways. Either they are good solely for their consequences. Or they can be good intrinsically. They are good for themselves or they can be good both in themselves and for their consequences. And he says the common view of justice is that it's only good for its consequences in terms of the reputation it can give you and the kind of offices and various benefits in life that can accrue from having a good reputation. But there is nothing intrinsically good about justice. And the way he argues for this is to look at what he claims is the common view of the origin of justice. And he says that it's actually in nature it's good to be able to harm others so long as you don't suffer anything in return. But it's bad to be harmed and have no form of redress. But it's worse to be harmed than it is to be able to harm others and if there was just a free for all with no moral code, no laws you would end up getting very badly hurt and you wouldn't be able to do anything about it. So humans agree. They have a kind of social contract and they agree a code and a system of laws, which roughly say I won't harm you if you don't harm me. And they call this system of laws justice. So justice ends up being a kind of compromise. Nobody really wants it. It doesn't really satisfy anybody's deepest desire but they think it's the best that they can hope for in the situation.

In terms of whether it was a popular view yes, it feeds into a huge debate that was going on in Greece at that time about a debate between respective roles of nature and culture or nature

and the laws. And a number of thinkers, the Sophist Antiphon was one was saying really disobey the law whenever you can get away with it. It's in your natural interest to disobey the laws if nobody is watching. So there is an enormous debate going on about whether justice has any real intrinsic benefit for you.

Alex Barber

To the modern ear to say that it's good to be unjust to harm others, sounds a very strange claim. Is the word good being used in a different way?

Angela Hobbs

It is strange isn't it? I think what he means is it's good to be able to satisfy whatever your desires happen to be by whatever is the quickest means be that theft or be that taking somebody else's wife, committing adultery, even murdering. I don't read the argument as sort of saying as a particularly sadistic one as saying that everybody really enjoys hurting other people. I read the argument as saying that we have a certain set of desires which I am sure we will come on to and the way to satisfy these desires is to do whatever you want with other people. And if you need to harm them then so be it.

Alex Barber

Does anyone hold this view today do you think

Angela Hobbs

Oh I think plenty of people think that we would only we only obey the law because we think we can get sort of something out of and we are going to get punished if we don't. I think it is a pretty common view, yes.

Alex Barber

So that's the common view and Glaucon gives voice to it and tries to defend it and he does so in part by introducing this example of the mythical Gyges, the shepherd who finds the magical invisible making ring. How does that example serve to enable Glaucon to defend the common view?

Angela Hobbs

Well what he's doing is trying to show that if we all became invisible there would be no difference between the behaviour of the supposedly just, good moral person and the unjust person. And what happens is this poor shepherd Gyges, during an earthquake, discovers this ring and he puts it on and he finds that if he swivels it around he becomes invisible. And he thinks this is extraordinary. So off he goes to the Court of Lydia, becomes invisible when he's entered the Court and uses this cloak of invisibility to seduce the queen. He marries her. Kills the king. Becomes king of Lydia. And what Glaucon is saying actually all this talk of justice is

really so much hypocritical cant that actually underneath we all have these very basic desires for money and power and we have certain lusts and if nobody is going to punish us then we are all going to behave in the same way. It's a pretty cynical view

Alex Barber

Glaucon seems to go a bit further saying that this is how we would behave or how humans are built to behave. He seems to be claiming also that we would be foolish to do otherwise.

Angela Hobbs

He is speaking for the common person and he thinks the common person will just take it for granted that we have certain interests which are very narrowly located in the satisfaction of certain physical desires and the acquisition of money and power. And you don't really need to defend these claims. This is just what we all are like and of course we would all satisfy these desires if we could and why would we do otherwise. Of course Socrates is going to come in and really examine this notion of self interest and say wait a minute here. Is this notion of the self really an accurate one?

Alex Barber

And he offers a variety of responses, a variety of different answers. Is there any common theme to the different responses to Glaucon that Socrates gives?

Angela Hobbs

Oh I think so. As we were just saying I think they all focus on this notion of what self interest really is and the claim that in fact Glaucon has been working with a very narrow rather arid view of self interest based on a very thin notion of the Self. And that Socrates is going to argue that Glaucon has misunderstood the nature of human happiness because he's misunderstood the nature of human psychology and what we have to do is really explore the complex nature of the human psyche and what it's going to take to satisfy it's different aspects.

Alex Barber

So the idea is that Socrates is going to try and show that acting justly will make you happier or

Angela Hobbs

Absolutely.

Alex Barber

Will be in your interests-

Angela Hobbs

Totally. He is going to argue that in fact acting morally and justly and being happy are in fact the same the same psychic order. The same inner state of your soul our psyche.

Alex Barber

Okay. Let's look in a little more detail at some of the arguments, the specific arguments that he gives and in particular I want to look at the argument from superior judgement and the argument from mental health. Let's start with the argument from superior judgement.

Angela Hobbs

In the background to both of these arguments we've got the crucial theory of the tripartite psyche tripartite soul. So what has happened by this stage is that Socrates has claimed that the human psyche has three basic aspects. There's its rational aspect, devoted to the pursuits of truth and reality. There is the spirited aspect of the psyche which loves honour and respect and success and counting for something in the world and then there is your appetitive faculty which is devoted to the physical pleasures of sex and food and drink and the acquisition of the money needed to satisfy them. So we've got these three parts of the psyche. They all have their own objects of desire and depending upon which part of our psyche is in control you will be a different kind of person and be living a different kind of life and will have a different kind of view of what constitutes the good life.

Alex Barber

And how does that feed into the argument from superiority

Angela Hobbs

Well what Socrates says here is that yes of course each kind of person with their psyche devoted to these different sets of pleasures thinks their own kinds of pleasures are best and their own way of life is best. But the view of the philosopher in this instance whose life is devoted to truth and reality his view or indeed her view is the superior view because the views of the philosopher are supported by experience and intellect and training and rational argument and those three things will enable the philosophers judgement about which way of life is the best life to be the best judgement. Only the philosopher has experience of all three kinds of pleasures; has the training and the intellect needed to assess that experience.

Alex Barber

So it's a kind of doctor knows best only philosophers know best.

Angela Hobbs

Indeed. Indeed. You might think there's some special pleading going on here.

Alex Barber

How about the argument for mental health

Angela Hobbs

Well we've seen that the psyche is divided into these three different aspects devoted to three different kinds of objects of desire. So the appetitive aspect are devoted to physical pleasures and money. The spirited aspect devoted to honour and success and the rational aspect devoted to truth and reality and Socrates says in perhaps one of the key arguments in the whole Republic is that your psyche will only be in a state of good order if your reason is in control and telling the other two parts what to do. And the other two arts harmoniously agree to be ruled by reason, because they accept that reason dictates will be good for the whole of the psyche. And so the spirited aspect is going to devote its energies to supporting what reason says. And that the appetitive aspects are basically going to do what they're told and only satisfy the necessary physical desires needed for survival and reproduction and not go off on a tangent satisfying unnecessary desires. If your psyche is in that state of reason being in control Socrates says you will be in a state of mental health, a state of psychic health. And he says it is at least as important to possess psychic health as it is to possess bodily health. And how could anybody disagree with that and indeed in fact Glaucon right at the beginning of his challenge had actually said that health is one of those goods, which are both good in themselves and good for their consequences. It's one of the top classes of goods so Glaucon can't really disagree with this. And Socrates says therefore this state of rational, harmonious psychic order is both the state of justice. So this state is now what he calls justice. And it's also your state of happiness. So justice and happiness are going to be the same thing. So there can be no question about tensions and conflicts between the two. They are the same psychic order. And this order is also a beautiful order. So he also brings in this notion of kind of musical harmony and proportion here. So really all the Greek values are concentrated in this one inner state of your Soul.

Alex

I think I can see why being in a harmonious psychic state might make one better off or happier but I'm not seeing why it would lead to ones acting justly. I mean surely somebody who is purely rational could nevertheless act extremely unjustly; could steal from others to get something that they want or could poison troublesome people, if they could get away with it that is.

Angela Hobbs

Well that's a really good question and it's one of the challenges that's most often been made about this argument about justice equalling mental health. And I think to really understand Socrates position we need to look on to the later claim that each part of the psyche has its own particular objects of desire. So it's not just a case of reason ruling your soul and being some kind of arid passionless thing. Your reason has its own desires and passions for truth

and reality and Socrates' claim is that if that is what's governing your life, and if you're really motivated by that why would you want to commit crimes of murder or rape or theft? What are the motivations of people who do commit those crimes? That they are motivated by greed, or jealousy or the feeling that their honour has been slighted or ambition all the things which show that either your spirited part of your psyche is in control or your appetitive part is in control. If your reason is in control, says Socrates, you just won't want to commit those kinds of crimes. It's just not where your head is. You're concentrated on this beautiful world of goodness and order and justice and beauty.

Alex Barber

What I'm not seeing in this argument is why somebody who is governed by the rational part, their reasoning part, in other words somebody who is desirous of truth, who loves the truth, is passionate about the truth would never act unjustly. I will give you an example. I've received a letter from my library saying I must return these books. Now I could lie. That would be the unjust thing to do but it seems that it is in this context what a reasonable, rational person would do. Somebody who loved the truth. So what would Socrates response be to that?

Angela Hobbs

Well I completely agree. I think one can come up with some counter examples and it's quite fun to do that. Stealing library books is a very good one. However I do think Socrates is on to something when he says let's consider why people who commit common or garden crimes commit them? What's ruling in their psyche? And I think usually you will find that he is right because it's either the appetitive desires are ruling or the spirited desires which are focused on competition and honour and worldly success and so on.

Alex Barber

In other words in most of the circumstances that we happen to find ourselves, our desire for truth won't be compatible with acting unjustly that's the idea

Angela Hobbs

Not as Socrates conceives the desire for truth. I think we have to – it's really important to remember that for Socrates for all the Greeks, reason is not some kind of servant of the desires. It's not there simply to work out the means to satisfy desires that resented to it. Reason is a very passionate entity for philosophers like Plato and it has it's own particular desires and it's own particular way of life. I think if we look at that conception of reason rather than some of the conceptions of reason that can come later in western philosophy, then we will see that Socrates argument has really quite a lot going for it.

Alex Barber

By this point in the Republic Glaucon appears to be in complete agreement with Socrates.
Are you?

Angela Hobbs

No. No. I'm not because I think that there are some serious problems with this notion of justice as mental health. There are clearly political dangers. As soon as you start saying somebody who is just in a state of mental health then of course the corollary is that a criminal is somebody who is mentally sick and we've all seen where that led. For instance Stalinist Russia it sent political dissidents off to Siberia to have their brains rearranged and they were told you know we are going to cure you. We are going to cure you of your dissident political beliefs. So that is – it is a dangerous path. I'm not denying that at all. However, I do think it's a very rich theory. If you look at what Glaucon was saying he was talking about justice and injustice in terms of what people do; the actions that they commit. What Socrates is doing, and it's a very important move in western philosophy, is to bring justice inside the individual actor, the individual agent and saying it's about the state of your psyche. It's not just to do with the actions you commit or indeed the consequences of the actions you commit. It's about who you are. And hence it's not purely a legalistic conception of justice that Socrates wants to offer us. If we remember Glaucon had really defined justice as this rather grubby, legalistic compromise. It's not what anybody wanted but it was a system of laws they came up with so nobody got too badly hurt. And it was very much justice was simply obeying the law. Socrates has given us something for better or worse much richer and deeper than that to explore

Alex Barber

Thank you very much