

pursuing justice. Finally, reason recognises moral demands, and so, if it rules, directing desires and spirit rightly, the person will produce moral behaviour.

## PLATO'S ANSWER

This is the point (367e) at which the syllabus leaves the discussion. Plato's attempt to demonstrate that injustice leads to inner conflict and that justice leads to inner harmony is very lengthy. However, it is worth discussing briefly, both for the sake of a better understanding of Plato's view of what justice is, and in light of the many connections to his arguments regarding the virtue of philosophers.

To show that justice makes its possessor happy, we must first understand what justice 'in the soul' is. In this exploration, Plato develops and extends the idea that justice involves not wanting more than one's share. He argues, from the common experience of internal conflict between what we want and what we believe is good, that there are different parts of the soul (436b). Desires are distinct from the 'spirited' part of the soul, and both are distinct again from reason. When reason rules the soul, the person is wise; when the spirited part has its appropriate strength, the person is courageous; when all parts of the soul collude in the rule of reason, in particular with desires being restrained and not unruly, the person is temperate; and thus justice consists in each part functioning as it should, being contented to make its contribution and accepting the contributions of the others (444d). Plato talks of 'friendship' between the parts of the soul (589a). Justice, then, brings wisdom, courage and temperance with it.

This leads to the conclusion that the just person will be happy, the unjust person unhappy. A life without inner conflict is a happier life than one in which parts of the soul fight each other for supremacy. In Books VIII and IX (543-580), Plato describes the life of people with various desires in charge (money: encourages licentiousness; satisfaction: with no overall desire in charge, unnecessary desires grow in strength; lust: uncontrollable desires grow in strength, the soul becomes fearful and full of regret). When ruled by a desire or by spirit, how we conceive of what is good is skewed, and we lack a true conception of the good. Rule by desires, therefore, cannot provide happiness as securely as rule by reason. It is essential for Plato's argument that only the rule of reason can secure the absence of inner conflict, and the pursuit of the truly good, that is the mark of true happiness.

### Objections

These charges all depend on his view that desires are incapable of self-regulation, that they are, in an important way, 'blind'. This description seems to fit bodily desires and obsessions (e.g. with money) better than others, e.g. those involved in friendship and compassion. One line of response Plato can make is that desires, as desires, do not involve consideration for the person *as a whole*; however, this is precisely the kind of reflection that reason provides (442c).

But we can object that the kind of reason needed is prudential, not moral. An immoral person needs to think about how to act in their self-interest, and this can involve reasoning. But why think this reasoning will lead them to act morally? Plato assumes that having reason in control automatically means acting morally. This is because he believes that if we reason well, we will realise that acting morally is truly good. But that still doesn't mean it is in my self-interest. As the argument stands, a *prudential* immoral person could be happiest.

Plato can respond that with reason in charge, desire is appropriately directed or restrained, so the person will not be greedy or narrowly self-interested; spirit has strength and is likewise appropriately directed, so the person will not flinch from the difficulty of

whatever one can, compromising where necessary (the corruption of politicians comes to mind). Where the rulers are not 'the strong' and the people are not 'the weak', then 'justice' (at best) will be nothing more than social compromise, between groups or individuals with competing interests.

Some notable philosophers, including David Hume and John Rawls, have endorsed forms of this, but placed a positive spin on it by adding an initial premise of equality between people. Social compromise, when it secures law and order, and thereby enables citizens to go about their lives without fear of others, is very valuable. Hume argues that understood like this, and given our need for society, it is easy to see how justice is in our self-interest (*An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, § 3). Rawls defines justice as that set of principles for designing the structure of society that everyone would agree upon, on completely self-interested grounds, if they did not know what position in society they occupied (*A Theory of Justice*, pp. 11f.). As justice serves self-interest, broadly understood, in the conditions of rough equality, justice will make us happy.

## JUSTICE AS A VIRTUE

But Hume and Rawls are still open to the objection which Glaucon, who wants Socrates to be right, presses: no one would act justly if they could get away with cheating (359b). He tells the story of the ring of Gyges, a ring that made Gyges invisible whenever he put it on. Gyges is able to steal, murder and seduce without detection. Who wouldn't use the ring that way? Again, although justice may be of benefit to society (your acting justly benefits me and vice-versa), justice offers no benefit to the just person. It is better to be narrowly self-interested and prudent.

Plato's argument against this claim forms a substantial part of *The Republic*. The claim is, intuitively, plausible. If justice conflicts with self-interest, then we do better to act unjustly when we can. Plato needs to show that acting justly – not because you avoid punishment, not because people then treat you well, but for its own sake – is in one's self-interest. In developing the argument this way, it seems that Plato makes an assumption to the effect that unless justice can be shown to appeal to the possessor, it has no 'real' value. Underlying this questionable assumption is the thought, common in ancient Greece, that virtues must, by definition, contribute to the happiness (or good life) of the virtuous person. If justice does not, it is not a virtue; and if it is not a virtue, on what grounds can we recommend it?

In fact, Plato had already put the point in these terms in an earlier response to Thrasymachus. After Thrasymachus argues that injustice is a virtue, Socrates responds that it cannot be. One reason he gives is that the unjust cannot cooperate for their own good. They must at least act justly towards each other. Justice enables people to cooperate more effectively. But he also says (352a) that injustice leads to *internal* conflicts in the individual, so he becomes less capable of acting well even on his own.

It is plausible that justice between people enables their cooperation – and so justice is a 'social' virtue. But why injustice should lead to internal conflict is very unclear when Plato first says it. But it forms the essence of his response to Glaucon. Glaucon presses the point that justice is not thought to benefit its possessor. It is thought to be a cost to the individual, though a benefit to society. Any benefits the just man receives are through reputation and social rewards.

## Plato on the nature of morality

The official topic of the *Republic* is justice. The ancient Greek idea of justice – *dikaioné* – applied in the first instance to law-abiding behaviour, but with the sense of not wanting or taking more than one ought to. As with our notion of justice today, it primarily refers to external acts, but also marks a state of mind or desire. Plato built upon and deepened both aspects of the concept. His discussion, however, is not just about justice, but about morality as a whole.

### THE CHALLENGE

The discussion begins with a challenge from the Sophist Thrasymachus, who argues, in essence, that might is right. Justice or morality, so-called, is nothing more than obeying the rules that those who are strong make and impose on others (the weak). Because the strong make the rules in their own self-interest, then ‘justice’ is simply what is in the interests of the strong.

Socrates, as Plato’s mouthpiece, points out that these two definitions – obeying the laws and what is in the interests of the strong – are in tension with each other. What if the rulers mistakenly make laws that are *not* in their self-interest? Then is it just to obey the laws or do what is actually in the interests of the strong? (339d) Given the challenge to our normal conception of justice, this is a quibbling objection, and Thrasymachus says as much. The essential idea is that rulers impose laws that are (mostly) in their self-interest, and that these laws determine what we would conventionally think of as ‘morality’.

If this is all there is to morality, then our usual conception of morality is very mistaken. For instance, why should we be moral? It only serves the self-interest of the strong! Thrasymachus draws precisely this conclusion: there is no reason for people who can get away with being immoral (unjust) not to be immoral. ‘[T]he just man always comes off worse than the unjust’ (343d). Since they are making the rules, the strong are in a very good position not to be punished for disregarding the interests of others while pursuing one’s own. Acting unjustly is always in one’s own interest, while acting justly is always in the interest of the strong (344a-c).

Socrates replies that this cannot be so. Justice is a virtue, and virtues help us live well. So it is the just that are happy. But Thrasymachus replies that injustice is the virtue, not justice (348e). Thrasymachus has, of course, specified that the unjust man must ‘get away with it’ to be happy; and he has noted that the law-makers get away with it – for who can challenge them? He would be quite willing to agree that for the weak, the ruled (most of us!), to act unjustly (not in accordance with the laws) would bring unhappiness, since we won’t get away with it. But this is only to advocate prudence, not justice per se. There’s no value in being just.

We may doubt now, in a democracy, whether rulers really can ‘get away with it’. If so, there is some point to being a just ruler, i.e. making genuinely impartial laws that give each their due. But Thrasymachus would reply that it would be better to aim to get