

Republic by Plato

- (1) [Book 2, pp. 358-61] Glaucon speaks: “By nature,⁵ they say, to commit injustice is a good and to suffer it is an evil, but that the excess of evil in being wronged is greater than the excess of good in doing wrong. So that when men do wrong and are wronged by one another and taste of both, those who lack the power [359a] to avoid the one and take the other determine that it is for their profit to make a compact with one another neither to commit nor to suffer injustice; and that this is the beginning of legislation and covenants between men, and that they name the commandment of the law the lawful and the just, and that this is the genesis and essential nature of justice—a compromise between the best, which is to do wrong with impunity, and the worst, which is to be wronged and be impotent to get one's revenge. Justice, they tell us, being mid-way between the two, is accepted and approved, [359b] not as a real good, but as a thing honored in the lack of vigor to do injustice, since anyone who had the power to do it and was in reality 'a man' would never make a compact with anybody either to wrong nor to be wronged; for he would be mad. The nature, then, of justice is this and such as this, Socrates, and such are the conditions in which it originates, according to the theory.
- (2) “But as for the second point, that those who practise it do so unwillingly and from want of power to commit injustice—we shall be most likely to apprehend that if we entertain some such supposition as this in thought: [359c] if we grant to each, the just and the unjust, licence and power to do whatever he pleases, and then accompany them in imagination and see whither his desire will conduct each. We should then catch the just man in the very act of resorting to the same conduct as the unjust man because of the self-advantage which every creature by its nature pursues as a good, while by the convention of law¹ it is forcibly diverted to paying honor to 'equality.'²
- (3) “The licence that I mean would be most nearly such as would result from supposing them to have the power [359d] which men say once came to the ancestor of Gyges the Lydian.³ They relate that he was a shepherd in the service of the ruler at that time of [Lydia](#), and that after a great deluge of rain and an earthquake the ground opened and a chasm appeared in the place where he was pasturing; and they say that he saw and wondered and went down into the chasm; and the story goes that he beheld other marvels there and a hollow bronze horse with little doors, and that he peeped in and saw a corpse within, as it seemed, of more than mortal stature, [359e] and that there was nothing else but a gold ring on its hand, which he took off and went forth. And when the shepherds held their customary assembly to make their monthly report to the king about the flocks, he also attended wearing the ring. So as he sat there it chanced that he turned the collet of the ring towards himself, towards the inner part of his hand, and when this took place they say that he became invisible [360a] to those who sat by him and they spoke of him as absent and that he was amazed, and again fumbling with the ring turned the collet outwards and so became visible. On noting this he experimented with the ring to see if it possessed this virtue, and he found the result to be that when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, and when outwards visible; and becoming aware of this, he immediately managed things so that he became one of the messengers [360b] who went up to

the king, and on coming there he seduced the king's wife and with her aid set upon the king and slew him and possessed his kingdom.

- (4) "If now there should be two such rings, and the just man should put on one and the unjust the other, no one could be found, it would seem, of such adamant¹ temper as to persevere in justice and endure to refrain his hands from the possessions of others and not touch them, though he might with impunity take what he wished even from the marketplace, [360c] and enter into houses and lie with whom he pleased, and slay and loose from bonds whomsoever he would, and in all other things conduct himself among mankind as the equal of a god.² And in so acting he would do no differently from the other man, but both would pursue the same course. And yet this is a great proof, one might argue, that no one is just of his own will but only from constraint, in the belief that justice is not his personal good, inasmuch as every man, when he supposes himself to have the power to do wrong, does wrong. [360d] For that there is far more profit for him personally in injustice than in justice is what every man believes, and believes truly, as the proponent of this theory will maintain. For if anyone who had got such a licence within his grasp should refuse to do any wrong or lay his hands on others' possessions, he would be regarded as most pitiable³ and a great fool by all who took note of it,⁴ though they would praise him⁵ before one another's faces, deceiving one another because of their fear of suffering injustice. So much for this point. [360e]
- (5) "But to come now to the decision⁶ between our two kinds of life, if we separate the most completely just and the most completely unjust man, we shall be able to decide rightly, but if not, not. How, then, is this separation to be made? Thus: we must subtract nothing of his injustice from the unjust man or of his justice from the just, but assume the perfection of each in his own mode of conduct. In the first place, the unjust man must act as clever craftsmen do: a first-rate pilot or physician, for example, feels the difference between impossibilities⁷ and possibilities in his art [361a] and attempts the one and lets the others go; and then, too, if he does happen to trip, he is equal to correcting his error. Similarly, the unjust man who attempts injustice rightly must be supposed to escape detection if he is to be altogether unjust, and we must regard the man who is caught as a bungler.¹ For the height of injustice² is to seem just without being so. To the perfectly unjust man, then, we must assign perfect injustice and withhold nothing of it, but we must allow him, while committing the greatest wrongs, to have secured for himself the greatest reputation for justice; [361b] and if he does happen to trip,³ we must concede to him the power to correct his mistakes by his ability to speak persuasively if any of his misdeeds come to light, and when force is needed, to employ force by reason of his manly spirit and vigor and his provision of friends and money; and when we have set up an unjust man of this character, our theory must set the just man at his side—a simple and noble man, who, in the phrase of Aeschylus, does not wish to seem but be good. Then we must deprive him of the seeming.⁴ For if he is going to be thought just [361c] he will have honors and gifts because of that esteem. We cannot be sure in that case whether he is just for justice' sake or for the sake of the gifts and the honors. So we must strip him bare of everything but justice and make his state the opposite of his imagined counterpart.⁵ Though doing no wrong he must have the repute of the greatest injustice, so that he may be put to the test as regards justice through not softening because of ill repute and the consequences thereof. But let him hold on his course

unchangeable even unto death, [361d] seeming all his life to be unjust though being just, that so, both men attaining to the limit, the one of injustice, the other of justice, we may pass judgement which of the two is the happier.”

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