

# Intrinsic Valuing and the Limits of Justice: Why the Ring of Gyges Matters

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## I. Introduction

- A. Glaucon prefaces his argument against the just life by presenting a threefold classification of goods:
1. Goods valued and chosen for their own sake (e.g. joy and harmless pleasure)
  2. Goods valued and chosen for their own sake and also for the sake of their consequences (e.g. knowledge, sight, and health).
  3. Goods that are burdensome in themselves and thus valued and chosen only for their consequences (e.g. physical training and medical treatment).
- B. The Ring of Gyges
1. Glaucon claims that anyone who would refrain from injustice while in possession of the ring “would be thought wretched and stupid by everyone aware of the situation” (360d4-5).
  2. The intended upshot seems to be that nobody chooses justice for its own sake. In other words, justice is viewed by all as a Type-3 good.
- C. Interpreters such as Irwin (1999) and Shields (2006) object that Glaucon’s argument could not establish this because one can value something intrinsically while also judging that its value can be outweighed. Hence, even if one endorses Gyges’ behavior, one might still think that justice has *some* intrinsic value.
- D. Despite the initial plausibility of the Irwin-Shields objection, we argue that the soundness of Glaucon’s argument would indeed demonstrate that nobody values justice for its own sake. We present an alternative reconstruction on which the Gyges story yields a more serious challenge to the purported value of justice.

## II. The Compatibility Thesis

- A. Valuing something intrinsically needn’t commit one to valuing that thing above all else. Hence, valuing justice for its own sake may be compatible with endorsing acts of injustice when the profits are high enough.

“Some people are willing to be considerate if it costs them nothing, but unwilling if it involves even the smallest instrumental cost. If I find a private letter of yours that is of no use to me, and I have a choice between putting it back in your letter box and throwing it on the ground, and each action is equally easy, I might think it intrinsically better to put it back in your letter box. But if it cost me the least trouble, I would not put it in your letter box. Gyges (or someone in similar circumstances) might take a similar view of the value of justice” (Irwin 1999: 173).

“In making such a choice [i.e. whether or not to follow the just path], we would no doubt consider the relevant degrees and thresholds and make our decisions accordingly” (Shields 2006: 79).

- B. According to Shields, the Gyges argument is of little utility for Glaucon’s purposes but rightly included by Plato as a mechanism for causing readers to reflect on their level of commitment to justice (2006: 76).
- C. On Irwin’s reading, what Glaucon aims to show is not that we value justice only instrumentally, but rather that we do not think justice is more valuable than injustice *in all circumstances* (1999: 175). Glaucon asks Socrates, “Do you want to seem to have persuaded us that it is better *in every way* to be just than unjust, or do you want to truly convince us of this” (357a4-b2, emphasis added).
- D. Neither of these readings attributes much significance to the Gyges argument, and they both fail to accommodate strong textual evidence that the argument is meant to establish that justice is viewed as a Type-3 good.
  - 1. Even on Irwin’s reading, the Gyges story is of little import for Glaucon because the “in all circumstances” question is better addressed by the Choice of Lives, which follows immediately after the recounting of Gyges’ Ring.
  - 2. Glaucon prefaces the Gyges story as follows: “We can see most clearly that those who practice justice do it unwillingly and because they lack the power to do injustice, if in our thoughts we grant to a just and an unjust person the freedom to do whatever they like...The freedom I mentioned would be most easily recognized if both people had the power they say the ancestor of Gyges of Lydia possessed” (359b6-d1).

### III. Normative Objects and the Limiting Requirement

- A. The genuineness of our evaluative judgments is contingent upon our behaviors, dispositions, and the related judgments that we make.
  - 1. This is seen most readily when the object of our valuing is itself partly constituted by ethical norms or standards.
  - 2. Let us call the various principles, moral ideals, and virtues that one might value *normative objects*.
- B. If an agent genuinely values a normative object for its own sake (as opposed to merely feigning to do so), then she will not reflectively endorse behaviors and attitudes that directly violate the principles and standards of which it is composed. This is because intrinsically valuing a normative object involves endorsement of the constitutive principles and standards.
- C. Valuing justice for its own sake is incompatible with rational endorsement of undermining behaviors when the ostensible justification for the undermining involves considerations that justice itself precludes from having justificatory weight.
- D. Limiting Requirement: Justice requires viewing the interests of others as placing limits on what one can permissibly do in pursuit of effective goods (e.g. wealth and political power).
  - 1. The fact that justice places limits on the pursuit of wealth and power explains why Glaucon has doubts about the value of justice in the first place.

2. Adeimantus also expresses the idea that justice limits one's options for pursuit of personal gain when he takes up Glaucon's position later in Book 2 (364a1-3).
  3. In explaining why the ostensibly just person will act exactly as the unjust person does in circumstances of immunity, Glaucon uses 'fairness' (*isotia*) as interchangeable with 'justice' (359c). The Limiting Requirement is clearly involved in any plausible notion of fairness.
- E. Given the centrality of the Limiting Requirement to the very notion of justice, analyses of Book 2 based on the Compatibility Thesis must attribute the following set of judgments to the agent in question:
1. One ought to view the interests of others as placing limits on what one can defensibly do in pursuit of power and wealth.
  2. Whenever the potential gain in power and wealth is sizable enough, one is justified in completely disregarding the interests of others.

#### **IV. Intrinsic Valuing within a Eudaemonist Framework**

- A. If valuing justice for its own sake were merely a matter of preferring states of affairs in which justice is generally realized over those in which it is not, then the Compatibility Thesis would be true.
- B. However, a person who intrinsically values a normative object itself is someone who accepts and embraces the central principles and requirements for herself (and believes others ought to do the same).
- C. This is especially clear within a eudaemonist framework, where the relevant attitude is one of choosing to pursue the normative object as a non-instrumental part of one's good.
  1. An agent who pursues justice as a non-instrumental part of her good is someone who is striving to become a just person.
  2. And one cannot make a sincere effort to become just while simultaneously maintaining a policy of being willing to disregard the interests of others whenever the potential profits of doing so are sufficiently great.
- D. In light of these points, we reconstruct Glaucon's argument as follows:
  1. Any agent who chooses to pursue justice as a non-instrumental part of their good is someone who strives to become a just person.
  2. Any agent who strives to become a just person is someone with a reasonably stable commitment to justice; their reflective endorsement of giving consideration to the interests of others does not depend on the amount of riches obtainable by completely disregarding those interests.
  3. Any agent who chooses to pursue justice as a non-instrumental part of their good is someone with a reasonably stable commitment to justice. (1-2)

4. Anyone who would reflectively endorse Gyges' acts does not have a reasonably stable commitment to justice.
5. Everyone would reflectively endorse Gyges' acts (at least in private).
6. Nobody has a reasonably stable commitment to justice. (4-5)
7. Nobody chooses justice as a non-instrumental part of their good. (3 and 6)

## V. Making Sense of Book 2

A. On the analysis we have been challenging, Glaucon appears to make a number of silly mistakes.

1. In discussing the three types of goods, Glaucon loses sight of the original question concerning the comparative value of justice and injustice. He mistakenly believes that if Socrates can prove that justice is actually a Type-2 good, this will advance the case for the superiority of justice.
2. Glaucon fails to recognize that the Gyges argument is incapable of showing that justice is a Type-3 good (i.e. valued only for its consequences).

B. We should not assume that either Glaucon or Plato are being careless unless there are no viable alternatives. Our analysis provides just such an alternative.

1. Glaucon has the reasonable thought that understanding which type of good justice is will help illuminate its comparative value to injustice.
2. If Socrates can prove him wrong, by showing that justice is actually a Type-2 good, then it looks promising that the just life is better than the unjust life.
3. Glaucon rightly believes that the Ring of Gyges provides a test to see which type of good most people believe justice to be. If our endorsement of just behavior is contingent upon the amount of profit at stake and whether we can pursue those profits with immunity, then we do not value justice for its own sake but only for its consequences.

C. If nobody chooses to pursue justice for its own sake, this is *prima facie* reason to doubt that it *ought* to be chosen for its own sake; we would need strong reasons for believing that so many people are making such a significant error. Hence, Plato includes the Gyges story not merely to force us to think about the extent of our commitment to justice but because it represents a strong challenge to the supposed superiority of the just life.