

### **Glaucon's argument (from *The Republic*, Book II) that:**

The best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just.

The main argument:

1. No one pursues and enjoys doing the just thing for its own sake. (Doing the just thing is not intrinsically rewarding.) People act justly only out of their desires for the effects of acting justly. These effects include honour, respect and trust; they also include making other people less inclined to do injustice toward one. Some of these effects—honour, for instance—are loved for their own sakes, while some are good by way of securing things one loves for their own sake.
2. The effects of doing the just thing actually come to one merely from one's having the reputation for being just; it is neither necessary nor sufficient that one be committed to doing the just thing in order for one to bring about these effects.
3. A clever and resourceful person prepared to do the unjust thing whenever she judges that doing the unjust thing will best promote her life's projects stands a much better chance of enjoying more of the things she loves for their own sakes, and of enjoying them more often, than an equally clever and resourceful person committed to doing only the just thing stands.
4. The best life of all is that in which one pursues and enjoys to the greatest extent the things one loves for their own sakes.

Therefore:

5. The best life of all is the life of the (clever and resourceful) unjust person whom others believe to be just.

Considerations in favour of the first premise of the main argument:

A. Imagine two people, one committed to justice, the other not. Suppose that each were to possess some device that made him invincible in the pursuit of whatever he loves for its own sake. Clearly the unjust person, now without fear of being caught or punished for his injustice, would not hesitate a moment to act unjustly whenever he judges acting unjustly will best serve his purposes. But how would the formerly just person act? Thanks to his device, he is now equally without fear of being caught or punished were he to act unjustly. His behaviour would be indistinguishable from that of the unjust person.

B. But a person actually committed to doing the just thing out of a love for justice itself would not forsake his love in such changed circumstances. Had the formerly just person truly loved justice for its own sake, he would have used his device to promote justice, even at the expense of other things he loves for their own sake.

The thought experiment we just conducted shows that:

1. No one pursues and enjoys doing the just thing for its own sake. (Doing the just thing is not intrinsically rewarding.) People act justly only out of their desires for the effects of acting justly.

Considerations in favour of the second premise of the main argument:

A. A person who does what in fact is the just thing but who is wrongly believed to have done the unjust thing will not receive the honours, the respect and the trust that people bestow on those they believe have done the just thing.

B. A person who does what in fact is the unjust thing but who is wrongly believed to have done the just thing will receive the honours, the respect and the trust that people bestow on those they believe have done the just thing.

Therefore:

2. The effects of doing the just thing actually come to one merely from one's having the reputation for being just; it is neither necessary nor sufficient that one be committed to doing the just thing in order for one to bring about these effects.

Considerations in favour of the third premise of the main argument:

A. A person committed to justice is one whose actions manifest respect for other people and their projects. She does not think to advance her projects by lying, stealing or cheating. She does not ridicule, insult or denigrate other people, but is always careful about their feelings. A person committed to justice devotes time, effort and resources to promoting impartially other people's interests or the general good.

B. A person not committed to justice is one who is indifferent to the projects and sense of self-worth of anyone beyond those close to him. He will lie, steal or cheat whenever he judges it is in his interests overall to do so. He devotes time, energy and resources to other people's projects only when he deems doing so will further his own projects.

Thus:

C. A person committed to justice abstains either habitually or out of principle from various means by which to attain things she loves for their own sakes, even when those means are the most efficient means available to her. An unjust person, on the other hand, uses whatever means are the most efficient means available to him, without scruple.

D. A person who abstains from using the most efficient means to further her projects will fare worse in life than a person who uses whatever the most efficient means happen to be will fare.

Therefore:

3. A clever and resourceful person prepared to do the unjust thing whenever she judges that doing the unjust thing will best promote her life's projects stands a much better chance of enjoying more of the things she loves for their own sakes, and of enjoying them more often, than an equally clever and resourceful person committed to doing the just thing stands.

Considerations in favour of the fourth premise of the main argument:

A. A good life is a life spent pursuing and enjoying the things one loves for their own sake.

Therefore:

4. The best life of all is that in which one pursues and enjoys to the greatest extent the things one loves for their own sake.

Objections:

1) The very best way to acquire and maintain a reputation for justice is to be committed out of principle or habit to do the just thing. This is because to be prepared to do the unjust thing when one judges it best overall to do the unjust thing is to put oneself at risk of forfeiting one's reputation for justice and, thereby, to put oneself at risk of losing the honours, respect and trust that come with a reputation for justice. It is also to risk punishment, the very worst outcome from the point of view of one's quest to enjoy the things one loves for their own sake. People are notoriously bad at estimating the chance that they will get caught should they resort to unjust means in pursuing their projects; and typically people overestimate the value of what they can accomplish through unjust means and underestimate the disvalue of being caught and punished. So, to stay on the safe side, the wise person commits himself to justice.

—Response: The very best life of all is the life of the unjust person whom people believe to be just. That only a clever and resourceful person, one able to estimate risks and values accurately and reliably, can live the very best life of all doesn't mean that that isn't the very best life at all.

2) Unjust people suffer pangs of conscience. Suffering pangs of conscience is bad in itself and also debilitating. Thus, a wise person commits herself to justice.

—Response: A person without a conscience is, then, most fortunate! A wise person cursed with a conscience seeks as best she can to rid herself of her conscience. A wise person unable to rid herself of her conscience will draw a deep breath and, with profound regret, resign herself to living an inferior sort of life.

3) The best community in which to pursue and enjoy the things one loves for their own sakes is the community in which justice prevails, for in that community each individual benefits from the

peace and prosperity justice brings. The best way to create and maintain such a community is to commit oneself to justice.

—Response: A wise unjust person will be concerned to promote justice among his fellow citizens in order to help create and maintain a just community, so that he might enjoy the benefits available in such a community. But he has no reason to limit himself to the just enjoyment of these benefits.