

The folly of ethical commitment

I. To have a commitment to ethics

A person with strong commitments to ethics is a person who, by habit or principle, tends either:

- 1) to treat individual people with respect and care
- or
- 2) to act impartially to promote the well-being of those whose lives her actions touch.

A person with strong commitments to ethics:

- 1) refrains from lying, cheating, stealing, or harming others when pursuing her own goals, and accepts just treatment at the hands of others
- or
- 2) devotes time, energy, money, or other resources to the well-being or happiness of others, even when neither she herself nor one for whom she specially cares will benefit from her efforts.

First thing to notice:

A person with strong commitments to ethics acts under constraint in the pursuit of his own goals. He tends not to use unethical means to secure those goals, even when unethical means are, overall, the best means to use. He might also refuse to pursue as ethically unsound certain goals otherwise attractive to him. And he might, in caring impartially for others, deplete resources he could use for himself or those for whom he specially cares.

II. Sources of commitment to ethics

A person's strong commitments to ethics can rest on one (or both) of two grounds.

- 1) Her commitments can rest on the thought that in the long run, she herself will come out farther ahead in her other pursuits by having commitments to ethics than she would by not having such commitments.
- 2) Her commitments can rest on a love of justice or decency or the common good for its own sake.

But:

A commitment to ethics as instrumentally useful is fit only for people too lazy or stupid to think well for themselves (as Glaucon demonstrates in Book II of *Republic*).

So let us confine our attention to commitments to ethics stemming from a love of justice itself.

III. Glaucon's dismissal of the love of justice

—Get real!, says Glaucon, —no one actually loves justice for its own sake! Anyone committed to ethics is committed to it out of concerns for other things. But since a commitment to ethics based on its instrumental value makes sense only for the slothful and dull, it is foolish for people like us to acquire or maintain a commitment to ethics.

Why should we think no one is committed to ethics for its own sake?

1. A person apparently committed to justice who becomes convinced that she can pursue her projects unjustly with impunity would either 1) abandon her commitment to justice or 2) retain her commitment only for the sake of her conscience.
2. A person who loves something for its own sake will remain committed to that thing through changing circumstances.
3. A commitment that stems from one's concern not to feel the pangs of conscience is an instrumentally-based commitment.

Therefore: 4. No one loves justice for its own sake.

But let's suppose Glaucon is wrong about this. Glaucon's contention that love is not love which alters when it alteration finds (statement 2 in the above argument) is most likely false. (But how would an argument against that contention go?)

IV. Epicurus and the pursuit of happiness

1. One's love for something or someone is a foolish love when it puts one's happiness at risk.
2. One's loving justice for its own sake will inevitably put one's happiness at risk.

Therefore: 3. One is foolish to love justice for its own sake.

The love of justice is like the love of fried foods, or the love of alcohol, or the love of power, or the love of parachuting from bridges, or the love of someone who doesn't love in return. There's a high chance that things will turn out very badly because of that love.

How does loving justice put one's happiness at risk?

A happy person is a person free of physical pain and possessed of peace of mind. A happy life is simply a trouble-free life. Commitments to ethics stemming from a love of justice or the love of the general good not only do not promote trouble-free living, but can easily increase one's troubles.

How can loving justice increase one's troubles?

- 1) By depleting resources one could use instead to reduce one's troubles or to prevent troubles arising in the first place.
- 2) The world is marked by much injustice, cruelty, and unhappiness. To be concerned about this fact is immediately to be troubled.
- 3) There is little you can do to make the world more just or to spread happiness in it. You will be disappointed and dispirited by the limited results your efforts achieve.
- 4) Friendship is a direct source of happiness and a great bulwark against trouble. But a concern for justice will alienate one from one's friends when justice or the good requires impartiality. Worse, justice or the good can require that one bring trouble to one's friends. One might, of course, choose one's friends over justice or the good, but only at the cost of emotional pain if one has a commitment to justice or the good.

V. Nietzsche and the art of self creation

“Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that.” (*From Twilight of the Idols.*)

1. Your life is your one single most precious possession.
2. The art of living is the art of making your life the most beautiful and fulfilling creation it can be.

Thus: 3. Any commitment that compromises your ability to create for yourself the life most worth living is a foolish commitment.

4. Commitments to ethics compromise your ability to create for yourself the life most worth living.

Therefore: 5. You are a fool to love justice for its own sake.

How do commitments to ethics compromise a person's ability to create for herself the life most worth living?

By alienating her from her life. Commitments to ethics are other-directed commitments, commitments that put others on the same level with or even above oneself. To have a commitment to justice out of a love of justice for its own sake, then, is to deny the significance to oneself of one's most precious possession, one's life.

VI. Questions

Do Glaucon's reasonings go wrong? Where do they go wrong? How can a defender of the wisdom of commitments to ethics respond to them?

Do Epicurus's reasonings go wrong? Where do they go wrong? How can a defender of the wisdom of commitments to ethics respond to them?

Do Nietzsche's reasonings go wrong? Where do they go wrong? How can a defender of the wisdom of commitments to ethics respond to them?