

Glaucou's argument

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Early in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, we find an argument that just as a matter of fact, no one is honest for the sake of honesty. *The Republic* is written as a conversation (or, at least, the first few books are), and the argument that no one is committed to honesty out of a love for it is presented by a character named "Glaucou."

Glaucou says that a person who believes she can lie without being found out wouldn't hesitate to lie should she believe lying will advance her cause more effectively than not lying. Since we would lie if we could get away with it, Glaucou reasons, our commitment to honesty, should we have one, must rest on our fear of getting caught and having to pay a penalty. Better, we think, according to Glaucou, simply to cultivate honesty as a character trait than to take chances by leaving ourselves open to telling lies.

We've seen, though, in a previous column, that a circumspect person able to think well on his feet would most likely do better to remain willing to lie than to cultivate honesty. We would be unwise to cultivate honesty, then, as a means to furthering our goals.

Now it would seem that one can have one of but two reasons to commit oneself to honesty. One can commit oneself to honesty in the belief that that commitment will serve one well in one's projects, or one can commit oneself for the sake of honesty itself. If we're right that honesty is a tool fit only for the chuckleheaded, then we can be wise to commit ourselves to honesty only should we hold that honesty its own reward. But if Glaucou is right, no one actually believes that honesty is its own reward.

Glaucou's argument is this: No one able to lie with impunity would remain committed to honesty; therefore, no one presently committed to honesty is committed to it for its own sake. That's the argument as explicitly formulated in *Republic*. Clearly it is missing a premise, one we need to supply for ourselves.

What connects the conclusion to the stated premise is the idea that a person who loses a commitment to something when circumstances change had only an instrumental commitment to that thing. That is, he was not committed to it for its own sake. The background thought is that a person who values something for its own sake doesn't abandon that thing in the face of changing fortune.

In other words, love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

Now certainly we can take the fact that a person easily abandoned one of his commitments to be evidence that that commitment did not rest on a strong positive affective attitude. But we can take it as evidence only. It is possible actually to love

something and through changes in one's circumstances to lose that love. Glaucon's implicit premise is false, that is, and, for that reason, his argument is unsound.

It's possible for a person to love something and to lose that love so long as that person loves many other things. Our lives are our attempts to find ways to honour each of the things that matter to us, given our circumstances and our prospects. When more than one thing matters to us, our loves will compete with each other for our time and resources. As circumstances change, we can discover it easier to devote ourselves to some particular thing that matters to us, and we can begin to favour it at the expense of another. That a love fades, then, does not prove that it wasn't really ever a love.

Showing Glaucon's argument to be faulty, though, is not to show that one should love honesty for its own sake and, thereby, be committed to honesty as an expression of one's love. It is not, indeed, even to show that it's possible to love honesty for its own sake. It is only to remove one objection to the idea that we might yet be wise to be committed to honesty, even though we are foolish to be committed to it as a way of getting other things that we want.

Nonetheless, since we are without a sound argument that none of us does love honesty for its own sake, we are free to suppose that what appears to be a person's intrinsic commitment to honesty is indeed an intrinsic commitment. So let us assume that it is possible to be committed to honesty as an expression of one's love of honesty. Now we need to know whether such a love is ever a wise love.