



Why Socrates Rejects Glaucon's Version of the Social Contract

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Though society is not founded on a contract, and though no good purpose is answered by inventing a contract in order to deduce social obligations from it, everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit.

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, chapter iv.

In Book II of the Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus challenge Socrates' claim that justice belongs in the class of goods which are valued for their own sake as well as for the sake of what comes from them (Rep. 357 b- 358 a). Unconvinced by Socrates' refutation of Thrasymachus, Glaucon renews Thrasymachus' argument that the life of the unjust person is better than that of the just person. As part of his case, Glaucon states what he claims most people consider the nature of justice to be and what its origins are. He proceeds to present a version of the social contract theory:

They say that to do injustice is naturally good and to suffer injustice bad, but that the badness of suffering it so far exceeds the goodness of doing it that those who have done and suffered injustice and tasted both, but who lack the power to do it and avoid suffering it, decide that it is profitable to come to an agreement with each other neither to do injustice nor to suffer it. As a result, they begin to make laws and covenants, and what the law commands they call lawful and just. This, they say, is the origin and essence of justice. It is intermediate between the best and the worst. The best is to do injustice without paying the penalty; the worst is to suffer it without being able to take revenge. Justice is a mean between these two extremes. People value it not because it is a good but because they are too weak to do injustice with impunity. Someone who has the power to do this, however, and is a true man wouldn't make an agreement with anyone not to do injustice in order not to suffer it. For him that would be madness. This is the nature of justice, according to the argument, Socrates, and these are its natural origins (Rep. 358 e-359 b).¹

In the course of Socrates'² extensive response³ to Glaucon and Adeimantus, he offers an account of justice that is a radical alternative to Glaucon's version of the social contract theory. But while it is relatively clear why Socrates believes that justice belongs in the class of goods that are valued for their own sake, it is less clear why he rejects Glaucon's version of the social contract theory. The question takes on added interest when we remember that in the *Crito* Socrates appeals to something like the social contract theory to explain why he must

not escape from prison (Cri. 50 b-53 b). In this paper, I investigate Socrates' refutation of Glaucon's social contract theory. I begin with a brief account of what I take to be Glaucon's central claims. Next, I argue that there are two central, related arguments why Socrates rejects Glaucon's version of the social contract—one is metaphysical, and the other epistemological. Socrates' metaphysical argument contends that the natural world is not morally indifferent or neutral, as Glaucon's social contract theory supposes, and human nature is not simply avaricious and competitive. Rather, the complex amalgam that is human nature is unified and perfected by justice, and nature itself exudes moral value in as much as it is illuminated by the Good. Socrates' epistemological argument contends that most humans are in error of what the Good truly is, and so they cannot provide an adequate foundation for a just society by means of the negotiated compromise which constitutes the social contract. Only those enlightened by philosophy are capable of understanding what justice is, because they alone know how justice is tied to the Good. Finally, at the close of the paper I briefly suggest some ways in which Socrates' rejection of Glaucon's position is compatible with the appeal to a social contract in the *Crito*.

I

Glaucon's argument in *Republic* 358 e-359 b is committed to at least the following five claims:

1. The essence of justice is to be understood by its beginnings.⁴
2. Committing injustice is naturally good and desired, but suffering injustice is naturally bad and avoided.

Hence,

3. Justice is not grounded in nature (*phusis*); rather, it is contrary to human nature.

Accordingly,

4. Justice is based entirely on convention (*nomos*), namely, a social contract that people make with one another whereby they sacrifice their attempts to perform injustices with impunity in order to avoid suffering injustices without recompense.

Real men, who can commit injustice with impunity, would not submit to this convention

Glaucon apparently presupposes that the human good is some combination of power, pleasure, and wealth, and that because these goods are limited, humans compete with one another over them. For when Glaucon develops his position, he claims that "what anyone's nature naturally pursues as good" is to "outdo others and get more and more (*pleonexian*)" (Rep. 359 c) of "other people's property," and to "take whatever he wanted from the marketplace with impunity, go into people's houses and have sex with anyone he wished, kill or release from prison anyone he wished, and do all the other things that would make him a god among humans" (Rep. 360 b-c). Humans, on Glaucon's picture, are naturally competitive, and willing to go to whatever lengths necessary to secure their own private advantage. However, since most people are not potent enough to secure for themselves the lion's share of these limited goods, and are afraid of losing what little of these goods they have, they agree to the compromise which is the social contract. Thus, their "nature is forced by law into the perversion of treating fairness with respect" (Rep. 359 c). Those rare individuals who can make successful attempts at injustice, on the other hand, at most will feign adherence to this social contract. Most of their acts of injustice will remain undetected, but if discovered, they can set things right either by rhetorical persuasion or by force (Rep. 360 e-361 b).

Less clear is what source Glaucon is drawing from in asserting this view of justice. Allan Bloom suggests that Glaucon is applying the pre-Socratic study of nature to questions of politics.

Bloom writes, “The results of the study of nature led the earliest philosophers to believe that there is no cosmic support for justice, that the gods, if they exist at all, have no care for men. Justice is, then, merely human convention and hence a matter of indifference to those who wish to live according to nature.”⁵ Glaucon thus comes across as “a daring man whose desire not to be hoodwinked by common opinions about the good gives him a certain intellectual force lacked by Thrasymachus.”⁶

However, Glaucon does not explicitly appeal to philosophers for support. Instead, he cites what is “most people’s opinion” (Rep. 358 a), and what not only Thrasymachus but “countless others” say about justice (Rep. 358 c). These commonly held opinions undoubtedly are consistent with, and perhaps influenced by, the materialism of pre-Socratic philosophy. Yet for Bloom to attribute them to pre-Socratic philosophy in opposition to common opinions about the good is too strong, especially when one can find similar views in the patently unphilosophical Callicles (Gorg. 482 e-484 c). Hence, it is more accurate to describe these beliefs, as F. M. Cornford does, as “current in intellectual circles.”⁷ Perhaps one can account for them, as Julia Annas suggests, “as a result of increased awareness of differences in culture and society between Greek cities and between Greeks and other peoples.”⁸

II

In his refutation, Socrates will reject at least four of the five claims to which Glaucon’s version of the social contract is committed. But it is unclear whether or not he rejects the first claim—the essence of justice is to be understood by its beginnings. Socrates begins his alternative account of justice by describing the origin of the city (*polis*). He asks, “If we could watch a city coming to be in theory, wouldn’t we also see its justice coming to be, and its injustice as well?” (Rep. 369 a). This suggests that Socrates accepts Glaucon’s first claim. On the other hand, Allan Bloom thinks that, this passage notwithstanding, Socrates rejects Glaucon’s first claim as well. According to Bloom, Socrates’ acceptance that the origin of a thing reveals its nature is merely provisional,⁹ and that he teaches “in the discussion of the ideas, that the end, not the origin, of a thing is its nature.”¹⁰ Bloom’s interpretation is hampered by Socrates’ account of the various regimes in *Republic* VIII-IX. Socrates places the best regime first, and then describes the downward spiral of decay to timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Bloom attempts to resolve this problem by claiming that “Here he [Socrates] appeals to Glaucon’s faulty philosophical understanding by putting what is really the end at the origin.”¹¹ Bloom adds that by putting the ideal regime first in time, even though it is historically implausible, Socrates shows that the philosophical quest for wisdom is not in conflict with respect for the ancestral.¹²

However, even if Bloom’s interpretation can handle these passages, it nevertheless makes Plato’s Socrates into a proto-Aristotelian. While there are hints of a recognition of final causation in Plato,¹³ Bloom attributes to Plato a more robust teleology than would seem to be warranted. Therefore, I think it remains an open question whether or not Socrates agrees with Glaucon that the essence of justice is to be understood, at least in part, by its beginnings.

Starting from the premise that “none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things” (Rep. 369 b), Socrates proceeds to list the most basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, and health (Rep. 369 d). Given that people do a better job if they specialize than if they attempt to practice many crafts (Rep. 370 b),¹⁴ Socrates infers that this primitive city includes farmers, carpenters, metal workers, weavers, cobblers, shepherds and other herdsmen, retailers, merchants, and wage-earners (Rep. 370 c- 371 e). Absent from this simple, healthy city are guardians and soldiers, and justice seems to take care of itself (Rep. 371 e-372 a).

Bloom notes, “This first city is obviously impossible. It depends on an unfounded belief in nature’s providential generosity, in a ‘hidden hand’ which harmonizes private and public interest.”¹⁵ Moreover, this city, as Annas observes, “is built up purely on the basis of self-interest”¹⁶ and so falls far short of the ideal type of human being found in the ideal type of city. Nevertheless, it serves to begin to undermine Glaucon’s third, and, by implication, second and fourth claims.¹⁷ For this primitive city indicates that humans are not merely the avaricious,

competitive individuals that Glaucon makes them out to be. Rather, as Cornford remarks, because humans “are not born self-sufficient or all alike; hence an organized society in which they are interdependent and specialized according to innate aptitudes is... both natural and advantageous to all the individuals.”¹⁸ In other words, Socrates is beginning to build the case for a natural basis for justice, grounded on our nature as social and political animals. Consequently, he is beginning to show that society is not “the artificial outcome of an arbitrary contract” nor the “thwarting [of] the individual’s natural instincts.”¹⁹

Socrates’ argument is complicated by Glaucon’s complaint that the first city, with its lack of amenities, is more fit for pigs than people (Rep. 372 d). Although Socrates insists that “the true city... is the one we’ve described” (Rep. 372 e), he consents to describe and study a “city with a fever” (Rep. 372 e). According to Annas, the real moral argument in the Republic begins here, with the “facts about human nature and co-operation that we see at work in the luxurious city.”²⁰ Among these facts are human desires for sensual delights, for this city has “all sorts of delicacies, perfumed oils, incense, prostitutes, and pastries” (Rep. 373 a) along with paintings and embroideries, ivory and gold. It includes musicians, artists, poets, actors, and choral dancers (Rep. 373 b). Unlike the vegetarian inhabitants of the first city, the members of this city eat meat (Rep. 373 c). Consequently, they will have a greater need for doctors (Rep. 373 d). They will also need more land in order to raise their livestock, and so will have to seize that land from their neighbors (Rep. 373 d). Their neighbors will want to do the same to them, and so, consistent with the principle of specialization, the luxurious city will need professional soldiers and political guardians to protect and rule over the city (Rep. 374 a-e). Hence, the facts about human nature also include those features that Glaucon stressed earlier—competitiveness and *pleonexia*.

However, in the end conceding Glaucon’s desire for a luxurious city helps rather than hinders Socrates’ case against Glaucon’s version of the social contract. This is most clearly seen if we fast forward to Socrates’ familiar account of the tri-partite soul. One important basis for distinguishing between the three parts of the soul is the experience of psychological conflict. For example, in the presence of one of the sensual delights found in the luxurious city, the soul can be both drawn toward that pleasant object and driven away from it. Since “the same thing will not be willing to do or to undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time” (Rep. 436 b), we must distinguish one part of the soul which accounts for the inclination toward the sensually pleasant object—the irrational appetite—and at least one part of the soul which accounts for the drive away from that object—the rational part of the soul. When the soul is angry with itself for indulging its appetite, it is because the rational part is being assisted by the spirited part of the soul (cf. Rep. 439 b- 440 a).²¹ Now the occurrence of this kind of psychological conflict is difficult to imagine in the inhabitants of the first, healthy city. But it is all-too-common among the inhabitants of the luxurious city that Glaucon desires to create.

Given the tri-partite amalgam which is the human soul, Socrates proceeds to offer a preliminary description of its health and perfection. In the healthy soul, the rational part rules on the basis of its knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole soul (Rep. 442 c). The spirited part follows reason’s lead and carries out its decisions (Rep. 442 b). Together, reason and spirit govern the otherwise insatiable appetitive part (Rep. 442 a-b), in such a way that each part is in harmony (Rep. 442 c). Such a healthy soul would have nothing to do with acts of injustice, such as robbery, betrayal of friends and country, adultery, and impiety (Rep. 443 a). Instead, this healthy, well-ordered soul is just (Rep. 442 d- 444 a). Justice is either equivalent to psychological health or the state which insures it.²² Contrary to the third claim in Glaucon’s initial argument, justice is grounded in nature; indeed, it is the health and perfection of human nature (Rep. 444 d-e).

Alternatively, an unjust soul is diseased. It involves an extreme version of the psychological conflict that Socrates presented earlier, with the irrational appetite in rebellion against the rational part. In such a soul, the irrational appetite undeservedly rules over the rational part. This, Socrates stresses, is contrary to nature (Rep. 444 d). In opposition to the second claim in

Glaucon's initial argument, committing injustice is not naturally good and desired; indeed, life is not even worth living when the soul is in such ruin and turmoil (Rep. 445 a-b). Therefore, a real man would not wish to commit injustice with impunity, contrary to the fifth and final claim in Glaucon's argument. Glaucon concedes that to suggest otherwise "looks ridiculous... now that justice and injustice have been shown to be as we have described" (Rep. 445 a).

But if a proper understanding of human nature reveals that justice is its health and perfection, it does not follow that the ultimate source of moral value lies in human nature, or even in nature itself. The case against Glaucon's version of the social contract theory does not end at the close of Book IV. Nor does it receive a hiatus until the discussion of the just and unjust souls resumes in Books VIII and IX. For Socrates is not content to reject the social contract theory on the grounds that it, in Annas' words, "cannot show why I should be just and moral even if I could get away with being unjust and immoral."²³ Instead, he seeks to show that Glaucon's social contract theory is fundamentally flawed on metaphysical and epistemological grounds.

In the central books of the *Republic*, Socrates argues that the ultimate source of value lies, not in nature and certainly not in the human construction of a social contract, but in an idea grasped by the enlightened intellect—the Form of the Good. This is one of the central lessons of the figures of the Sun, the Line, and the Cave. Plato's wonderful illustrations are justly praised for their inspiring depictions of, inter alia, the liberating power of philosophy. They are also justly criticized for the difficult puzzles they raise.²⁴ For our purposes, most of these puzzles can be side-stepped. What is most important is how these illustrations convey the zenith of Socrates' metaphysical and epistemological refutation of Glaucon's version of the social contract theory.

In Book VI, Socrates begins his treatment of the Good—"the most important thing to learn about" although also something of which, Socrates quickly admits, "we have no adequate knowledge" (Rep. 505 a). Justice, as important as it is, is not the Good because "it's by relation to it [the Good] that just things and others become useful and beneficial" (Rep. 505 a). He argues that pleasure is not the Good either because there are bad pleasures (Rep. 505 c), and thus implies that whatever is the Good must be good in every way and without qualification. We easily may infer from all this that even though justice is the health and perfection of human nature, nature is not the Good either, for nature—with its earthquakes, tornados, floods and droughts—is not good in every way and without qualification. So what, then, is the Good?

Of course, Socrates never gives a clear answer to this question. With good reason Annas remarks, "'Plato's Good', which he refuses to clarify, became a byword for obscurity."²⁵ Nevertheless, he does offer some compelling analogies. First, he compares the Good to the sun. Just as the sun makes objects visible to human sight, the Good makes objects of knowledge intelligible to the human intellect (Rep. 508 c-e). It "gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower" (Rep. 508 e). Next, he describes a Divided Line which apparently classifies, in ascending order, the different states of opinion and knowledge.²⁶ At the top of this line is understanding (*noesis*), the state of knowledge in which reason reaches "the unhypothetical first principle of everything" (Rep. 511 b). Unstated, but implied, is that the Good is this unhypothetical first principle of everything. Finally, Socrates offers the Allegory of the Cave, a figure which shows "how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened" (Rep. 514 a).²⁷ The journey of the escaped prisoner culminates in a clear vision of the sun (Rep. 516 b), which Socrates again compares to the Good:

In the knowable realm, the form of the Good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding (Rep. 517 b-c).

Taken together, these poetically beautiful but philosophically ambiguous images offer a rhetorically magnificent rebuttal of Glaucon's metaphysical assumptions. The natural world is not morally neutral or indifferent, and justice is not a mere human construction. Rather, it is illuminated by the Good, the cause of all that is just, beautiful, and true.

To this point, I have stressed the metaphysical message of the figures of the Sun, Line, and Cave. But there is an epistemological message as well. All of us begin as unenlightened prisoners, confused about what our true Good is, and most of us remain at the level of imagination (eikasia), accepting the shadowy, ephemeral opinions about what is good conveyed to us by our poets, politicians, pollsters, priests, and press (Rep. 514 a-c).²⁸ Glaucon's social contract theory, since it is based on most people's opinions about justice (Rep. 358 a), belongs to the low levels of the Divided Line and Allegory of the Cave. Yet even those who advance beyond the realm of opinion and emerge from the Cave, such as the mathematicians and geometers, continue to rely on unexamined hypotheses (Rep. 510 c). They are thus like escaped prisoners whose eyes have not yet adjusted to the bright sunlight (Rep. 515 e- 516 a). None of these people are able to give an accurate account of the Good. Consequently, to maintain, as Glaucon does, that human beings can construct genuine justice by means of a mutually agreed upon compromise is tantamount to the preposterous suggestion that the unenlightened prisoners in the cave can tell what is truly real and good based on their ability to predict which shadows come next (Rep. 517 d) and then organize their city in a just and rational way on the basis of those shadows.

III

Given Socrates' complete and total repudiation of Glaucon's version of the social contract theory, it is worth asking if this doctrine in the Republic is compatible with the apparent acceptance of the social contract theory in the *Crito*. It is tempting to insist that the two dialogues hold incompatible views of the social contract theory, and then attempt to account for the differences by claiming that when the young and philosophically immature Plato wrote the *Crito*, he endorsed the social contract theory, but by the time he penned the Republic, he wisely changed his mind.

However, I do not think that the dialogues are inconsistent. When Socrates appeals to his social contract with Athens in the *Crito*, it is not in order to establish the origin and nature of justice. Instead, it is merely to indicate, in terms that Crito can accept, the basis of his obligation to Athens, and why that obligation entails that he submit to his death sentence. If, as Glaucon claims, most people take the basis of justice to be some form of the social contract theory of justice (Rep. 358 c, 358 e-359 b), then Crito is already predisposed to thinking that each Athenian citizen has made a promise of loyalty to the city in return for the benefits he has received, and that justice requires that this promise be kept. Socrates simply exploits Crito's premises to argue for his own, very different conclusion.

Furthermore, the argument of the Republic leaves open whether Socrates could accept an alternative version of the social contract. Glaucon's version of the social contract has a striking resemblance to Thomas Hobbes'. But as the history of modern political philosophy makes clear, there are other versions of the social contract that do not presuppose a materialist metaphysics.²⁹ So perhaps an alternative, non-Glauconian version of the social contract could be constructed from Platonic premises. Such an account could be both presupposed in Socrates' reply to Crito and also compatible with the ideal city of the Republic.

To summarize, Glaucon's version of the social contract maintains that the natural world is morally indifferent or neutral, that human nature is predominately avaricious and competitive, and that in order to protect ourselves from each other's pleonexia, we can devise relatively sound rules of justice. Socrates rebuts each of these claims. First, he presents a more complex account of human nature to show how the soul is unified and perfected by justice. Second, he describes a morally charged account of nature itself in which it is illuminated by the idea of the Good. Finally, he offers a dark assessment of the success that most humans up to this point have shown in discerning what the Good truly is. This undermines Glaucon's confidence that their alleged social contract has provided an adequate foundation for justice, while at the same time inspires Glaucon (and—may we dare hope—his 21st century readers) to find in the liberating power of philosophy the possibility of finding a truer foundation for justice.

Endnotes

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations from the *Republic* are from G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve's translation (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1992).
2. While I believe that in the *Republic* the dramatic character Socrates represents Plato's own view of justice, my argument does not require this assumption.
3. Richard Kraut persuasively argues that the defense of justice does not conclude until Book IX; see his "The Defense of Justice in the *Republic*," *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 311-37.
4. Allan Bloom stresses this in his interpretative essay of Plato's *Republic*; see *The Republic of Plato*, translated with notes and an interpretative essay by Allan Bloom, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 341.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 338.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
7. Francis MacDonald Cornford, in his translation of *The Republic of Plato*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941/1973), p. 41.
8. Julia Annas, *Voices of Ancient Philosophy: An Introductory Reader*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 385. She makes a similar point in *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 7.
9. Bloom 1968, p. 344.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 416.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 416-7. This is important because, according to Bloom, the *Republic* is responding to Aristophanes' charge in the *Clouds* that philosophy in general and Socrates in particular are a threat to the city and its ancestral customs (*ibid.*, pp. 307-10, 416-7).
13. See, for example, Socrates' criticism of Anaxagoras in *Phd.* 98 e- 99 b.
14. The significance of this claim is discussed in Annas 1981, pp. 74-6.
15. Bloom 1968, p. 346.
16. Annas 1981, p. 78.
17. In this respect, Annas is wrong to conclude "that Plato has not given the first city a clear place in the *Republic*'s moral argument" (Annas 1981, p. 78).
18. Cornford 1941/1973, p. 54.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 53. I stress that Socrates' primitive city is only the beginning of his rejection of Glaucon's social contract theory, pace Cornford 1941/1973, who seems to think that Socrates' primitive city suffices to disprove the social contract theory.
20. Annas 1981, p. 78.
21. I deliberately omit many of the complexities of Socrates' account of the tri-partite soul. For a discussion of these complexities, and the questions they raise, see Bloom 1968, pp. 375-8; Annas 1981, pp. 124-131.
22. Julia Annas argues that it is the latter (Annas 1981, p. 132).
23. Annas 2001, p. 387.
24. See Annas 1981, pp. 242-71.
25. *Ibid.*, 246.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
27. Jowett translation.

28. Julia Annas complains that the lowest stage of the Divided Line, *eikasia*, “seems not to correspond to anything significant in our lives” (Annas 1981, p. 250) and finds it difficult to harmonize this with the suggestion in the Allegory of the Cave that the prisoners spend most of their time looking at shadows (Ibid., pp. 254-6). But if, as Bloom suggests, *eikasia* sees the world through the cultural filter provided by the poets and legislators (Bloom 1968, p. 404), then it is much less difficult to see how *eikasia* does describe how most people see reality and why it is rare for people to go beyond that stage of opinion.

29. Kant’s version of the social contract is an obvious example.

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