

PD35 - Plato's ring myth, and gods

Post by "Godfrey" of June 10, 2021 at 8:35 PM

This afternoon I was listening to a podcast in which the Plato scholar Jacob Howland was being interviewed. At one point he brought up the ring myth from Plato's Republic. The basic idea is, as I got it, is that people are such that if any of us had an invisibility ring and hence could do whatever we wanted without being caught, we would commit numerous injustices. Although of course it wasn't mentioned in the podcast, it immediately brought to mind this principal doctrine as yet another answer to Plato.

At another point Howland mentioned that all-knowing gods were invented to solve this problem, and part of the rationale behind the totalitarian regime of the Republic is to create a society with no privacy in order to eliminate injustices committed in this way. Howland, to his credit, immediately pointed out the irony of that! He also pointed out that many totalitarians throughout history have referred to the Republic as a working manual. Further, the thinking was (and still is!) that if somebody is not afraid of, or does not believe in, all-knowing gods, then they will commit injustice.

This serves as yet another illustration of the stakes of the conflict between Epicurus and the Platonists. It's also an illustration of the optimism of Epicurus, although many see materialist philosophy as leading to nihilism and hopelessness!

Post by "Cassius" of June 10, 2021 at 9:45 PM

Godfrey do you recall if there are other occurrences of this doctrine in the texts beyond [PD35](#)?

I am thinking it is in Cicero too - there is this in the Torquatus narration:

"The usual consequences of crime are, first suspicion, next gossip and rumor, then comes the accuser, then the judge; many wrongdoers have even turned evidence against themselves, as happened in your consulship. And even if any think themselves well fenced and fortified against detection by their fellow men, they still dread the eye of heaven, and fancy that the pangs of anxiety night and day gnawing at their hearts are sent by Providence to punish them. But what can wickedness contribute towards lessening the annoyances of life, commensurate with its effect in increasing them, owing to the burden of a guilty conscience, the penalties of the law and the hatred of one's fellows?"

But there's a fragment somewhere that says this is a hard question.....

I am thinking i have another comment but I need to find that first.

Post by "Cassius" of June 10, 2021 at 9:49 PM

OK I am thinking of this from [Bailey's "Extant Remains"](#): (I don't see the original source cited, but i think this is just a reworking of Usener's cites)

Quote

II. Problems._

2. Will the wise man do things that the laws forbid, knowing that he will not be found out? A simple answer is not easy to find.

Post by "Cassius" of June 10, 2021 at 10:01 PM

OK here's my (admittedly half-formed) thought:

I tend to see this [PD35](#) as operating on multiple levels like most of the principle doctrines. it certainly is true from a practical point of view as written, but I don't think it is very satisfying unless it is viewed in the more abstract context of discussing the 'best life' or the "highest good."

In that context, it serves well to point out that your aren't going to be able to live the best life possible if you indeed are worried about retribution for your crimes. As the doctrine points out, once you've committed the crime you'll always wonder if it will be found out, whether you should have turned yourself in, apologized, made it good, or what. And that amount of worry is something that will always stand in the way of the at least aspirational goal of pure pleasure.

But I think it is indeed a "hard question" because Epicurean philosophy is also highly practical in realizing (in my view) that life requires pain and risk, and it's practically impossible to eliminate them. I can easily see the prudent Epicurean saying that just like the rest of life, it's a practical question of whether you should violate the seat belt law for a ten minute drive to the store, or violate the speed limit, or do any of a numberless type of crime where you might rationally

deem the risk of punishment to be worth committing the crime.

So I do tend to see this one as I tend to see many of them - more of a logical observation that is good for debating the greatest good and the issues of crime and punishment in a godless universe. I do believe it's a true observation, but it's also a true observation in the Epicurean scheme that everyone is going to determine for themselves what degree of hardship and risk they want to undertake in order to gain the pleasures they want.

Now having said all that, I wonder if in listening to the podcast you heard anything about Plato's views of the ring myth that might give us subtleties on how Epicurus' viewpoint was a response?

Post by “Godfrey” of June 10, 2021 at 11:35 PM

My impression from the podcast was that Plato was saying that we're only just to avoid negative consequences and that injustice is more advantageous. The purpose of the ring (the ring of Gyges) is to avoid detection, to which [PD35](#) seems to me to be a direct response:

It is impossible to be confident that you will escape detection when secretly doing something contrary to an agreement to not harm one another or be harmed, even if currently you do so countless times; for until your death you will be uncertain that you have escaped detection. [PD35](#)

[PD34](#) and [PD17](#) are also related to this, but [PD35](#) seems directly tied to the ring problem.

[PD34](#): *Injustice is not bad in itself, but only because of the fear caused by a suspicion that you will not avoid those who are appointed to punish wrongdoing.*

[PD17](#): *One who acts aright is utterly steady and serene, whereas one who goes astray is full of trouble and confusion.*

Post by “Don” of June 10, 2021 at 11:42 PM

[PD17](#) Ὁ δίκαιος ἀταρακτότατος, ὁ δ' ἄδικος πλείστης ταραχῆς γέμων.

One who is just, moral, and virtuous has peace of mind; but one who is unjust is overflowing with agitation, confusion, and uncertainty. (ταραχῆς, i.e., the opposite of ἀταραξία).

If you are just in your dealings with other people, moral in your actions, and do your best to

display fair behavior, you have no need to be troubled. You've done your best. Don't get me wrong. Bad things will happen to you, and some people still won't like you. But you don't control that. Your mind can be at peace. On the other hand, if you treat people poorly, display amoral behavior, and are basically an objectively poor excuse for a human being, you have reason to be troubled! People will be out to get you. If you're the latter, you need to have some frank speech with yourself and get on the right track. To paraphrase Wil Wheaton: Don't be a jerk! If you take his advice, you and all of us who interact with you will be the better for it.

Post by “Cassius” of December 29, 2024 at 7:35 PM

I am adding this here as additional background both on Gyges and for Cicero's commentary on hypotheticals. Its from On Duties Book 3:

[LacusCurtius • Cicero — De Officiis III.35-95](#)

37 Away, then, with questioners of this sort (for their whole tribe is wicked and ungodly), who stop to consider whether to pursue the course which they see is morally right or to stain their hands with what they know is crime. For there is guilt in their very deliberation, even though they never reach the performance of the deed itself. Those actions, therefore, should not be considered at all, the mere consideration of which is itself morally wrong. Furthermore, in any such consideration we must banish any vain hope and thought that our action may be covered up and kept secret. For if we have only made some real progress in the study of philosophy, we ought to be quite convinced that, even though we may escape the eyes of gods and men, we must still do nothing that savours of greed or of injustice, of lust or of intemperance.

9 38 By way of illustrating this truth Plato introduces the familiar story of Gyges: Once upon a time the earth opened in consequence of heavy rains; Gyges went down into the chasm and saw, so the story goes, a horse of bronze; in its side was a door. On opening this door he saw the body of a dead man of enormous size with a gold ring upon his finger. He removed this and put it on his own hand and then repaired to an assembly of the shepherds, for he was a shepherd of the king. As often as he turned the bezel of the ring inwards toward the palm of his hand, he became invisible to everyone, while he himself saw everything; but as often as he turned p307 it back to its proper position, he became visible again. And so, with the advantage which the ring gave him, he debauched the queen, and with her assistance he murdered his royal master and removed all those who he thought stood in his way, without anyone's being able to detect him in his crimes. Thus, by virtue of the ring, he shortly rose to be king of Lydia.

Now, suppose a wise man had just such a ring, he would not imagine that he was free to do wrongly any more than if he did not have it; for good men aim to secure not secrecy but the right.

39 And yet on this point certain philosophers, who are not at all vicious but who are not very discerning, declare that the story related by Plato is fictitious and imaginary. As if he affirmed that it was actually true or even possible! But the force of the illustration of the ring is this: if nobody were to know or even to suspect the truth, when you do anything to gain riches or power or sovereignty or sensual gratification — if your act should be hidden for ever from the knowledge of gods and men, would you do it? The condition, they say, is impossible. Of course it is. But my question is, if that were possible which they declare to be impossible, what, pray, would one do? They press their point with right boorish obstinacy, they assert that it is impossible and insist upon it; they refuse to see the meaning of my words, "if possible." For when we ask what they would do, if they could escape detection, we are not asking whether they can escape detection; but we put them as it were upon the rack: should they answer that, if impunity were assured, they would do what was most to their selfish interest, p309 that would be a confession that they are criminally minded; should they say that they would not do so they would be granting that all things in and of themselves immoral should be avoided.

But let us now return to our theme.