

Got the Happy Life? Try Justice.

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Corruption. There is something enviable about people who commit acts of injustice but escape prosecution. The world is plagued by corrupt leaders, and yet we wish we were more like them. We desire not only their power and prestige but also their ability to buy their way out of punishment. They are our role models: as students, many of us cheat on tests, buy papers from online databases, and steal money from our peers. We desire the easy life, the life that is filled with pleasures. Justice is for others, the ones who commit big crimes, or really, for anybody but me. According to Socrates, however, the good life is not the one that most of us desire but rather the life of the just man. In this paper, I will argue that justice is far better than injustice, even when it means that one must seemingly forfeit some pleasure or measure of happiness.

Socrates turns the prevalent worldview upside down. He says, "The admirable and good person...is happy, but ... the one who's unjust and wicked is miserable" (*Gorgias*, 470e10-12). Upon first examination, this claim does not appear to be true. Saddam Hussein, former dictator of Iraq, was undeniably evil. It is hard to imagine why Socrates would even consider that a person like Saddam Hussein could be discontent, nonetheless miserable. He had power, palaces filled with all the comforts money can buy, not to mention the authority to begin the process of "Arabizing" Iraq without anyone to stop him. Socrates would argue that Saddam is happier now, in the custody of Iraq and the occupying powers, than he was during his reign as dictator, as he is now paying his dues; justice is being served (*Gorgias*, 478d1-e2).

Socrates' philosophy on justice is what most Americans have been socialized to believe, yet that belief is incomplete. Many assert the virtues of justice but complain upon receiving a speeding ticket. Thus, many would agree that "a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever anyone thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust" (*Republic*, 360c6-8). What is it about justice then that Socrates says ought to spur us to live our lives justly, instead of purely for pleasure? Quite simply, the just life is the happy life. The just man is the one who controls his inner beast rather than allowing the beast to control him (*Republic*, 588e4-589a4). Perhaps those with addictions best understand the importance of having control over one's own behavior; feeling ill and unable to perform for lack of caffeine, or any other drug, is certainly not the ideal life. Self-control, then, is key to a happy life. "Do not even think about snacking before dinner," is probably a familiar line to most. Many would agree with Callicles that a person "shouldn't restrain his appetites but let them become as large as possible" (*Gorgias*, 492d6-8). Nevertheless, as Socrates illustrates and as our parents and teachers tried to tell us, self-control is essential for a just life. According to Socrates, one ought to be "self-controlled and master of oneself, ruling the pleasures and appetites within oneself.... He should not allow his appetites to be undisciplined or undertake to fill them up – a never ending evil" (*Gorgias*, 491d13-e1, 507e1-3).

Callicles' view that the happiest man is the one who can accumulate all the wealth and power within his capabilities, whether in a just or unjust manner, resonates with many of us. We desire such pleasures, paying little regard to whether these pleasures are beneficial or harmful (*Gorgias*, 499d5-7). Socrates, however, gives us yet another reason to restrain these cravings. He claims that the man whose appetites are undisciplined "could not be dear to another man or to a god, for he cannot be a partner, and where there's no partnership there's no friendship" (*Gorgias*, 507e4-6). Few would give up companionship for all the riches in the world, yet this is precisely what Socrates says unjust men do for much less gain. College students, politicians, and businessmen are ambitious and often isolate themselves from others because of their ruthless zeal for surpassing all others in power and wealth. These people would agree with Callicles

on some level that “the people who institute our laws are the weak and the many.... They’re afraid of the more powerful among men, the ones who are capable of having a greater share, and so they say that getting more than one’s share is ‘shameful’ and ‘unjust...’” (*Gorgias*, 483b4-5, 483c1-4). Put simply, one ought not to worry how he obtains his job or promotion, for he earned it, even if he had to lie or pay bribes in order to achieve it. Nobody, absolutely nobody, should have the audacity to question his right to that position.

Not surprisingly, Socrates questions it. He says that the man who leads an unjust life is miserable. For it is “the man who keeps [evil in his soul], and who doesn’t get rid of it...whose life is the worst” (*Gorgias*, 478e7-8). Socrates argues that it is better for a person who has done wrong to be punished than to simply live a life of corruption or even a life of not being held accountable for past injustices committed. When a person’s soul is damaged, the person is shamed unless justice is served, and implementing justice often requires punishment. It is the punished man, the one “who pays what is due” who is second happiest, only to the one who leads a completely just life (*Gorgias*, 478e5). Undoubtedly, the happiest people are those who have no evil in their souls, yet I question whether those who are never caught for the crimes that they committed are truly less happy than those who had to pay a fine or serve a jail sentence. Clearly, the soul of an unjust man is in bad condition and upon judgment day will not fare well with the gods. In this world, however, few people share Socrates’ outlook on punishment.

Most would rather evade punishment, perhaps even with more deceit, than face it. President Nixon tried to cover up Watergate, and President Clinton attempted to cover up his immorality by lying in court. Neither of these American leaders was punished, as a “normal” citizen would have been under similar circumstances. Nixon was pardoned after resigning from office under threat of impeachment, and he subsequently served no time in jail, though many other Watergate conspirators did. Likewise, Clinton’s act of perjury was overlooked by all but Congress, who did impeach him. Neither Nixon nor Clinton seemed to regret that they were not punished within the legal system. Neither suggested that they deserved any greater punishment, but instead, they did everything in their power to prevent being punished. If punishment truly makes unjust people happier, as Socrates believes, why is it that those who commit unjust acts work so hard to avoid punishment?

Evidently, not everyone understands the importance of the corruption, or lack thereof, that afflicts their souls. Many criminals, especially those deemed “hardened,” have little remorse for the heinous acts they have committed in the past. If the condition of one’s soul is of little consequence to that person, he will not be any happier punished than unpunished. The only exception is that person who, through punishment, learns to quell his desires for bad pleasures and thus begins to live a “good” life, free of acts of injustice towards others. No matter what an individual may believe, however, the state of the soul is important, and this will be obvious to each and every one of us on judgment day. “For of all evils, the ultimate is that of arriving in Hades with one’s soul stuffed full of unjust actions” (*Gorgias*, 522e2-4). Socrates describes the unjust soul as one that is “whipped and covered with scars, the results of acts of perjury and of injustice, things that each of his actions has stamped upon his soul. Everything was warped as a result of deception and pretense, and nothing was straight, all because the soul had been nurtured without truth” (*Gorgias*, 525a2-6). This, Socrates claims, is what the gods will see and judge when we pass into the afterlife. No longer will injustices be masked as justice; the gods can and will see what sorts of lives we led.

The grim image of the unjust soul that Socrates leaves us with is only one of the compelling reasons provided for why we ought to live the just life. The just life, Socrates explains, is the good life. Not because it is always pleasurable – for there are bad pleasures – but because it is the life that is under our control. The just life is the one that is ordered, as it is without the constant worry of craving more things: more shoes, more clothes, more toys, more money, and more power. The just man is satisfied, whereas the unjust man is never content with what he has (*Gorgias*, 507d9-e6). Saddam Hussein may have had

palaces, more money than one man could possibly need, and the finest dining in Iraq, but his reign was filled with injustice. His appetite for pleasures could never be met, and his friends were certainly few. The life of Saddam Hussein, even at the height of his glory as dictator, was not enviable at all. Despite appearances, it is not the unjust man who lives the good life; it is he who lives justly.

Works Cited

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