



ELECTRYONE
ΗΛΕΚΤΡΥΩΝΗ



THE PLATONIC MYTH OF GYGES AND THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE IN MODERN-DAY SPORT AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Konstantina Gongaki
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
kgogaki@phed.uoa.gr

ABSTRACT: Plato recounts the myth of Gyges (Republic), forefather of King Croesus, who served the then archon of Lydia. Gyges found a magic ring that gave him the ability to become invisible to others. Wearing the ring, he went to the palace, made the queen his lover, killed the king and took his riches. Thus, the shepherd, with the help of the ring, annihilated the king and took the throne himself.

The obvious message of the myth is pointed out by Plato himself: Those who apply justice do so not of desire but because they cannot do otherwise. But if license were given to both the just and the unjust to do as they wished with impunity and we observed where their desire led them, we would ‘catch’ the just one selecting the same path as the unjust. This, is because every person, by nature, aspires to avarice as something good, and only by law is forced to respect equality. If, therefore, such a ring is worn by both the just and unjust man, neither would appear such an upstanding character so as to remain true to justice, if he had the ability to, without fear, do anything he desired, Plato maintains.

The myth of Gyges has corresponding applications in the field of modern-day sport, as a ‘record’ turns the athlete into a Croesus, who has everything at his feet. But the myth, has analogous applications in modern world as well. How many, in truth,

wearing Gyges' wondrous ring and being able to use the advantage it offers with impunity would not do so? They are very few, those who, although possessors of the 'magic' ring, have the strength of character, the moral fortitude, to resist the temptation. These few, the only ones capable of rejecting the lure of avarice, are the chaste, Plato intimates.

KEY-WORDS: Plato, Gyges, Justice, Injustice, Myth.

Gyges, a forefather of king Croesus, lived and worked as a shepherd and servant of the then archon (ruler) of Lydia. One day, after a heavy rain and earthquake, a part of the earth cracked open creating a chasm precisely at the spot where Gyges was grazing his livestock. Curious, Gyges descended into the chasm where, apart from other mythical wonders, he also saw a bronze horse that had a dead man inside its cavity and the dead man only a golden ring, which Gyges took and then ascended from the chasm. When later the shepherds gathered to report to the king on his flocks, Gyges also went, wearing the ring. As he was sitting together with the others, however, he happened to turn the ring's stone inward towards his palm, and immediately disappeared from the others' sight, and they talked about him as if he had left, while when he turned the ring's stone outwards, he immediately became visible again to the others. Gyges tested the ring persistently to make sure that it indeed had such power, and finally ascertained that the same thing happened every time: when he rotated the ring's stone inwards he became invisible, while when he rotated it outwards he became visible again. After becoming absolutely sure of this, he asked to be and was designated a member of the committee that would present itself before the king. When Gyges reached the palace, he made the queen his lover and with her help plotted against the king and after killing him, was enthroned himself on the royal throne. Thus the shepherd, with the help of the magical ring, annihilated the king, depriving him of his riches, his kingdom, all his riches, his wife, and even his very life.¹

¹ Plato, Republic B, 359c-d-e.

The above is recounted by Plato, through the mouth of Glaucon, in his *Republic*.² The obvious moral is pointed out by the philosopher himself. Those who apply justice do so without so desiring but because they cannot be unjust. If, however, license could be given to both the just and the unjust to do whatever they desire, and then if one followed them and took note of where their desire would lead each of them, then one would find the just taking, due to his avarice, the same path as the unjust. This is due to the fact that every human being, due to his/her very nature, seeks excess as something good, and only by the law is forced to respect equality. This outcome would be even more certain if people could be given the power that Gyges once had, observes Plato.

If, consequently, two such magical rings were to be found and one was worn by the just and the other by the unjust, neither of the two would manifest such integrity of character as to remain true to justice. Neither of the two would decide to keep their hands off of other people's belongings if he had the ability to, without fear, take whatever he wanted from the marketplace, to invade another's space and to have intercourse with any woman he wanted, to break out of prison whomever he wanted, or even to kill and, in general, do anything at all, like a god among mortals. In acting in this way, the one would not do anything different than the other, but rather both would be taking the same path, Plato maintains. This is the greatest proof that no one is just of his own will, but only because of necessity. Justice, therefore, is not a good thing in and of itself, since wherever one thinks that he can be unjust he will be so, as every human being believes that injustice benefits him much more than justice. Indeed, if someone having this ability does not desire to do any injustice, others who learn about it will think that he is a fool, although among themselves they will praise him, trying to fool each other in fear of being wronged themselves.³

How many are there who, wearing Gyges' wondrous ring and being able to exploit the advantage it offers, would in all honesty not do so? How many, if they could easily take whatever they desire from the market, have intercourse with anyone they desire, grab and kill, without the risk of being caught and punished and act as the equals of gods among the other people, would honestly refuse to do so? Power and

² Lucian, *Navigium (The Ship)* 41, *Bis Accusatus sive Tribunalia (The Double Indictment or Trials by Jury)*, 21, Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius Tyana*, 101, Nicholas Of Damascus, (Müller, *Fragmenta Hist. Graecorum* III, 382-6).

³ Smith (1902) 361–387.

authority, when acting without obstruction and without meeting any reaction, are imposed, giving their possessor the ability to do that which he pleases. When the opportunity is presented to satisfy one's passions without qualms and with the certainty of not being discovered and of impunity, it would perhaps be foolish on his part to not take advantage of it.⁴ There are very few people who, having the "magical" ring, have the fortitude of spirit to resist the temptation offered them. These few, the only ones able to reject the lure of greed are the 'wise' or 'prudent', Plato intimates.

The myth of Gyges has analogous applications in the field of modern-day sport as well. The athlete, and particularly the elite athlete, does not always devote himself to sport due to love of the sport, but because victory will give him the ability to be enthroned on the throne of success. The athletic victory and high performance (records) comprise the magical ring that will render the athlete from an ordinary person into a 'god'. The associations accompanying the victory, therefore, compose the picture of a human being that conquers it all: money, loves, a luxurious life, publicity. The magical record instantaneously turns the athlete into a Croesus, who has everything at his feet.

Given the above mentality and with gain as the incentive, is there any athlete who would refuse to make use of the magical advantage of the ring and would not plot with the coach or the sponsor companies? An athlete who, knowing he had the ability to remain invisible to the eyes of the law, would not take advantage of that ability? One who could feasibly avoid the penalty, and would not resort to every mechanical, chemical or pharmaceutical means when the outcome would be the opening of the gates of heaven on earth to him, like Gyges? One who would have the ability to cheat or wrong his opponent and grab the victory from him, without the threat of punishment, and would not use that ability? Is there, in a nutshell, an athlete capable of resisting avarice and greed, replacing them with temperance and selflessness? And, if such is untenable for the total of humanity, how can the athlete be just, withstanding to temptation, frugal, pure and unselfish?

Human virtue is undermined, in the bottom line, by the certainty of asylum or impunity. This, maintains A.E. Taylor, is the spearhead, the essence, of the platonic myth of Gygis. According to J. Moravcsik, the ideal imposed by Glaucon and by other Platonic interlocutors is that which is willingly espoused by a typical moral

⁴ Laird (2001) 12–29.

skeptic.⁵ Each of the interlocutors in the Republic outlines his perceptions on justice, forging one's own moral path, and Socrates, one of the interlocutors in the Republic, progressively forges his own path, which is more lonely and difficult, introducing to justice the value of the "metron" (measure).

Justice is used by Socrates as a cultivated "art" that controls and tames its material. Thus, the musician, as a master of his art, would not want to stretch or loosen the chords (strings) of an instrument more than any other musician (peer), but nevertheless more than a non-master. His purpose is not to prove himself by exceeding the master peer, but to prove better than the non-master. Under the same reasoning, a doctor would never want to exceed, with respect to setting out the regimen of a patient, any other doctor peer, but would want to exceed any non-doctor. Similarly, a coach (trainer) should not want the athlete to exceed the limits of his own physical endurance or the physical endurance of a fellow athlete, but only the limits of a non-athlete. Correspondingly, the athlete himself should not want to stretch, and should not stretch, his own 'chords' more than any other fellow athlete, but more than a non-athlete. Consequently, what should be sought in sport is the athlete to exceed the individual who does not exercise, but not to the point of exceeding his own physical limits to outdo a fellow athlete, and even more so to outdo a 'machine' or a 'robot', which is essentially what the non-natural or excessive means of performance enhancement turn the athlete into.

Only the non-master, an ignorant or an inadequate individual, attempts to best both the master and the ignorant, Plato maintains. The ignorant and the unjust resemble each other in this since, as it has been said, the unjust pursues the advantage over the just and the unjust alike. Consequently, the just man is a wise and good man, while the unjust man is ignorant and bad, unlike what some of the Platonic interlocutors maintain. Avarice and selfishness, consequently, makes the ignorant destroy his life, makes the doctor lead his patient to death, makes the musician destroy his instrument, leads the coach to ruining the health of his athlete, and leads the athlete to putting his very health and life at risk.

In the case of the athlete, in fact, it is worth noting that non adherence to the 'metron' constitutes not only an injustice against his fellow athlete, but also folly, since he endangers his own reputation and his very life. Therefore the athlete, for

⁵ Moravcsik (2000) 104.

example, in the case of blind one-sidedness (excessive training) or use of substances, does an injustice to his own self, since he annuls the right of treating the gift of life, his own life, as a value. As such, the search for the essence of justice and, by extension, injustice, presupposes an acute intellectual perspective so as to render one the master of its essence. Socrates indicates that justice, as a value of the psyche, will become apparent, understood, only when it becomes clear what justice is and how it functions in the state. Justice, in the microcosm of the psyche, has the same essence with that of the macrocosm of the State and society's system of values.

The state, structured in such a way so as to satisfy and solve all the needs of its citizens, contains all the types of people, towards which it manifests special care with respect to their breeding and education. The learning means, among which is physical education, are founded on discourse, simplicity and the measure (metron) in order to promote the ethos of the psyche.

The harmonious combination of music, rhythm, discourse and physical exercise averts exclusivity, or one-sided devotion to physical exercise (excessive training), given that excessiveness ends up in toughness and brutality in the person.⁶ Besides, improvident use of the physical abilities of the human body, as if man is an animal-machine with the only criteria being those of the marketplace, constitutes a hubris to the human body and man's very nature, since it deducts the ethical content of sport. The use of the body as a consumer product/fetish constitutes lack of respect for the human physical hypostasis and is in total contradiction to the theory of humanity.

A solution to the problem arising, which is compounded by the loose ethical conscience with which the fluidity of the athlete's value is approached, is not visible in the existing technocratic system. On the contrary, only through full invalidation or reversal of the modern-day society's system of values can arise the hope of its differentiation, and only on condition of an in-depth restructuring of the role of learning. Education, instead of functioning obediently as the servant of the existing ruling class, and thus reproducing the prevalent social perceptions, should instead create its own moral values which, gradually, will evolve into social models. Only then will the present models of success be replaced by models of value throughout the entire social spectrum and, by extension, to sport as well.

⁶ Dombrowski (1979) 29-38.

In the meantime, each and every individual must develop his own resistances, rejecting all that is base or excessive, rejecting wealth or poverty, the two extremes, for his own life, and seek and recognise the value of balance. Balance in faces and functions consolidates balance and prosperity of the civil society and its members. The crucial point is for one to know his own limits, meaning how far he can reach in every area. That which Plato was more interested in was for each and every individual to carry out his own task smoothly and unobstructedly, without provocations and problems. But because in life everything does not work so smoothly and self-evidently, one needs to be vigilant so as to reinforce the effort to establish and apply a new order.

The state, in order to fulfil its reason for existence, needs to be founded on values such as prudence, lucidity and justice. The consolidation of a proper polis (city), on the basis of justice and the correlative virtues is influenced by and reflected on the individual level as well, in other words in the psyche of the individual. The two elements, psyche (microcosm) and city (macrocosm), resemble each other and, according to the Platonic Socrates, an individual is correct and just in the same way that the city is correct and just. If, therefore, the state encourages, leaves unpunished, or even worse, vindicates or rewards the bad, the unjust, the crooked, the intriguer, the liar, the thief, the distraught, the foolish and the senseless, then it correspondingly diminishes the genuine values and shatters its own cohesion. The individual who abuses has, as a rule, suffered abuse himself as a child, and the children who are violent, confused and distraught are the product of the state, the elders, and their parents.

The individuals and groups in a state society, looking to the state's notional model, act in the best way that their nature can carry out their own *oikeiopragein* (task or role). This is the first important condition for cementing a proper polis or society. A second, equally important condition is to live naturally, in other words for each and every one to live by and with respect for his/her own nature. This principle, in the field of sport, is counter to the 'deification' of performance and the 'idolatry' of the body which, in the bottom line, manipulate the personal freedom of the human being.

In the field of sport, more particularly, a third condition exists. That of sport not being treated as an industrial branch, or as a globalised multinational corporation but, rather, as a field for the human being's contact with his nature and his physical hypostase. Sport should also not be construed as a means of political exploitation,

given that the ideological investment in sport (i.e. the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin) constitutes the most insidious totalitarianism for the societies, according to Jean-Marie Brohm.⁷ The major athletic events, however, are chronically exploited to serve as a smokescreen and legitimization for regimes or systems that violate the elementary human rights in conditions of impunity (i.e. the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games). If, however, one perceives that highly competitive sport (or ‘championship’ sport) today is linked with hazards and distortion or misuse, then doping definitely constitutes the sure means to death. Doping is, to be precise, the flip side of the medal, and the driving force of the “championship” industry which is evolving into a global economic activity. In the context of the “global war” being conducted via sport, many athletes are being turned into “mercenaries” in order to serve the interests of governments, corporations, religious organizations or nationalistic delirium. Their goal is to eliminate the competitors, to destroy them if they can, and to triumphantly raise their arms as victors. Breaking the previous record is almost equal to breaking the domination of the competitor, and the raised arms of the winner resemble the triumph of a conqueror.

The beautification of a grotesque reality is not the solution, however. An “ostrich” mentality generally prevails in the field of sport, since everyone knows everything going on but prefer to hide their heads in the sand and keep silent, thinking that they cannot thus be seen and that the others don’t see them. However, they all know the full truth. What, then, is the quality of the social values that can today enhance the good or noble competition, to imbue the competition with the value of fairness, for the prevalence of “fair play”? What is the existing philosophy of sport? And can the former, by itself, reverse the utilitarianism and capitalization of success which many athletes strive for at any expense? Is the state not responsible for moulding the predatory mentality in sport and the moral loosening of conscience? Or is there lack of responsibility limited to the field of sport, while in education, the economy and all other social fields everything is clean and brilliant? But what is the system of values that determines the good life? What are the moral values that are put forward today via a corresponding model counter to the worthless, to ostentation, pretension, artificiality and vaingloriousness? What is the modern-day axiology which, instilled through education, can enhance the characteristics of the non one-

⁷ Brohm (1978).

dimensional man⁸ and the quality of his life with the principles of decency, selflessness and respect?

Glaucon's interjection is bluntly realistic and timely: if the just and the unjust are given a free hand to do as they please without penalty, then it is impossible for the just not to follow in the heels of the unjust! King Croesus' shepherd, Gyges, in passing from the light to the dark renounces his responsibility, becoming invisible via the ring, and turning instead to a passion "gains" success: he becomes king due to chance and murder. So what?! He lost his conscience, though. The wondrous ring in essence constitutes the instrument of darkness, the temptation or lure that alters his previously pure nature into an evil nature. This lasts until his death, when someone else will exploit the magical property of the lustrous instrument of darkness on a course without conscience, without a way out and, perhaps, without hope.

The laws that govern the world do not impose on the conscience how it will act each time. Exercise, however, in the pains and toil of life, as the cynic philosopher Diogenes would say, the transition from the dark to the light, and vice-versa, strengthens the person's psyche, enabling it to restore its own distance from the actions that put its conscience into doubt. The distance that separates each man from injustice and anomy is subjective and depends on the individual's ability to assume the responsibility for his choices, freely and honestly, without acting in a secretive, devious and criminal manner and without being blinded.⁹

Plato's view, expressed through this myth, is clear. Man, whether possessing Gyges' ring or not, in his choices and actions has as his criterion and end purpose the value of justice in a span of time that covers his entire life. The dialectic of the ancient philosopher is the psyche's journey from the tangible to the conceivable. The end of the course is delineated by the knowledge of the principles and the idea of the good, and man's psyche is obliged to strive in that direction as well as in the direction of knowledge of the sublime truth throughout his entire life.

K.G.

⁸ Marcuse (1991) 3-7.

⁹ Sayers (1999) 159, Purshouse (2007).

WORKS CITED

Brohm, J.-M. 1978. *Sport, a prison of measured time: essays*, by, translated [from the French] by Ian Fraser, London, Ink Links Ltd.

Dombrowski, Daniel A. 1979. "Plato and Athletics", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*: 6: 29-38.

Laird, A. 2001. "Ringing the Changes on Gyges: Philosophy and the Formation of Fiction in Plato's Republic", [Journal of Hellenic Studies](#): 121: 12–29.

Marcuse, H. 1991. "Introduction to the Second Edition". *One-dimensional Man: studies in ideology of advanced industrial society*, London, Routledge, 3-7.

Moravcsik, J. 2000. *Plato and Platonism: Plato's Conception of Appearance and Reality in Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics, and Its Modern Echoes*, Oxford, Cambridge (USA), Blackwell, 104.

Purshouse, L. 2007. *Plato's Republic*. London: Continuum.

Sayers, S. 1999. *Plato's Republic. An Introduction*, Edinburg University Press, 159.

Smith, Kirby F. 1902. "The Tale of Gyges and the King of Lydia", [American Journal of Philology](#): 23 (4): 361–387.