

Lesson 24

Plato's Justice

Objectives

- To develop personal perspectives about the nature of justice
- To identify Plato's parts of the soul and the concept of harmony

Notes to the Teacher

The idea of justice is important to political philosophy. People want to live in a society that is based on justice; otherwise, it wouldn't be in their best interest to band together for mutual protection.

"What is justice?" is a primary theme in Plato's *The Republic*. In his dialogue, Plato has Socrates reject the idea that justice is a matter of acting in the interest of the stronger—in other words, that those with power decide what is right, and others follow out of fear.¹ Are people just because they chose to be or because they have to be? This question is put forward for consideration in the story of the Ring of Gyges found in Book II of *The Republic*.

A related principle of Plato's political philosophy is justice in the harmony of a functioning society. According to Plato, the various classes of a society each offer a particular virtue. If each class performs its duty, then justice will be found. This idea of balance is also related to the leadership of a society. Plato believes that only philosophers should rule because they alone possess the skills for understanding truth and justice.

In this lesson, students examine the story of the Ring of Gyges and give examples of justice. Students match Plato's three parts of the soul to his three parts of society and reflect on the idea of harmony. This lesson concludes with Plato's criticisms of democracy.

Procedure

1. Ask students, What is justice? (Accept all reasonable responses.) After a short discussion, explain that this is exactly the way Plato starts *The Republic*. Socrates is asked this very question by Thracymachus, and from there, the story of Socrates' imaginary society is developed.
2. Introduce **Handout 37** by asking the following questions: What would it be like to be invisible? If you had the ability to become invisible upon command, what kind of a person would you be? Then present the following scenario: Imagine you possess a ring that enables the wearer to become invisible at will, therefore escaping any consequences of his or her actions. Why should you be just?
3. Distribute **Handout 37**. Have students complete it. Discuss students' responses.

Suggested Responses:

1. *seduced the wife of the king, murdered the king, and took hold of the leadership*
2. *Possible responses could include the following: an effect on school attendance, a use in basic crimes, corruption in police. We have a tendency to sneak around anyway (for instance, underage drinking, speeding in the country, cheating on a test, or stealing cookies from the cookie jar).*
4. Distribute **Handout 38**. Read the directions aloud to the class. Have students work with a partner to answer the questions. Conduct a class discussion on the completed handout.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Reason would relate to superego and the scarecrow; spirit would relate to ego and the lion; and appetite would relate to id and the tin man.*
2. a. *reason*
b. *spirit*
c. *appetite*
3. *Examples could include schools, classrooms, government, and religious institutions.*

¹Mel Thompson, *Philosophy* (Berkshire, England: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1995), 159.

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5. Distribute **Handout 39**. Assign it as homework. The following day, have students discuss their responses in small groups. Conclude with a large group discussion.

Suggested Responses:

1. *Plato was very critical of democracy. This dissatisfaction is, in part, due the death of his mentor, Socrates, and the corruption of Athenian government under Pericles.*
 2.
 - a. *Plato would be more in favor of an appointed city manager.*
 - b. *The school board is elected, and the superintendent is appointed. Plato would favor the appointed superintendent over the elected board.*
6. During the discussion, relate the following criticisms of Plato's arguments against democracy:
- Ruling is a skill like medicine.
 - A ruler doesn't direct the conduct of a citizen but instead is there to reflect the interests of the citizens and make the achievement possible.
 - Citizens should hold the rulers responsible for their actions.
 - A society run by a few will stifle the development of most of the people who live in it.
7. Brainstorm a definition of fascism. (*Fascism advocates a nationalist dictatorship, private ownership of property with state control of the economy, militarism, and suppression of individual freedoms in the name of security.*) To conclude, have students write a paragraph response to the following question: Was Plato a fascist? Explain. Share and discuss the paragraphs.

The Ring of Gyges

What would it be like to be invisible? If you had the ability to become invisible upon command, what kind of person would you be? Read the following background information and the selection from Book II of *The Republic*, and answer the questions at the end.

The story of Gyges the Lydian is part of Glaucon's beginning speech in Book II of *The Republic*. Glaucon steps in when Thrasymachus has been silenced by Socrates to defend the opinion that people don't practice justice for itself, but only for fear of what would befall them if they don't.

Here goes the story

. . . Gyges, according to the tradition, was a shepherd and servant of the king of Lydia, and while he was in the field, there was a storm and earthquake, which made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. He was amazed at the sight, and descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in saw a dead body, of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and reascended out of the opening. Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report concerning the flock to the king; and into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring towards the inner side of the hand, when instantly he became invisible, and the others began to speak of him as if he were no longer there. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared; thereupon he made trials of the ring, and always with the same result; when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Perceiving this, he immediately contrived to be chosen messenger to the court, where he no sooner arrived than he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom.²

1. How does this story show that people don't practice justice for itself, but only for the fear of what would befall them if they don't?
2. If this is true, can you think of an everyday example to support this idea?
3. Aside from all the weird stuff you would try to do, would being invisible corrupt you? Explain your answer.

²B. Jowett, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 181-182.

Plato's Politics

Read the following descriptions of Plato's ideas about politics, and answer the questions at the end of each segment.

Plato presents two analogies or comparisons that help to explain the nature of justice. The first analogy is the make-up of the personality, which he refers to as the soul. A healthy soul consists of proper harmony of the three functional parts of the soul. The second analogy describes the relationship between the individual soul and the society as a whole.

Each of these parts of the soul plays a role in the healthy, virtuous soul. However, each element must follow its proper function and perform it in harmony with the other elements. Reason must rule, directing the spirit and channeling its aggression in non-destructive ways. Reason must also regulate the healthy, necessary appetites in the proper proportion and to the appropriate degree. To overindulge may produce false and short-lived pleasure which results in inner conflict and unhappiness. If all the parts of the soul function smoothly, they will produce a balance of health and true happiness.

Plato's three parts to the soul:

Reason—the power to choose sensibly, analyze alternatives, and suppress unwise impulses

Spirit—the aggressive, warlike, courageous, willful part of one's personality

Appetite—the desires for things of the body

1. Think of Plato's three parts of the soul, make a comparison to the following two examples: Psychologist Sigmund Freud's personality parts (id, ego, and superego) and the three *Wizard of Oz* characters who help Dorothy (scarecrow, tin man, and the lion).

Plato believes that society is the individual "writ large." He believes that the three classes of the state are an extension of the three parts of the soul.

Plato's three parts of the state:

Rulers—elite guardians

Warriors—protectors of the guardians

Citizens—the masses

2. After reading the description of the three parts of the state, match them with the parts of the soul which they would best represent.
 - a. Rulers
 - b. Warriors
 - c. Citizens
3. Think of an example from everyday life which reflects Plato's ideas of the soul and the state.

Plato and Democracy

Read the following synopsis of Plato's ideas about government, and answer the questions at the end.

Plato believed if each part of society performs its proper function, justice is produced in the existing harmony. It is important to note that Plato did not see justice as equality. He believed the wisest citizens should rule in society, just as reason rules the soul. The idea of philosopher-king fits in perfectly with this concept. The philosopher-king possesses knowledge of what is truly good for the society and also the rational self-control to resist the temptation of harmful desires.

The following list outlines some of Plato's notions about democracy:

- He believed in the "doctrine of the expert," which argues individuals go to an expert when advice is needed for something of value; for example, if physically ill, people don't go to a carpenter; they go to a doctor.
- People differ in their capabilities to acquire and to exercise various skills.
- Ruling is a skill.
- Those who exhibit the greatest capacity for ruling should be trained in this skill, and when trained, they ought to be made rulers of the society.
- Because they have the greatest skill in ruling, they ought to be given absolute authority so that their laws will be put into effect.
- In democracy, the leaders are not always the most skilled; they are the most popular.
- Either the trained must rule, or the untrained must rule.

In *The Republic*, Plato outlines the various forms of governments.

Plato's Forms of Government from *The Republic*



