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Being and Seeming in Books I and II of Plato's
Republic and in the "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu
Sir" of the *Thousand Nights and a Night*

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Being and Seeming in Books I and II of Plato's *Republic* and in the "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir" of the *Thousand Nights and a Night*

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Abstract: Being and seeming have to do with the way perception affects justice in both the works compared. One approaches the matter from a theoretical basis, and the other is in itself a demonstration of how justice interacts with being and seeming, the issues of reputation and reality. With both works there is an understanding that there is a "real" reality underlying the everyday reality. Both show the power of perception in shaping destiny, and the unhappy fate of the just man who seems to be unjust, compared with the unjust man who seems to be just. Both use supernatural intervention to vindicate the just man, although in the "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir" the witness factor of the folk also belatedly comes to his defense. The works compared have come to identical conclusions independently of each other.

Books I and II of Plato's *Republic* and the *Thousand Nights and a Night's* "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir" are comparable in several areas. Plato set up Books I and II of his *Republic* as a discussion in dialectic of the benefits of living a just life; the "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir" may be seen to function in part as a demonstration of its precepts. When Socrates and his various interlocutors discuss some problems of living an enjoyable, rewarding life that is also perfectly virtuous and just, the polar opposites of Abu Kir, the vile dyer, and Abu Sir, the noble barber, come to mind seemingly of themselves, as if glimpsed in their lifetimes, walking by as a perfect demonstration. To make the opposing qualities of the two ways of life – perfectly just and perfectly unjust -- stand out even more, for the sake of argument, Socrates and his interlocutor Glaucon decide to argue the matter based upon a fictional man of perfect justice, but with a reputation for injustice, compared with a fictional man of perfect injustice, but with a reputation for justice (Plato I, 360e). Abu Kir takes considerable trouble to achieve his goals, in the process playing a number of roles, all of which are nobler than his true inner self. Abu Sir, while remaining the same just, virtuous man throughout good times and bad, wears the reputation of injustice in the story, and suffers for it. Being and seeming are the heart of the matter.

Being just, virtuous, and ethical is proverbially difficult, but the man who manages it has the following advantage – he can be his true self all the time. He does not need to spend time and energy maintaining any pretense or deception. If he acquires a reputation for being unjust, as Abu Sir does, society must maintain and justify it; the just man does not waste any energy on it at all. On the other hand, the deception involved in being a disguised blackguard is considerable, requiring a large amount of dedication, energy, and memory for detail. Abu Kir, for example, upholds a number of roles during his life, including that of honest craftsman and trader. His deceptions at times keep him as busy as a juggler with a number of plates in the air, trying to catch each of them in time to prevent a crash. Thus the life of the unjust hypocrite is more complex, as well as requiring more energy. It may also be more active, while the good man who practices no pretense may seem relatively passive, even if he suffers hardships.

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Which of the two leads the better life, meaning the more satisfying and enjoyable life, and how does the reputation factor affect the equation? This essay will deal with the following aspects of being and seeming: voice and persona; ethics and strategy; folk, ruler, and witnesses; and worldview. Being and seeming, justice and injustice, present difficulties in all societies; there is no evidence that Plato's work had any influence on the *Thousand Nights and a Night* or vice versa.

Michael Morgan in his introduction to *Classics of Moral and Political Theory* (Morgan. 2005. vii.) describes what it is about a written work that makes it a classic. According to his definition, both Plato's *Republic* and *The Thousand Nights and a Night* are classics. Both works are also translations, from Classical Arabic or Classical Greek into modern English. They were written by men, for men, and about men. In their language usage, the word *man* or *men* equates with human or humankind, but this definition functions in societies in which the male sex ran things and defined terms of discourse in their absolute totality. Both works have been copied and recopied, compiled and recompiled, translated and retranslated, many times. They have been construed to mean many things in many social and historic contexts. In their various uses and interpretations, each is not one text but many, in a sort of constellation.

Plato, a disciple of Socrates, cast his teacher in the leading role in a long series of works, expressing through the literary Socrates he created, the values and tactics both he and Socrates believed in. Both felt wisdom and knowledge were the key to living the best human life; they pursued philosophy as a quest for moral knowledge. Because they believed that right conduct was the expression of an individual's virtue and wisdom, they tied harmful or unjust action to self destruction (Morgan 2005, 31). Does bad or unjust conduct lead invariably to self destruction? Does the just, moral man live a happy, fulfilled life, no matter what? Books I and II of *The Republic* explore this area of inquiry with respect to individual men, but turn in the close of Book II to the consideration of justice and injustice as seen in a state, a republic, rather than an individual life. Book X, however, returns to the problem of justice and injustice in the life of an individual.

The *Thousand Nights and a Night* is a collection of stories that are in individual instances certainly as old as or older than Plato's Athens (Irwin 1994, 71,74). More than one tale explores the interplay of justice and injustice or joy and sorrow. "The Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir," according to Burton, goes back to prototypes known in the Egypt of the Pharaohs (Burton Vol. 9, 134, footnote 3). Other *Nights* stories follow the fates of two individuals, one just and one unjust, including "The Envier and the Envied," in Book I (Burton. Vol.1, 123-126). In no other tale, however, does the narrator reveal so much about the internal workings of both sides of the equation. In no other tale is the balance of being and seeming so straightforward. This essay will use a comparison of the "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir" (Burton. vol. 9, 134-165) with the "Tale of the Envier and the Envied" to express the paradigmatic qualities of both in terms of plot. In short, the "Tale of the Envier and the Envied" includes 1) no work or craft, 2) no pact or partnership, only the most rudimentary deception, and 3) considerably more action on the part of the Envied (the just man) than of the Envier (the unjust man), whereas in the "Tale of Abu Kir and Abu Sir" 1) the work or craft of each man is paramount, 2) a sworn pact and elaborate deception and plotting play a major part, and 3) there is considerably more energy and initiative demonstrated by the unjust Abu Kir than by the just Abu Sir. The most obvious characteristic of the Envied, marking him as a just man, is religious practice, whereas religious practice is present, but not a

turning point of the plot, in the instance of Abu Kir and Abu Sir. On the other hand, in both stories a happy ending with a triumph of the “good guy” relies heavily on supernatural intervention.

More and less active characters: “... the Envied did nothing save prosper” (Burton. Vol. 1, 123) until he became aware of the Envier’s attempts to harm him and put the Evil Eye upon him, whereupon he moved to another city. There he hosted a large number of holy mendicants and practiced prayer and religious devotions himself, in the process becoming famous. The Envier heard of this and followed him to the new city, requested a chance to speak to him alone, went with him to a deserted well located on the Envier’s property, pushed him into the well, and left him for dead (124). The powerful supernatural beings inside the well saved the Envied, commenting upon the pleasure his overheard devotions had given them. They also discussed in his hearing a way to heal the daughter of the Sultan. The Envied climbed out of the well, received a delegation of the Sultan, went to the side of the daughter, healed her according to the instructions of the ifrit in the well, married her, and became Vizier, and eventually King. It seems the primary purpose of the Envier is to set up the Envied to achieve life’s highest imaginable success. And at the end of the story, the Envied, still the more active of the two, pardoned the Envier and sent him on his way laden with costly gifts (126).

“The Tale of the Envier and the Envied” has an agenda. It is a tale within a tale. The storyteller of the frame story tried by telling this tale to persuade a powerful being not to kill him, but rather to pardon him, as the Envied pardoned the Envier in the story. The storyteller did not achieve a complete pardon, but instead of killing him, the djinni transformed him into an ape. The story preaches unearned forgiveness; it purports to be the religiously pious thing to do. Compare Islam 002.263 “Allah is absolute, clement,” or 024.022 “Let them forgive and show indulgence.”

Wealth in the story accrued to the Envied by unexplained means. There was no public, folk, or witness to any of the plot actions, except the Sultan, who witnessed the healing of his daughter, and the supernatural beings in the well, who witnessed the murder attempt and saved the Envied from certain death. The Envied took four actions: 1) he moved away, 2) he agreed to see the Envier in privacy, 3) he saved the Sultan’s daughter, and 4) he pardoned the Envier and loaded him with gifts. The Envier took only two actions, 1) he cast the Evil Eye on the Envied, and 2) he murdered the Envied, at least as far as he knew. There was no deception. Neither of these characters pretended to be anything but what he was. The Envier’s crime was based on seeing. He saw his neighbor’s situation, envied him, and cast an Evil eye on him. The Envied’s salvation was based on hearing. The supernatural beings saved him because the religious devotions they had heard from the Envied’s household had been sweet in their ears. He also listened to their recipes for healing the Sultan’s daughter and followed the instructions he had heard. Of the two main characters, the Envied is the more interesting to the reader, because he is more enterprising, to the point of achieving the epitome of success in life, accession to the throne with the ruler’s daughter at his side.

The longer story of Abu Kir and Abu Sir (Burton Vol. 9, 135-165) lends itself to being divided into three parts, Part I before Abu Sir’s sickness (135-142), Part II during and after his sickness, but before his death sentence (142-158), and Part III after his death sentence (158-165). In all the parts the consistently virtuous, diligent, and just barber Abu Sir remains forthrightly himself, acting and reacting as the same person throughout. His neighbor and sometime partner Abu Kir, however, juggles several

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voices and personalities. In Part I he speaks as the honest, diligent skilled craftsman (134-35,138), the victim (136), the swindler (136), the ill or seasick person (140-142), and the pauper (136). Actions, but not spoken words, reveal additional facets of his personality – the thief, idler, oath breaker, devourer of endless resources, and perfidious abandoner of a gravely ill friend (140-142). In Part II he adds concerned friend (155-156), slanderer (148), conspirator (155-156), unprovoked attacker and torturer (147), judge, punisher (147), and murderer (148), a total of 17 separate voices or personalities. In Part III he is relatively inactive, showing his character only by his rejoicing at the mistaken news of the barber's death. Acting a role requires energy, forethought, and considerable concentration. Memory for details is important also. One might conclude that Abu Kir's multiple roles – ten of them in Part I alone – make for a complicated, strenuous lifestyle, especially in keeping secret and separate the hidden facets from the more socially acceptable ones. It is important to differentiate between the words he speaks and the actions he takes, because the argument of this essay is that only by his actions can one truly understand Abu Kir. On the other hand, Abu Sir's words and actions are at all times perfectly matched. He even pardons Abu Kir and implores the Sultan to do so as well, gives him proper burial, and is in turn buried next to him (164-65).

Abu Kir's most skillful performances come in Part II, after Abu Sir has become aware of his thievery and neglect during his illness. Abu Sir goes to see Abu Kir, thinking he would receive him with friendship, but instead Abu Kir accuses him falsely of being a petty thief – Abu Kir being a thief on a grand scale – and a loiterer – Abu Kir being an idler and loiterer on a grand scale and at the expense of Abu Sir – and orders his servants to beat and torture Abu Sir mercilessly. Abu Kir plays the roles of judge/punisher and victim while acting as slanderer and unprovoked torturer. His next performance, however, tops this one, because it takes into consideration a factor not present since before Abu Sir's sickness, a witness. When arriving at Abu Sir's successful Hammam bath, Abu Kir remonstrates with him, playing the victim, while perfectly aware that Abu Sir is perfectly aware of the slander, beating, and accusations at their recent encounter. Finally he blames Abu Sir for the unfortunate incident of the beating of Abu Sir at Abu Kir's behest, and Abu Sir goes along with it, although he is aware of the deception (154). At this point in the story it is the virtuous man, Abu Sir, who seems self-destructive, and Abu Kir, the unjust man, who seems vital, enterprising, and powerful, the fitter survivor of the two by far. Abu Sir seems almost to connive at his own destruction.

Seeming -- or the reputation factor -- also comes to the fore in Books I and II of Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates and a series of conversational partners attempt to define justice, and move on to determining what justice means in a just man's life, then begin to debate whether or not a fictional perfectly just man, who has the reputation of perfect injustice, would lead a happier life than his unjust counterpart who seems just. In Book I lines 328c to 331d, Socrates speaks with the elderly Cephalus, who comes to the conclusion that justice is paying what one owes and speaking the truth. Cephalus's son, the boy Polemarchus, takes up his father's task in lines 331d to 336b, defending the proposition that justice is benefiting one's friends and doing harm to one's enemies. From line 336b to 354a the sophist Thrasymachus takes up the task of 'helping' Socrates define, justice, defending the point of view is that justice is for pious suckers; real men take advantage of others and break the rules, because that is the way to get ahead in life. From line 357a to 368d Glaucon, a disciple of Socrates, takes up the thread of debate, setting up conditions in which seeming and being work directly against each other. To approach the matter in its purest form, Glaucon requires that Socrates stipulate a perfectly just man who seems –

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has the reputation of – being perfectly unjust, compared with a perfect unjust man who seems to be perfectly just.

Glaucón is looking for the value of intrinsic justice, apart from the reputation factor, in determining who has the better life, the just man or the unjust man. Thrasymachus has been going on about how much better injustice is, saying that only cowards and weaklings refrain from injustice, because it is so advantageous in and of itself. To set the stage, Glaucon tells the story of the ring of Gyges (Plato, Book II lines 352d to 360d), in which a shepherd happens upon a ring which, when he puts it on his finger, renders him invisible. The shepherd then embarks on a career of theft and other offenses against justice, with complete impunity. The ring gives him godlike abilities to escape the consequences of his actions. There are no witnesses. There is no folk, no other human being to observe his misdeeds, thus it is as if they were done by a powerful supernatural being. Those who do not have to answer to their society for their actions are thus comparable to gods. They are also invisible to their own communities, i.e. homeless wanderers.

Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, sharpens the argument even more, by declaring that no one is just willingly, but the gods love justice. These summaries are of course oversimplifications, but they serve to introduce the role of society in the matter of seeming and being. Society is not necessary for being, but it plays an all-important role in seeming. One does not merely seem to be just or unjust; one seems to be just or unjust to someone or indeed to a set of someones, known as one's community, one's peers, one's neighbors, or the folk. Setting up a situation in which the perfectly just man seems to be perfectly unjust is the same as condemning him to execution, again in Glaucon's opinion (361e to 362d).

Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, takes over at that point. He and Glaucon clearly expect Socrates to defend the seemingly unjust, perfectly just man's chances to achieve greater happiness and satisfaction in life than the successful unjust man who seems to be perfectly just. It doesn't happen. Socrates says he can't do more than he did when countering Thrasymachus's arguments, but he feels he would be impious not to try. It is at this point that Socrates proposes the group move their discussion of justice to a larger scale, the scale of a state. He and his interlocutors from that point on proceed with setting up the state that is the major premise of *The Republic*. The reputation factor, the factor of society, presents a huge problem if it is to be set up to work against the just man.

Plato and the Abu Kir and Abu Sir story's author flinch when it comes time to deal with the ultimate consequence of seeming versus being. Then they choose the same way out, ultimately. They choose a supernatural *deus ex machina*. Supernatural forces, religion, and the afterlife come in to straighten things out. These non-human factors have appeared practically nowhere in either of the accounts up to this point.

Plato, after closing the deliberations that set up the model republic, has Socrates say to Glaucon (Book X, 608b) "It is a great struggle, greater than people think, to become good rather than bad. So we must not be tempted by honor, money, or any sort of office whatever – not even by poetry – into thinking that it is worthwhile to neglect justice and the rest of virtue." He goes directly from there to – "Haven't you noticed that our souls are immortal and never destroyed?" He then identifies the evil components of each thing as responsible for its destruction, as rot will ruin a piece of fruit. It is, of course, injustice,

intemperance, cowardice, and ignorance that harm the soul. Socrates goes on (Book X, 612c to 620c) to describe how the evil and good factors of an individual man's life – being, not seeming – are known to the gods, ending with a long story of rewards and retribution in the afterlife. Socrates avoids the issue of how this works in life. Plato has him go – completely uncharacteristically, for the historic Socrates -- to mystic and supernatural realms when it becomes problematic to defend his premise without doing so.

The power of society or the folk is indeed great. Abu Sir found it was primarily the testimony of witnesses in his own particular case – added to the miracle that put the Sultan's lost signet ring into his hands – that caused him to escape the death sentence put upon him as a result of the machinations of Abu Kir (Burton Vol. 9, 162-163). Even the *deus ex machina*, the supernatural element, was inadequate by itself to vindicate the hapless Abu Sir, although it turned the tide in the correct direction. The concierge of the hostel, who found Abu Sir seriously ill and locked into his room, and who watched as Abu Kir abandoned him, testified to the sultan. The servants of Abu Kir, who beat and tortured Abu Sir at Abu Kir's command, also testified. Society, in fact, came rather belatedly to the defense of Abu Sir, whereupon the sultan pardoned him, loaded him with riches and honors, and denied him only one thing – Abu Sir's desire to see Abu Kir escape the death sentence of the sultan for his many crimes (Burton Vol. 9, 165).

Abu Sir, the man with only one personality, the man who was always his own virtuous self, without any complex set of personalities or voices to juggle, spent most of the story patiently helping his ungrateful companion, then building his own business, then trying to help his merciful executioner by doing some fishing. He worked his way step by step through the story, ending up vindicated because of the miracle of the ring showing up inside the fish. He triumphed because of his consistent virtue and patience, like a long-suffering Cinderella waiting for the shoe to fit. In folktale terms there is something feminine about him.

The dynamic rogue Abu Kir, however, was active at every phase of the story up to the last. His basic personality – expressed in his actions rather than his words – is that of idler, swindler, and devourer of substance not his own as well as that of perfidious murderer and conspirator against his benefactor and partner in a religiously sworn pact. His redeeming features are initiative, energy, and ambition. He has much more than his share of all three. The author set up a situation where the virtuous Abu Sir had the opportunity to provide a decent burial for the scoundrel Abu Kir, as a good Muslim should, and then find his own final resting place by his side. The moral seems to be that extremes are not really viable. In this instance the two diametrically opposed characters may function as part of a whole picture. It is a tribute to their partnership, even though the partnership never really functioned as such, that as years go by and the side-by-side tombs suffer the inroads of time, it is Abu Kir's name that remains attached to the burial spot, not that of the virtuous Abu Sir.

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