

Carneades' argument against justice

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ABSTRACT

Carneades' argument against justice, including the famous 'plank of Carneades', is preserved indirectly by the fragments of Philus' speech in Cicero's *De re publica* III and also by Lactantius and Augustine, both of whose accounts were likely to have been based on Cicero. This paper investigates (1) the target, (2) the logic, and (3) the scope of Carneades' argument, especially in view of its relation to Plato's *Republic*.

(1) Although Philus says that Plato and Aristotle are his targets, Carneades' original target is the Stoics, especially Chrysippus. The concept of justice that is assumed in his argument, as J.-L. Ferrary and others have shown, is not Platonic but peculiarly Stoic; that is, it is considered to be essentially altruistic, and is explicated as 'obeying the laws' or as 'distributing to each what is worthy of him'. On the other hand, at least some of the allusions to Plato's *Republic* in Philus' speech, especially its resemblance to Glaucon's sophistic challenge in the *Republic*, are no doubt derived from Carneades.

(2) However, there are important differences between Glaucon's and Carneades' accounts. First, while the tale of Gyges' ring in Glaucon's argument is entirely mythical (as criticized by Epicureans), Carneades' thought experiments, such as the 'plank' case, are meticulously described in physically possible situations. Second and more importantly, while Glaucon assumes the desire of *pleonexia* in human nature, Carneades, especially in the 'plank' argument, resorts only to the minimum desire for self-preservation. By these innovations, Carneades' argument shows effectively the conflict which appears to exist between justice and human nature.

(3) This poses serious problems for the Stoics, for they derive justice from *oikeiôsis*, which begins from the natural instinct for self-preservation. Although they claim that *oikeiôsis* can gradually expand into the universalized concern for the whole of humanity, it seems that a gap inevitably remains between the necessary partiality of human nature and the complete impartiality demanded by justice. Later, the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus* and Lactantius appropriate Carneades' arguments against the naturalistic concept of justice held by the Stoics as a point of departure for their own views, which rely on the ideal of 'becoming like god' or the prospect of the divine reward in the afterlife. Interestingly, these transcendental ideas were also foreshadowed in Plato's *Republic*. In this respect, modern debate on justice, as well as on the interpretation of Plato's *Republic*, still follows in Carneades' footsteps.