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# *The Justice of Socrates' Philosopher Kings\**

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As against current notions, which tend to identify the just with the voluntary and thereby to espouse a politically suicidal individualism, Plato's Socrates develops an account of justice that involves coercion, even against the elite, his philosophers, who must be forced from a life of contemplation to rule as kings. This essay suggests, accordingly, that despite the modern emphasis on individual rights, it is Plato who most fully exposes the perplexity of justice and political partnership, and who thus provides the soundest basis for its theoretical examination. It is further argued, against prevailing interpretations, that the manifestation of this perplexity in the *Republic*—the conflict between Socrates' city and philosophy—is merely provisional, not fundamental. Learning-loving philosophers actually benefit from the political responsibility forced upon them in gaining access to the "greatest learning matter," the idea of the good. This result provides stronger support for the reconciliation of the individual to his own citizenship, and thus for public-spiritedness, than might otherwise be available today.

## **Introduction**

Without justice, decent political society would decline into anarchy or tyranny. Yet each of us would like best to pursue his own interest, unimpeded by civic obligations, while others shoulder our common responsibilities. This inclination is significantly fortified by certain current notions of justice, or political right, which designate consent as the fountain of legitimacy and posit a "social contract" as the basis of political authority. Insofar as civic obligation is merely derivative from individual rights, however, the tendency to identify the just with the voluntary is, as Leo Strauss (1953, pp. 186–87) suggests, fundamentally irresistible. Accordingly, one might deny on principle the authority of political society, for example, to institute conscription or inflict capital punishment, regardless of the possible consequences of the former in promoting the common defense and the latter in validating common moral indignation, both of which are presumably necessary in a thriving polity. Flattering though it may be to our proper concern for human dignity, so absolute a commitment to the theory of individual rights could prove in practice to be dangerous to the preservation of liberty itself. Prudent self-interest would urge, then, a serious investigation of other accounts of man's ties to political society that are not strictly dependent upon the doctrine of individual rights. Indeed, this investigation may be regarded as part of the perpetual vigilance that is said to be the price of liberty.

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One such alternative warrants special attention, inasmuch as it stands as a deliberate response to a particularly profound formulation of the contract theory of justice. Glaucon, a young interlocutor in Plato's *Republic*, formulates the latter expressly to provoke Socrates' response. According to Glaucon, justice is essentially a compromise. It originates in mutual consent; the consenting parties agree to renounce what is best by nature, namely doing whatever one pleases with impunity, so as not to suffer what is worst, namely serving another's pleasure without recourse (358e3–359b5). Although Glaucon shares the modern view that justice originates in consent, he differs importantly in not regarding the compact, and thus political partnership, as an unqualified good. In this respect, he addresses the problem of justice and political life more profoundly than subsequent consent theorists. Whereas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 13), for example, contends that the social contract and justice are universally beneficial in providing naturally diffident man an assurance of self-preservation, Glaucon maintains that justice is beneficial only for the weak or powerless; there is no advantage, Glaucon declares, in justice or political ties for "a real man" (*hōs alēthōs andra*). Socrates makes it quite clear that Glaucon is himself such a man (357a2–3). True to this description, Glaucon challenges Socrates to show that justice and political life are profitable, not just for those whose preservation depends upon it, but for the best and strongest individuals.

Generally speaking, Glaucon represents precisely the high spiritedness on which the polity depends in times of its greatest crises. So his demand can hardly be dismissed as politically irrelevant. But, as Glaucon's rather swaggering affirmation of superiority testifies, political society cannot win the allegiance of its most spirited individuals on the basis of its rather humble claim to facilitate self-preservation. Political partnership must offer access to something finer, if Glaucon and those like him are to be included (372c2–d5; 398c7–8). To respond adequately to Glaucon's challenge, an account of political partnership must ultimately pit justice and political responsibility against the individual life of greatest excellence and self-sufficiency, the theoretical or philosophical life. Socrates undertakes a response to Glaucon's challenge in exactly these terms. With his interlocutors, he founds a city in speech in which political justice comes to light as requiring each to perform the civic function for which he or she is naturally best qualified (370c3–6; 374b9–c2; 434c7–10). In the name of this principle, Socrates compels his most philosophical citizens from a life of blissful, transpolitical contemplation back to the drudgery of political office. Justice, evidently, is not coextensive with the voluntary, even for the best individuals. But if justice is done only at the cost of the purest, most self-sufficient human activity, its goodness, as well as that of political partnership generally, is indeed dubious. Socrates thus acknowledges the

decisive question contained in Glaucon's challenge. But, as I shall suggest, he does more. In fact, Socrates proceeds to reveal that his philosophers actually benefit from their constrained resumption of political responsibility. If this is correct, one may find in Plato's *Republic* an account of man's ties to political society that is neither biased by the presumptions nor plagued by the shortcomings of the doctrine of individual rights, and yet is capable of satisfying the profoundest and noblest longings of the human soul.<sup>1</sup>

According to the view now current among students of the *Republic*, however, Socrates' philosopher king does not benefit from his resumption of political responsibility. Allan Bloom (1968, pp. 407–8), for example, contends that “it would be contrary to [the philosophers'] good to return . . . in the decisive respect the city is not natural: it cannot comprehend the highest activity of man” (pp. 407–8). Thus too John Sallis (1975, pp. 379–380), who interprets the philosopher king as a comic figure, owing to what he describes as the “radical discontinuity of philosophy and politics.” Arlene Saxonhouse (1978) notes the relevance of this putative discontinuity for the problem of justice, maintaining that “the attempt to praise justice by uniting politics and philosophy and by making the philosopher Socrates engage in the political activity of founding a city only renders the discussion of justice more laughable. . . . The biggest joke of all in Book 5 is the proposal for the philosophical ruler” (pp. 889–90). Similarly, Eva Brann (1967) contends that “if justice can only with difficulty be proved to be profitable for the guardian rulers because of the hard life they lead (419a, 465c4), for the philosopher kings this is altogether impossible” (pp. 17–18). Dale Hall (1977) and George Klosko (1981) agree, despite other notable differences with the preceding commentators, that the philosopher does not benefit from his compulsory return to the cave. In the judgment of these scholars, then, Glaucon's challenge to bring to light the inherent profitability of justice and political life is not effectively answered by Socrates.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Plato, we must remember, does not speak in his own voice in this, or any, of his dialogues. But we may, I trust, understand the work as a whole—the weave of its arguments and dramatic actions—to speak for him. Because of this peculiarity of the Platonic mode of writing, however, the comprehension of its teachings requires a special attention that is easily mistaken for a kind of specialization. For an illuminating discussion of the character and special difficulties of Plato's writings, see Jacob Klein (1965, pp. 3–31) and Leo Strauss (1964, pp. 50–60).

<sup>2</sup> My attempt to show the contrary is not unprecedented. Richard Kraut (1973) and Edward Andrew (1983) address this difficulty and try to show that philosophers indeed benefit as kings. Specifically, both claim for the philosopher a gain that accrues from *teaching*, whether a kind of immortality in influencing subsequent generations or the satisfaction of an erotic longing to share their insights with others. But Socrates' philosophers are expressly and above all lovers of learning. So a conclusive argument for philosophers' benefiting from political life must focus on what *they*, not their students, learn back in the cave.

Against the prevailing interpretation, I shall argue that Socrates' philosopher king, the chief political institution of his best city, is a meaningful expression of a profoundly articulated reconciliation of man and the political community. The conflict between Socrates' city and his philosophers is indeed genuine, then, but, in my view, provisional. For Socrates, the conflict between the *polis* and philosophy is akin to the illuminating friction that precedes, but culminates in, the lighting of a match (434e4–435a3). Only by focusing attentively on this friction, Socrates says, can one catch a glimpse of the justice or common good that transcends and yet embraces the interests of both the best polity and the best human being.

In the following pages, I shall present evidence drawn from the argument and dramatic action of the *Republic* revealing that the philosopher benefits by his political responsibility to Socrates' city. I shall suggest that Socrates' philosopher, who is by nature a lover of learning (*philomathēs*, 376b8–10; 485a10–b4; 490a8–b8), gains an adequate comprehension of what most needs to be learned (*to megiston mathēma*), the idea of the good, in the glimpse of the *kosmos* he attains as a result of being justly compelled to return to political life to concern himself with human affairs. Similarly, as disclosed in the action of Plato's drama, Socrates himself benefits intellectually, gaining a sound basis for his conviction in favor of justice, as a result of his caring for the order and integrity of the city he founds in speech.

### **Philosophers Benefit from Political Responsibility**

A moment's reflection will reveal that an awareness of any prospective benefit presupposes a recognition of deficiency. So the first step in an analysis of the prospective benefit gained by philosophers from political responsibility is to consider their deficiency prior to undertaking it. Disclosure of this deficiency, in both the case of Socrates and that of the philosophers beyond the cave, will itself suggest the character of the benefit they have yet to gain. I shall begin in each case, accordingly, by specifying the deficiency that points toward this prospective benefit. Then I shall try to indicate as clearly as possible what this benefit is, its importance to philosophical interests, i.e., education, and how its genesis is bound to the politics of Plato's *Republic*.

#### *The Case of Socrates*

The awareness of any prospective benefit presupposes, as I suggest, a recognition of deficiency. This recognition of deficiency is particularly difficult for us in the case of Socrates, a man whose very professions of ignorance have come to be treated as indicative of his wisdom. But Socratic ignorance might sometimes signify the gap between what Socrates understands and what is humanly possible to learn, rather than the upper limit of

that learning itself. Socrates himself sometimes fails to distinguish these cases. In fact, it might be said that this confusion is *at times* responsible for “the characteristic irony Socrates,” his peculiar brand of haughty self-depreciation. Thus it would be as mistaken to exempt from critical scrutiny Socratic irony as any other speech or deed one finds in a Platonic dialogue. Only by recognizing the deficiency implicit in Socratic irony is it possible to grasp the significance of much of the drama of Plato’s *Republic*. This deficiency is disclosed, nevertheless, at the moment the reader is least prepared to expect it, and for this reason perhaps is easily overlooked.

Just as Socrates concludes an apparently successful refutation of Thrasymachus’ argument for injustice, he surprisingly calls attention to the fruitlessness of his effort, declaring that he does “not know at all what the just is, if it happens to be a virtue or not, and whether in having it one is unhappy or happy” (354a13–c3).<sup>3</sup> Socrates’ efforts only silence Thrasymachus, they do not refute his argument for injustice. Judging from the responses of Glaucon and Adeimantus to Socrates’ declaration, one could attribute his expression of dissatisfaction to an accurate assessment of the circumstances. As Adeimantus explains, a better argument is necessary, not only truly to display the superiority of justice, but also if Socrates is even to distinguish his position from Thrasymachus’ (367c2–3).

Nevertheless, we sense something of the ironic in Socrates’ confession of utter failure. Indeed, there is something highly peculiar in the behavior of a lover of learning who so complacently accepts his own ignorance—indeed, who would march off with it as with a trophy—particularly when the likes of Glaucon and Adeimantus are available and eager to further the investigation. Yet Socrates himself says he had thought, by making this confession, that he had “escaped the argument” (357a1). Socrates here underestimates the extent of his remediable ignorance. But Glaucon and Adeimantus force him back to make a fresh start. Compulsion is necessary because Socrates evidently would have been content to have made his escape, regardless of its consequences for his own understanding.

The difference between the new line of investigation proposed by Glaucon and Adeimantus and the preliminary inquiry with Thrasymachus highlights the problem of Socrates’ complacent reticence. Glaucon makes it clear that it will no longer be enough for Socrates “to charm” others with his powers of refutation. Socrates must now say in what *he* thinks the nature and profitability of justice consists. Glaucon’s compulsion here neatly frees Socrates from Thrasymachus’ injunction against answering according to certain of his own opinions (336c6–337b5). Contrary to Thrasymachus’ stated intention, this demand actually left Socrates, as it would leave any-

<sup>3</sup> My translations are based upon John Burnet’s Greek text (Oxford, 1902).

one, no choice but to be ironic. The emergence of Glaucon and Adeimantus as Socrates' principal interlocutors marks, therefore, an important turn in the *Republic*, heralding the constitution of a regime in speech, a dialogic community, that will not permit Socrates the refuge of a complacent irony.

To appreciate the benefit Socrates gains as a consequence of being forced to engage in the affairs, and on the terms, of this dialogic community, one must realize the genuine inadequacy of his apparent refutation of Thrasymachus' argument for injustice. Implicit in this inadequacy is the precariousness of Socrates' own conviction in favor of justice. For, first, if Socrates truly fails to refute Thrasymachus, his own conviction to the contrary would seem to lack rational support, a circumstance which to Socrates especially ("the unexamined life is not worth living") should be a matter of serious concern. Nevertheless, Socrates' escape at the end of Book One would have prevented the needed self-examination. Second, as is evident to Socrates' interlocutors anyway, Socrates' argument is not merely inconclusive, but actually supportive of Thrasymachus' contention. To appreciate in full measure Socrates' deficiency, then, one must observe how Socrates' response to Thrasymachus in fact supports the superiority of injustice, notwithstanding Socrates' own conviction to the contrary. To do this we must review, in some detail, the conversation between Thrasymachus and Socrates.

Thrasymachus, we recall, affirms that justice is the advantage of the stronger. For everywhere, "each ruling class posits laws to its own advantage . . . declaring as it posits them that this, their own advantage, is just for the ruled. . . . [Thus] everywhere the same thing is just, namely the advantage of the stronger" (338e1–339a4). It follows that acting justly, in conformity with the law, does not promote one's own good but that of an alien ruling class. On this basis Thrasymachus subsequently contends that injustice is mightier and more profitable for oneself than justice since justice is, essentially, someone else's good (343c1–344c8).

In his response, Socrates does not dispute Thrasymachus' contention as it applies to current political practice; instead he contests Thrasymachus' implicit premise that rulers *by nature* aim at their own advantage in their ruling. He raises the possibility that "rulers" who look only to their private interests may be acting contrary to the nature of true rulers, that precisely speaking they are not rulers at all. Socrates builds his argument on a premise shared with Thrasymachus. In every instance of rule exercised indisputably on the basis of knowledge, the only claim to rule recognized by Thrasymachus (340d1–341a1), Socrates observes that the ruler looks not to his own private advantage, but to the advantage of the ruled, viz., those who follow his prescriptions. Thus, a knowledge of medicine, which lends authority to a physician's rule, pertains to the benefit of the one who follows

“doctor’s orders” (cf. 332c5–334a9). If a physician were to treat a patient without being paid, the benefit enjoyed by the patient would be undiminished, although the physician himself would gain nothing. Hence, against Thrasymachus’ thesis, Socrates maintains that the weaker (i.e., the ruled) benefit from obedience. What becomes questionable in Socrates’ analysis is whether the *ruler* gains from his ruling.

Socrates thus concludes that ruling does not seek the advantage of the stronger, the ruling class, but rather of the weaker, the ruled. This finding, we immediately discover, entails the impossibility of a good political community. “If a city composed of good men came into being there would probably be a fight over not ruling, just as there is presently over ruling. . . . [For] everyone of judgment (*pas ho gignōskōn*) would choose to be benefited by another rather than to have the trouble of benefiting another” (347d2–8). The “good men” Socrates has in mind would, of course, be *both* just and prudent. But Socrates resists the moralistic presumption that good things are always compatible; he instead indicates a problem in positing the harmony of justice and prudence. Insofar as the good man is just, if he should come to rule, he will look to the benefit of the ruled. Insofar as he is prudent, however, he will be unwilling to engage in such an inherently unprofitable activity. The eligibility of justice is most questionable, then, from the perspective of the man in a position to rule a city. In his case, as Socrates indicates, the very qualities supporting such prominence appear to be incompatible. One can establish harmony among them only by avoiding political responsibility. For the sake of this inner harmony or order, the good man is willing, as Socrates supposes, *to fight* to avoid ruling in the city. From this it follows that a good city is simply impossible. For the harmony of soul that characterizes a good man is attainable only at the cost of civil discord.

Surprisingly, this finding casts doubt upon Socrates’ unequivocal expression of disagreement with Thrasymachus (347e1). Thrasymachus’ praise of injustice is based, like Socrates’ response, on a conflict of interest separating rulers and ruled. Both Socrates and Thrasymachus accordingly say the just is something advantageous (339b3–4). They differ in that Thrasymachus contends that the just is the advantage of the stronger, while Socrates suggests that it is the advantage of the weaker. This difference is less remarkable, however, than the common implication of both their arguments, that justice benefits only a class or part, and is not a good embracing the whole. It follows from Socrates’ reasoning, no less than from Thrasymachus’, that justice is “someone else’s good,” and therefore that injustice is more profitable for oneself than justice. The perplexity that emerges in the poem of Plato’s *Republic* centers precisely on this rupture of justice and prudence.



No wonder then that Socrates should be dissatisfied with his “refutation” of Thrasymachus’ praise of injustice. Only by virtue of a common good not yet evident in either Thrasymachus’ or Socrates’ contentions regarding the city can justice come to light as profitable. Thus the true refutation of Thrasymachus’ argument, as distinct from merely silencing the man, depends on the discovery of a common good, which alone underlies *both* the integrity of the political community and the eligibility of justice. Only if Socrates can discover in principle how the fracture between rulers and ruled may be healed and a city made whole will he gain support for his conviction in favor of justice.

The balance of the *Republic* takes up this critical question of justice and political integrity. In the midst of the greatest constitutional crisis of his city in speech, Socrates confronts the apparent conflict of interest between philosophers, who are best qualified to rule, and their fellow citizens. The latter’s good is served by the rule of philosopher kings. But do philosophers benefit from this resumption of political life?

#### *The Case of Socrates’ Philosophers*

It is difficult to recognize the benefit Socrates’ philosophers gain as a result of political compulsion because one is inclined to believe that a philosopher has already achieved his peak when, to use Socrates’ image, at last he escapes the political “cave” and in contemplation purified of particular allegiances looks upon the “sun itself.” Certainly Socrates’ philosophers themselves concur in this opinion, for “they count themselves happy . . . believing that they have colonized (*apōikisthai*) the Blessed Isles while still alive” (516c6, 519c5–6; cf. *apiontas oikein*, 540b7). Thus the city’s demand that they break off their contemplation of pure immortal beings to care for mortal perishable things will naturally seem an almost insufferable indignity and sacrifice. Against the premise on which this opinion is based, however, Socrates indicates that the philosopher’s estimate of his own happiness is mistaken. It is important that we too recognize this deficiency, or it will be impossible to appreciate the benefit the philosopher gains as a consequence of his being obliged return to political life.

The philosopher’s deficiency is perhaps most evident in the arrogantly imperious belief that while living he could “colonize” a place reserved for the dead. Such is the philosopher’s wisdom that he doesn’t even know if he’s dead or alive! The source of the philosopher’s delusion, as we shall see, is the persistent lack, even outside the cave, of what Socrates calls *nous* or noetic intelligence. Socrates establishes this conclusion subtly but unmistakably. His strategy is twofold: he *contrasts* the philosopher, who believes he has already achieved perfect bliss outside the cave, with someone about whom we are told only, but exactly, that he *has* acquired noetic intelligence (518a1–b2); and he

*compares* the philosopher to the brashly self-destructive Achilles (516d4–7). Socrates' arguments here reveal, as I shall try to show, the characteristic deficiency of the philosopher—the erroneous inclination to dichotomize the *kosmos* as a consequence of his own natural preference for the imperishable “ideas” and alienation from merely mortal, human affairs.

*The Philosopher's Learning Disability.* Socrates contrasts the philosopher, who only believes he has achieved perfect bliss, with someone who, in fact, has acquired noetic intelligence. The philosopher counts himself completely happy in the “pure realm” and is not willing “to mind the business of human beings” (515c7–9). But the man of noetic intelligence, whom Socrates introduces for the purpose of this contrast, calls the philosopher happy precisely as he is being compelled to return to the cave. The man of noetic intelligence “would count the soul changing from light to darkness happy for both its suffering and its life, and have mercy on the soul changing from darkness to light” (518a1–b2). On what basis would an intelligent man count the philosopher returning to the cave happy in the suffering this return will inevitably cause?

One might hold that such congratulations are in order only in regard to the preceding transpolitical life of which this present suffering is evidence. This would comport with the philosopher's own view, which holds that perfect happiness exists only outside the cave. It does not, however, account for the express estimate of the man of noetic intelligence, who deems the returning philosopher happy precisely in respect of that return, for “both” his suffering and his life. If the philosopher's suffering were nothing but a regrettable symptom of a fall from the best life, it would be the focus of pity or indignation, but not of congratulations. The warm reception the man of noetic intelligence displays for this suffering indicates that it is not merely the residue of a lost happiness but, more importantly, that it is a testimonial to an immanent benefit. Suffering may well be a condition of learning. The present contrast between the philosopher and the man of noetic intelligence provides a clue, moreover, to the character of this further learning by the philosopher. Since the philosopher here is contrasted and shown to have conflicting opinions with the man of noetic intelligence, we may infer that, whatever else might be said of the philosopher's speculative powers at this point, it is certain that he has not yet himself developed noetic intelligence.

This is a telling discovery, and supports what Socrates had already brought to light. For Socrates held that the one thing most needful for the philosophical nature is exactly noetic intelligence. Such a one, in truth, “has no intelligence in him, although he needs it, and it is not to be acquired except by *slaving* for its acquisition” (494d5–6, emphasis added). The philosopher may acquire noetic intelligence, and thus fulfill his learning-

loving nature, only by “slaving,” a word with unmistakable political overtones. Slaving refers, accordingly, not to the arduous, albeit liberating ascent out of the cave. It points rather toward a forced resumption of political life. The philosopher, however, is himself unaware of this prospective benefit, being oblivious to his own deficiency outside the cave. As Socrates predicts, the philosopher will not easily bear even hearing of this. For this reason he must be *compelled* to return, and does so, accordingly, “as something necessary, not as something fine.”

The philosopher resists political life on the basis of his belief that he is already living the best life. Evidently, the philosopher’s characteristic deficiency surfaces most clearly in an inability to judge properly his own advantage, specifically to determine in what manner (in disinterested contemplation of pure, immortal beings or in the care for mortal, human affairs) he shall find happiness. This miscalculation of self-interest suggests that the philosopher’s noetic deficiency involves a shortcoming in prudence or practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Socrates isolates the nature of this shortcoming as he affirms that prudence “is never destroyed, but as it undergoes a turnaround (*hypo de tēs periagōgēs*) it becomes useful and beneficial” (518e3–4). To become truly useful, this “eye of the soul” must, presumably, undergo a “turnaround.” This, however, is a perplexing discovery, for the soul of the philosopher who escapes the cave has already undergone a turning of sorts. Such a soul, no longer bound like a prisoner to conventional opinion, has turned and is now fixed steadily on pure and true being. Can it be that *this* turning is not yet sufficient to render the philosopher’s prudence useful and beneficial, to nurture it into genuine noetic intelligence?

Socrates indicates, remarkably, that it is not sufficient. What amounts to no more than turning one’s back on human affairs and the entire realm of the perishable is, as we shall see, incomplete; that is, it will not by itself nurture a beneficial prudence. For only if one comprehends the *idea* of the good, Socrates declares, are all the other acquisitions and properties of the soul, including prudence, useful and beneficial (505a2–4). Consequently, the decisive question is the following. Under what circumstances is this comprehension of the *idea* of the good possible? Socrates suggests, quite remarkably, that this comprehension does not occur outside the cave, but only after one has returned. For the last thing that is seen outside the cave, Socrates says, is only the “sort of thing” the good is. Socrates alludes to this deficiency inherent in transpolitical contemplation, employing his sun analogy. “*Last*, I think, one might look upon the sun itself by itself in its own place and see the sort of thing it is. . . . *after this* he might then gather comprehensively that of *all* those things they had been seeing . . . this is the cause” (516b4–c2, emphasis added). Hence, to see what the good really *is*, as

distinct from merely the *sort* of thing it is, one must comprehend its influence both inside and outside the cave.

But when is the soul in a position thus to gather the influence of the good in the visible realm? This is impossible outside the cave, because the soul whose "eye" is fixed steadily "upward" cannot penetrate its darkness. Having become accustomed to the brilliant purity of the immortal realm, the philosopher outside the cave is unable, Socrates says, to judge human affairs (516e8–9). The brilliance of the final sight of the good outside the cave merely dazzles the soul. Instead of gathering the common dependence of both realms on the superintendence of the good, the philosopher outside the cave develops contempt for human affairs (486a4–10). He brashly considers the two realms utterly dichotomous. Socrates likens such a philosopher to Achilles, who vehemently prefers "to suffer anything whatever" among the truly living rather than to be even a king in the underworld (516d4–7). The philosopher is similarly unwilling to return even as king "to mind the business of human beings" once he has grown accustomed to his contemplation of immortal, pure beings (515c4–6; 517c7–9). Like Achilles, philosophers would be willing to accept *any* consequence that follow from remaining outside the "underworld." There are, in other words, no terms in which life in the lower realm is commensurable with that above.<sup>4</sup> The blindness, which still plagues the philosopher outside the cave (518a2–3), absolutely precludes his comprehension of the superintendent influence of the good in human affairs.

Without realizing it, the philosopher arrests the development of his own intelligence by thus alienating himself from the realm of human affairs, which from his lofty perch in the "clouds" seems like the underworld. This explains, furthermore, why Socrates refuses to lay the whole blame for the corruption of philosophers on the political multitude. For it is the philosopher's native keenness for contemplating pure, immortal beings that obstructs his noetic comprehension of the whole. It is indeed most surprising, as Socrates had predicted, to discover that "each aspect of the philosophical nature which we ordinarily praise can tear the soul that possesses it away from philosophy" (491b7–9).

*The Completion of Philosophy in Politics.* The philosopher who haughtily believes he has colonized the Blessed Isles is as blind as the lifelong cave dweller who is dragged for the first time up toward the light. To comprehend the *idea* of the good, the only remedy for this blindness, he must return from

<sup>4</sup>It is significant, in this connection, that Socrates' censorship of Homer, as far as his poems touch human affairs, begins with the expurgation of exactly this speech of Achilles (386c3–7). Socrates thus strives to shield the young philosophers in his city in speech from such influences as may glorify the excesses to which they are already naturally inclined.

outside the cave. Like the man of noetic intelligence, the philosopher must experience (hence *memneit' an*, 518a1) the complete *periagōgē* or turn-around from darkness to light and *back again*. Nevertheless, the philosopher is reluctant to complete this turning, to make the necessary descent. The politics of bad regimes conspire with the philosopher's natural inclination toward being in its purity to impede his development. If the philosopher were to return on his own to such a regime, he would be violently assaulted and even murdered by his former mates (517a4–7). Socrates' own execution in Athens testifies that this is no exaggeration. If, instead, the philosopher keeps quiet and avoids political life, he will be left in peace, but he will not, Socrates insists, achieve the greatest or most important things (*ta megista*, 497a3). But in a good polity, if one were ever to come into existence, a philosopher could flourish and achieve his fulfillment as a lover of learning.

Socrates' city in speech, unlike any other, is instituted so as to preserve the philosophical nature from corruption and to promote its proper development (401b1–c7, 417a5–6 with 376b11–c6). But in this city, there is a civic function assigned to everyone (406c3–4). Since philosophers are best equipped for it, both by virtue of their glimpse of the pure realm and their earlier experience as warriors and junior public officials, their job is to rule. In view of their previous fifteen years in “offices fit for novices,” the philosophers will hardly find the prospect of more practical experience either novel or attractive. On the one hand, they are right, for it clearly cannot be more experience as such that they need. But, on the other, their utter contempt for human affairs belies any supposition they may have of their own self-sufficiency. For philosophers have not yet comprehended the *idea* of the good, as long as they are blind to its redeeming superintendence in human affairs. Philosophers, as Socrates tells us, long by nature to comprehend the whole, both divine *and* human; but this longing is frustrated by their contempt for human life (486a5–11; 402b9–c8). What philosophers still need, even outside the cave, is not more experience, then, but rather to be reoriented toward experience, toward the impure, empirical particulars of mortal life. Only compulsion, forcing the philosopher *to care* for the human things, can bring about the next stage in his education.

The philosopher king, who is compelled to concern himself with human affairs, must attend carefully to the spectacle of ordered harmony amidst the flux of empirical phenomena. Socrates directs his philosopher kings to attend particularly “to the ordering of the city, private men and themselves”; indeed, their rule consists chiefly in “educating others of a like sort” (540a9–b6). In this respect the philosopher king develops more than added experience or a mere knack for practice. His political responsibility in Socrates' city compels the philosopher to exercise a vision that penetrates both the pure realm and back into the cave, requiring a complete turnaround of the soul.

Socrates' philosopher kings would "look away in both ways continuously (*pukna*), toward both the just and beautiful and moderate by nature and all such things and again toward the city and human characters" (501b1–4). This continuity, or literally the closely compacted character of this sight, which lends it its comprehensiveness, however, seems virtually impossible. One cannot, after all, look two ways at once. But only by virtue of such a double vision is a comprehension of the *idea* of the good possible. Amazingly, Socrates suggests, the double vision necessary to the completion of the philosopher's education aligns in a single focus in his concern for human affairs. Philosopher *kings* "will take their bearings from that arising in human beings which Homer too called both divinely eidetic (*theoeides*) and the image of god (*theoeikelon*, 501b7). The human things evidently partake of *both* the pure, "eidetic" nature of justice and the other virtues as well as the unpure, shadowy character of mere images. It is in regard to this orderly manifestation of the divine *eide* in the human soul that Socrates pronounces it, not some being outside the cave, "the finest sight to contemplate" (402d4). The philosopher achieves his culmination, not outside the cave, then, but by engaging in Socratic politics, a truly "periagogic" activity.

Only in undertaking such political activity as Socrates describes will the philosopher fulfill his nature as a learning lover and find genuine happiness. As a consequence of exercising his peculiar double vision, the philosopher king begins to grasp the common order of the visible realm and the intelligible, acquiring noetic intelligence at last. The regime supervised by such a philosopher, in turn, comes itself to manifest this order (506a9–b2). The fact that both the city and the philosopher benefit from his rule testifies to the common benefit of that justice in the name of which Socrates originally compelled the philosophers to break off their contemplation of pure beings. This justice, or common good, harmonizes Socrates' city, his rulers, and ruled and makes them one. Justice thus understood supplies a basis for political partnership that belies the conflict of interest between rulers and ruled on which Thrasymachus' praise of injustice is based (338e1–339a2).

### Conclusion

The dialogue of the *Republic* develops in response to the radical indictment of justice and political partnership given voice first by Thrasymachus, best by Glaucon, and evident dramatically from its opening scene. To refute Thrasymachus' argument and to provide a proper foundation for his own conviction that the just life is intrinsically more advantageous than the unjust life, Socrates must show that the interests of ruler and ruled are not fundamentally in conflict. Only if a common good is discovered that is more fundamental than any political conflict of interest will justice and political bonds generally come to light as intrinsically choiceworthy rather

than as merely “someone else’s good.” Such a conflict threatening political partnership arises when the imperatives of justice require philosophers to lead what they suppose to be a worse life, concerning themselves with human affairs, when a better life, in disinterested contemplation of pure, immortal beings is available. Surprisingly, however, Socrates’ philosopher benefits as a consequence of his political responsibilities, developing a truly mindful wisdom as a result of justly playing his proper role in the political community. Thus, in answer to Glaucon’s challenge, a penetrating mindfulness or wisdom is the payoff of a just life. To the claim of Thrasymachus that no one “wised-up” would choose to live a just life, Socrates can answer that only by living justly does one acquire genuine wisdom. In this way, Socrates finally reconciles the divorce between justice and prudence with which Book One ends.

This conclusion is substantiated, as I have indicated, by the dramatic action of the *Republic* no less than by its arguments. Socrates benefits from being forced to remain in the Piraeus, just as the philosopher benefits from the compulsion to return from outside the “cave.” In both cases the desire thwarted by force proves subsequently to be evidence of a deficiency of prudence. Socrates’ urge to escape the argument serves his true interest no better than the philosopher’s haste to spend all his time in disinterested contemplation divorced from politics. For Socrates himself initially holds his conviction in favor of justice without sufficient rational support. Were it not for the insistence of his interlocutors, their refusal literally to release him from the argument, Socrates would not have discovered a proper basis for his conviction. In his care for his own soul, for Glaucon, and for the city in speech, Socrates benefits in gaining a glimpse of the intrinsic profitability of justice, namely its role in making prudence truly beneficial by making possible the philosopher’s comprehension of the *idea* of the good. In short, the *Republic* shows that the highest strivings of man’s soul are consonant with the requirements of justice. By virtue of his presentation of this achievement, Plato makes it possible for us too “to make justice secure for ourselves.”

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## APPENDIX

### The Political Significance of the Divided Line

True to what he has indicated about the futility of unmediated contemplation of the good itself, Socrates refuses to address the good directly when he is pressed by his interlocutors to state his own opinion concerning it. But neither does he retreat in silence. Instead he offers an

analogy. In Socrates' presentation of this analogy and in the subsequent images necessary for its clarification, we may find further evidence to support the view of the *Republic* developed in this essay. Attention to these difficult passages seems particularly warranted, furthermore, by the fact that they introduce shadowy likenesses of the sort that philosophers outside the cave are apt to scorn, much to their own disadvantage. It is fitting, then, that we turn now to these likenesses, beginning with the sun analogy.

The analogy Socrates employs to describe his opinion of the good likens it to the sun. As the sun is sovereign over all that is visible, providing light, which enables sight actually to see what is visible, so the good is sovereign over the intelligible, providing truth and being, which enables intelligence actually to comprehend what is intelligible. Insofar as the good is itself responsible for this proportion or analogy (508b12–13), it should convey, if anything, the proportionate, rational character of the good. At the same time, it implies that like the sun, which is more than the light it provides, the good is also something even beyond the pure being and truth it provides.

Glaucon's response to this last implication is instructive. He remarks, "quite ridiculously" Socrates tells us, on its demonic hyperbole or excess, that is, its lacking all proportion (509b6–c2). In other words, he grasps nothing of the good's proportionate character. In response, Socrates cuts short Glaucon's futile effort to so directly glimpse the good and, like the city compelling philosophers, bids Glaucon to concern himself instead with the ordering of a particular line. Socrates directs Glaucon to take a line divided into two unequal segments, one representing all that is visible, the other representing all that is intelligible. We are not told the relative size of the two, except that they are unequal. Glaucon's job is to cut each segment according to the ratio, whatever it is, of the original two segments (509d6–8). Glaucon should order the line, in other words, "in proportion to itself" (cf. 508b12–13). Glaucon's attention to this practical task may disclose more clearly the basis of the earlier analogy, which, as we have seen, he was unable to comprehend.

Socrates instructs Glaucon to understand each of the four subsections resulting from his ordering to represent a condition of the human soul. The length of each section, Socrates says, corresponds to the degree of clarity or truthfulness attained by the faculties they represent.

/ visible		/ intelligible	
imaging ( <i>eikasias</i> )	trust ( <i>pistis</i> )	formal thought ( <i>dianoia</i> )	noetic intellection ( <i>noēsis</i> )

A number of important implications follow from Glaucon's ordering. Most fundamentally, the ratio between the line's principal segments, thus its character as a whole, is reproduced and thus is now evident in the organization of even its humblest part, the segment that corresponds to the merely visible (508a8–10). Most surprisingly, the subsections corresponding to trust and thought are *necessarily* equal.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As Jacob Klein (1965, p. 119) has conclusively demonstrated, Greek mathematics had sufficient access to this inference. We therefore accept it as an essential element of the line image, and thus as a central explanandum of any satisfactory account. Nevertheless, many noteworthy commentators deny Socrates' intention in this implication. James Adam (1902, II, p. 64) calls the equality of the sections corresponding to trust and thought "a slight though unavoidable defect in the line, for [trust] is not equal to [thought] in point of clearness." It is significant that Adam's proof of the equality of the middle sections relies on a characteristically modern mathematical analysis (cf. Klein, 1968, pp. 157–61, 197–98). Sallis (1975, p. 415) maintains that there is a "conflict between the proportionality which Socrates prescribes for the line and his stipulation that the divisions correspond to the degrees of clarity of what is



Now this implication immediately alerts us to certain shortcomings of formal thought. For if we take seriously Socrates' instructions for the interpretation of the line, it follows that the trust we have in our unproblematic perceptions of visible things must attain as much truth as, say, the purely deductively derived results of geometry. The empirical particulars that are the objects of our perception are no more (or less) deficient in truth than the formal propositions of deductive thought, which treats its suppositions as if they were adequate first principles. To strive for greater clarity and truth, to exercise noetic intelligence, Socrates says, one must use these presuppositions not as unquestioned first principles but as "springboards" toward what is the true source or first principle of all (511b1–8). We may surmise *how* this is done by examining our own presuppositions about the divided line.

Upon consideration, it is evident that our present understanding of the line is itself plagued by the shortcomings of question-begging formal thought. This can be seen if we note carefully Socrates' original description of the divided line. He describes it as perfectly, or completely severed in two (*grammēn dīcha tetēmēnēn*, 509d6). The line, then, is discontinuous as it is given us. It is no more *one* than a city split fundamentally by conflict of interest between rulers and ruled (422e7–423a8). In either case it is only a nominal courtesy, a question-begging definition, that testifies to their integrity. Thus to say that all the line's points lie directly between its endpoints is to remain at the level of the formal *dianoia* of the geometer, since this is merely the definition postulated for a line. By questioning this supposition, we are impelled toward the true source of the line's integrity. Thus one must consider how the line's posited integrity is possible, notwithstanding its bifurcation.

Glaucon himself discloses a basis for the line's integrity, surprisingly, in the act of tending to its order. As we have seen, Glaucon's ordering results in the equality of the middle subsections of the line, revealing the line as a visible representation of a continuous geometrical proportion. According to the original construction, imaging is to trust as thought is to intelligence. But since it has come to light that in a decisive respect trust is the equal of thought, one can say that imaging is to trust as trust is to intellection and imaging is to thought as thought is to intellection. The intelligible continuity of the proportion imaged here is a nontautologous basis for the line's integrity, notwithstanding its visible appearance of discontinuity.

The integrity of the line is established, then, by analogy or proportion. The line is introduced by Socrates to allow Glaucon to comprehend the relation between the good and the sun, between the intelligible and the visible, between the realm outside the cave and the cave itself. The philosopher is inclined, as we have seen, to deny this relationship. But the sun, as

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represented. The line which he instructs Glaucon to draw . . . cannot strictly speaking be drawn." Evidently with a similar consideration in mind, Bloom (1968, p. 465) affirms that "the way it is stated, it is impossible to know whether the highest [primary segment] or the lowest is larger." Gregory Desjardins (1976) argues that the line is cut in the "golden section," but in so doing likewise violates Socrates' injunction that the length of each of the four segments be understood as corresponding to their partaking in truth and clarity, to say nothing of the necessity that the principal segments constitute a commensurable ratio (*logon*, 509d7–8). Klein (1965, pp. 112–25) and Brann (1967, pp. 49–81) preserve the integrity of Socrates' formulation as a whole and consequently provide a basis for the greatest discoveries concerning the meaning of this passage. Stanley Rosen's (1969, pp. 140–93) careful analysis of the central images of Plato's *Republic* is, like mine, much indebted to Klein. I take issue, however, with Rosen's *presupposition* of the line's continuity. For reasons brought to light below, it is essential to recognize that the line is presented as "perfectly severed." Its intelligible continuity, despite this physical separation, is a most significant discovery which would be impossible apart from precisely the "internal articulations" that some find distracting.

Socrates contends, is "the offspring of the good, which the good began in proportion with itself" (508b12–13). The original division in the divided line, and thus the ratio of the visible to the intelligible, therefore, is the work of the good itself. The good itself underlies the harmonization of the visible and the intelligible. Glaucon, in making his cuts in accordance with the original ratio, furthermore, is like a philosopher king "consulting the good as a paradigm" (540a8–9). To make his cut in this way, he must turn literally from one segment, then to the other, and then *back again*. Remarkably, the revelation of the line's coherence as a whole occurs only in Glaucon's "periagogical" act of ordering.

Socrates next orders Glaucon to liken our nature in regard to its education (and the lack of it) to the condition of cave dwellers who from childhood are bound and constrained to look upon as real the dim shadows cast by firelight. The cave above all represents not merely, or even principally, opinion, but rather the *hold* of opinion, which obstructs our education. Insofar as it presents chained prisoners and outright resistance to education (see *amathias*, 518a7), the cave opposes pure being with pure nonbeing. The full meaning of the cave image becomes evident, however, only when it is "connected" to what precedes it, namely the sun analogy and the divided line (517a8–b1). This connection is possible because the sun plays a role both in Socrates' original analogy and in the cave image. The sun represents the lower, visible realm in the former, but it represents the higher, intelligible realm in the latter.<sup>6</sup> If these are connected, interestingly, a continuous proportion is formed. As the good is to the sun, so the sun is to the cave. The sun is the crucial middle term by virtue of which the extremes of pure being and nonbeing are harmonized and integrated into an ordered whole or *kosmos*. In this new consolidated image, the sun represents the "in between," the mingling of being and nonbeing, the realm of opinion (476e7–477b8).

The good counters the threat to the integrity and intelligibility of the universe posed by nonbeing, or evil in all its forms, by this comprehensive harmonization. Our best insight into the *idea* of the good comes, then, not in a direct glimpse, which, as Glaucon's experience suggests, is dazzling rather than enlightening. The *idea* of the good is rather more accessible in the things through which it accomplishes its characteristic work, in human affairs and statecraft, or rather "soulcraft." Notwithstanding the philosopher's inclination to become alienated from the "human all too human," it is here that he will encounter "the greatest learning matter," and accordingly achieve the genuine happiness of a lover of learning.

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