To Sin by Silence: A Reevaluation of the Just Life in Plato’s Republic

by

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Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
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I. Introduction

It is impossible to overstate the ambition of the project of Plato’s *Republic*. Published around 380 B.C.E., the book not only elaborates an argument in favor of living justly and treating other people well, but also provides a workable definition for what justice is and a description of its psychological and practical effects, in the city and in the individual. Even if one disagrees with these definitions and descriptions, as many modern readers do (myself included, in some cases!), one cannot deny their strength as arguments.

Why is arguing for justice so hard? Well, as Glaucon and Adeimantus point out in Book II, it is simply easier to obtain the creature comforts so many of us desire by ignoring the needs of others. Purely from a logical perspective, there are fewer variables to consider if you’re trying to develop a life plan that focuses only on your own pleasure. And from Plato’s day down to our own, that is the common conception of what a happy life is: a life where you have wealth and the freedom to do whatever pleases you, a freedom which can often be bought.

But humans are social beings: the vast majority of us require other people in some form or another to attain our own happiness. And in order to form relationships with others that are conducive to our own happiness, we need to contend with their needs. Epicurus solved this problem simply by prescribing that we avoid attachments to others so as to permit the pure pursuit of our own pleasure; but as anyone who has ever been lonely can attest, this does not lead to satisfaction. So we need to figure out
a way to play well with others, or at least well enough that we can have pleasant interactions with them.

For some, the argument ends there: we must simply submit to others’ needs just enough to get them to like us, but no further. But this answer was not satisfactory to Plato, not only because the picture it paints of common human existence is undeniably cold, but because it provides no real account of how one should live and grants no understanding of the different kinds of pleasure that human beings experience. In addition, Plato believed that abstract ideas have an existence independent of human construction, and the account of happiness that dictates that we should regard everything we encounter in the world as instruments of our own pleasure, including other human beings, also fails to give an account of the role these abstract ideas play in human life.

In response to this dissatisfaction, Plato constructed a series of arguments that attempted to define the happiest life and the just life, and to show that they were one and the same. That he succeeded at all is remarkable; that his project has had such wide-ranging influence over the whole of Western philosophy that came after it is truly miraculous.

As the child of two lawyers, I have spent much of my life arguing. From a young age, I was constantly demanding the reasons behind their decisions, much to my benefit—and their consternation. When I first read the *Apology* in seventh grade, I remember thinking that Socrates was a hero, despite my classmates’ protestations that he was annoying and ultimately ineffectual. As an adult, I understand their point: they
were only noticing what Thrasy machus notices in Book I, that Socrates is motivated in part by his love of arguments—or, more uncharitably, by his love of winning them.

After my exposure to more of Plato’s dialogues and to Socrates’s characterization within them, I agree that Socrates loves competing almost as much as he loves the truth. I can understand better the shades of elitism and arrogance that permeate Plato’s work. But nonetheless, I believe in the project of the Republic, and I am inspired by Plato’s example to think deeply about how I live, every day.

However, there is one piece of the argument in the Republic which has continued to frustrate and fascinate me: the idea that after arguing for so long and with such ardor for the intrinsic and external goods that justice provides, Plato argues that the philosopher has neither obligation nor desire to pursue justice unless he lives in the ideal world. Like a hothouse flower, he is only capable of blooming in a highly specific environment. Besides the fact that this line of argument presents a dim view of the possibility of ever achieving true justice in the world, it also seems inconsistent with Plato’s description of the character of the philosopher: how could someone who truly loves justice and the Good with all of his being be expected to tolerate injustice in silence, passively accepting the harm that it does to his society and to him personally? If this idea appeared only once in the text, it might be dismissible as an aberration or a temporary error in Plato’s judgment, but in fact it appears in three separate passages—489b-c, 496b-e, and 520b-d—complete with detailed arguments in its favor. So the idea that the philosopher is not motivated or required to fight for justice in the unjust city is not a mistake.
While it is not an error, I do believe that this idea of Plato’s is in error. I have therefore devoted a year of reading, writing, and thinking to proving this claim using the terms of Plato’s own arguments. I have endeavored to show that my conception of an active life for the philosopher in the unjust city fits better with his descriptions and definitions of the just and happy life, as well as with the character of the philosopher as an individual, than does the passive life described in 496b-e. As such, the project of this thesis is not only interpretive, but also speculative, meaning that while the bulk of it is devoted to arguing for my interpretations of the text, the remainder will require significant departures from the text. I have therefore evaluated my arguments based not on their accuracy to Plato’s words, but rather on my understanding of his ultimate goal in creating the Republic, which is to describe the just life, and to show that it is also the happiest one.

For the purposes of my argument, I am rejecting the Straussian approach to Plato, which has him making his arguments in order to prove a hidden point which may be the exact opposite of what he seems to prove. I reject it both because I do not believe that this was Plato’s intent in writing the Republic, and because the point I wish to prove relies on believing that Plato was trying to define and defend justice in earnest.

The basis of my argument is the idea that even if there is no external compulsion or reason that the philosopher should fight injustice in the unjust city, and even in the completely unjust city, the philosopher should fight nonetheless, because if he does not, he will endanger the state of justice in his own soul, defined as a state of harmony between the three parts of the soul that Plato identifies, these being reason, spirit, and appetite (443d-e). To begin with, the philosopher’s appetite in the unjust
city seems unlikely to be a source of injustice, despite the fact that the appetite is the source of unjust behavior in less well-regulated souls, because the desires of the philosopher’s appetite, insofar as he is a philosopher, are moderate because they are still kept in check by his own reason despite the lawlessness of the city, and should therefore be relatively easy to satisfy even in the most unjust city. However, the desires of spirit and reason are more complex; and, as I will argue in Chapter II, impossible to satisfy if the philosopher simply ignores the injustice surrounding him. In order to understand why, I begin by defining the role of spirit and the way that it functions in the soul, both in the just soul and the unjust soul, and then the way that it functions in a just soul living in an unjust environment. From there, I explore the desires of reason and its function in the soul, and how that function is hampered when the philosopher passively accepts injustice in the unjust city, in Chapter III. And finally, in Chapter IV, I develop a picture of an active life for the philosopher in the unjust city, a life that would satisfy the desires of spirit and reason without getting him killed, or at least without causing him to die without furthering the cause of justice even in a small way.

I hope by these arguments to show that even in the most unjust city, the cause of justice is never completely lost.

II. What is the function of spirit?
Socrates’ initial description of the guardian class in Book II makes use of a peculiar analogy comparing them to dogs. He claims that a dog is philosophical because

“it judges anything it sees to be either a friend or an enemy, on no other basis than that it knows the one and doesn’t know the other. And how could it be anything besides a lover of learning, if it defines what is alien to it in terms of knowledge and ignorance?” (376b)

This analogy, though bizarre, is a good description of the way that spirit in the soul operates: it is intimately responsive to people and customs that are known to it, but rejects those which are not. Spirit does not have an understanding of why it responds to certain things or people; it is merely trained to respond in certain ways, just the way that a dog is.

However, this conception of spirit raises some issues: in the first place, who is the dog trainer? It might seem that the answer is reason, but spirit is capable of rebelling against reason even in a properly ordered soul, as the example of Odysseus in Book IV shows (441b-c). Whether or not Odysseus’s soul overall is considered to be ordered, the way that reason is used to quiet spirit’s outcry at the unjust behavior of the suitors is clearly being used as a positive example. Given that spirit is capable of rebelling against reason, or at least of having different priorities, it cannot be that reason is the only force directing spirit.

In the case of Odysseus, spirit is responding to cultural ideas about the duties of a guest and private property; and most scholarly interpretations of spirit focus on the idea that it is the guardian of custom and the arbiter of social interactions between
people. The idea of spirit’s role as the champion of cultural values is tempting, as it explains why spirit is capable of coming into conflict with reason at all, as well as spirit’s quietude in unjust cities or souls. If spirit has not been educated correctly, it makes sense that it would not be aroused by injustice either within the individual soul or within the city.

But there is no evidence that citizens in the unjust city must have incorrect beliefs about what is to be valued or feared: for example, stories of martial bravery and honor are common to most cultures, so it seems unlikely that even in the unjust city, spirit would not have some education in the value of martial prowess. Neither would spirit fail to learn at least something of in-group vs. out-group dynamics: nationalism, for example, is a fairly common propaganda tool in tyrannies. Plato was keenly sensitive to the fact that the stories we tell about what should be valued do not necessarily line up with what we are shown to value in daily life; so if spirit has cultural beliefs which align with the Good, yet exists in an environment which encourages injustice, what happens? The short answer is conflict within the soul, which is the root cause of injustice, per Book IV. In the non-ideal soul-types, it makes sense that the emphasis put on appetitive concerns would overwhelm spirit’s correct beliefs about the Good, but what of the philosopher? We know from Book VI that it is possible for the philosopher to exist in an unjust city. The environment does reduce him somewhat—“Under a suitable [constitution], his own growth will be fuller, and he’ll save the community as well as himself” (497a)—but he is still capable of retaining justice in his own soul, if he guards it carefully. But if spirit is educated only through cultural messaging about what is right, it seems impossible that the
philosopher should discover or maintain correct beliefs about the Good; if he has been educated in the same manner as the other citizens, and presumably he must have been at least to some degree, then his spirit should be directed towards the appetitive concerns that drive his fellow citizens, and with his spirit inclined to align with his appetite, an eventual collapse of his soul’s internal order seems inevitable.

In this chapter, I will attempt to give an account of spirit that answers the following three questions: If spirit’s function is neither dictated by reason nor by custom, or at least not exclusively dictated by either, then what drives spirit or directs it in its role? Conversely, what forces drive spirit into conflict with reason?

a. What drives spirit?

Vastly more than the other two parts of the soul, spirit is focused on social behavior, and more specifically, on cooperative social behavior. As an example of what I mean, the appetitive part of the soul is “social” in the sense that it is interested in the competition for goods and resources, either when the body is lacking them or when appetite has grown too strong within the soul, causing greed, but appetite is not capable of understanding itself in cooperative relation to others. Similarly, reason may be social in that the search for truth can be, and ideally should be—per Socrates’s discussion with Thrasymachus in Book I about the desire of the ignorant person to outdo others, regardless of their skill (350a-b)—cooperative, but it is only interested in social behavior insofar as that behavior conduces to knowledge of the Good. In other words, appetite and reason may both be capable of understanding whether a particular social situation is good for the soul in one way or another, but they are not capable of or not responsible for understanding the place of an individual
soul in society. On the other hand, spirit’s function is intimately involved with the correct relationships between people. In Book IV, where a detailed account of spirit first appears, Socrates describes spirit’s response to just punishment versus unjust suffering (440c-d), claiming that spirit will not be aroused in response to a just punishment, but will fight to the death against an injustice inflicted upon the soul.

From Book I, in Socrates’s argument with Polemarchus, we know that harm creates injustice in the soul (335c); in the case given in Book IV, then, how could what a person suffers in the course of just punishment improve the soul? It cannot be that the improvement comes from a physical harm that’s inflicted, or there could be no difference between being unjustly assaulted and being justly punished. In the example in Book IV, it must be that the just punishment, physical or otherwise, is acting as a kind of payment for whatever crime was committed. Once the punishment is complete, then, some form of balance is restored in the relationship both between the criminal and his victim, and between the criminal and society. This is why spirit fails to be aroused in the case of a just punishment: because the just punishment allows the correct social relationships that were broken by the crime to be restored. Similarly, spirit’s desire and admiration for honor has at its root a concern with social relationships between people. If spirit is not fundamentally appetitive, and Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus agree in Book IV that it is not, then the good that accrues to one who earns honor in society must be more pleasurable social relationships (e.g., being treated with dignity and respect by one’s peers).

But spirit’s desire for cooperative social relationships does not extend to all of humanity; if it did, then the idea that spirit desires honor through martial prowess
would make no sense, as killing another person could hardly be construed as cooperative behavior. Spirit’s focus must therefore be limited somehow. This returns us to the dog analogy from 376b: spirit responds with gentleness to those it knows, but with aggression to strangers. The aggression towards strangers clause might seem at odds with the idea that spirit is responsible for creating cooperative social relationships; however, it must be that some tradeoff is being made, whereby spirit is able to ensure good relationships with those it decides to cooperate with—those it knows—by pledging to defend against strangers who threaten these people. In other words, spirit mediates a soul’s place within a kinship group.

The idea of spirit as a mediator of social status within a kinship group also explains why spirit is responsive to “moral” offenses, as in the example of Leontius in Book IV. Leontius is angry with himself not necessarily because there is something objectively wrong with necrophilia, or because his lust for young boys’ corpses conflicts with some aspect of the Good, but because his unconventional (to say the least!) desires threaten his place in society by the disgust they cause and by their potential to force him to violate social norms regarding treatment of the dead. This is also why courage and cowardice fall under the purview of spirit rather than reason. One could make the argument that courage could be construed in some way as reflecting the Good, in that it can sometimes act as a preserver of justice; however, particularly with regard to martial courage, the preservation of justice is only incidental, whereas the preservation of one’s kinship group and one’s place in it is the primary concern. The philosopher might fight to preserve justice; but the preservation of justice would not be a sufficient motivator for soul types less dominated by reason.
The auxiliaries, who are more responsive to spirit, fight because they wish to protect their society, and in so doing, protect or elevate their place within it.

Spirit, then, is the preserver of correct social relationships. However, this idea does not fully explain what happens in a context where spirit comes to dominate the soul unduly, with no internal or external countervailing force of reason to subdue it. After all, if spirit is the preserver of correct social relationships, in what way could it become deranged? By being nicer to guests than is dictated by custom? I propose that the way that spirit loses control is in a sense more ordered than the way in which appetite loses control, in that spirit is responsive to social rules and mores, as well as to the opinions of other people in the soul’s kinship group. These limiting factors mean that spirit cannot gain what it desires through pure greed, as appetite can; it has to follow the rules by which honor is gained in the kinship group. However, it is capable of abusing these rules by creating situations that permit it to gain honor: this is why the timocratic constitution permits unnecessary warmaking (547e-548a). Technically, the rules of the timocratic society, which say that bravery in combat is to be honored, are being followed; however, no thought is being given to the cost in terms of lives and resources to permit this honor-seeking through unnecessary combat. And given that war is often viewed as glamorous, particularly in a society wherein the primary way one gains honor is through martial prowess, the opinions of others in the kinship group would likely be blinded to the costs, human or otherwise, of these frivolous wars.

This account of spirit’s derangement in the timocratic soul and constitution, however, does not fully explain other observations Socrates makes in the Republic
regarding the acquisition of material goods. After all, if spirit is largely unconcerned with creature comforts, why is it that under the timocratic constitution, the rulers “will desire money just as those in oligarchies do, passionately adoring gold and silver in secret” (548a, emphasis added)? Tad Brennan argues that spirit is responsible for ensuring the correct distribution of appetitive goods according to status or merit, and while this account does explain the increase in desire for and accumulation of appetitive goods under the timocratic constitution and in the timocratic soul, it does not explain why those who have acquired high status under such a constitution feel the need to hide their material goods: after all, if they have acquired these goods by acquiring status and honor, would they not consider themselves and be considered by others to have earned these goods? In other words, in a society where status is everything, what is the motive for hiding status symbols? The desire for appetitive goods can be attributed not to spirit, but to appetite, which is not limited by spirit in the same way that it is limited by reason, thus allowing it to drive the soul towards the acquisition of material goods. Spirit, when it is improperly guiding the soul, would not seek to control appetite unless appetite is conflicting with the desires of spirit, i.e., to gain status and honor. However, aware that conspicuous consumption might cause the soul’s peers to look down on it, and perhaps feeling its own sense of shame due to cultural ideas about greed, spirit would ensure that the person’s wealth was hidden. In essence, spirit is not capable of exerting enough consistent control over the appetite to prevent the accumulation of wealth, but it is capable of disguising that wealth after the fact out of a sense of shame, thus explaining both the increase in private wealth under the timocratic constitution and
the necessity for those who become rich unduly to hide that from the larger population. In this way, spirit deranged is still engaged in its work of preserving correct social relationships, but in a way that is deceptive and unhealthy, because without reason to call it to heel, it begins maintaining and increasing its status under false pretenses. Instead of upholding justice and moderation in the soul’s social relationships by following social rules, as it does in the healthy soul and the just city, spirit in the unhealthy soul and the unjust city begins to abuse those rules for selfish purposes.

b. What drives spirit into conflict with reason?

Because spirit typically aligns itself with reason in the ordered soul, as we know from Book IV, there are relatively few examples in the Republic where we see spirit in conflict with reason. Obviously, in the timocratic soul, spirit would likely be in conflict with reason fairly often, as reason attempts to restore order—i.e., its own rule in the soul—and spirit resists or ignores its attempts. However, spirit is capable of disagreeing with reason even when functioning correctly, per the Odysseus example in Book IV. The spirited part of Odysseus’s soul is correctly responding with anger and outrage to the behavior of the suitors; but it is put in check, at least temporarily, by reason, because an immediate attempt to rectify the injustice would likely result in Odysseus simply being killed by the suitors, leaving him unable to repay the suitors’ transgressions and restore the correct social relationships between them and himself. Indeed, the final restoration of peace and justice in Ithaca requires
the divine intervention of Athena, who prevents the cycle of vengeance from continuing when the suitors’ families threaten Odysseus with further violence for killing their sons.

Two things are noteworthy about the example of Odysseus. In the first place, reason’s role here at first feels a little suspect—could the part of the soul responsible for high-minded contemplation really be turned from the path of justice because of an appetitive concern, i.e. the survival of the body or avoidance of pain? However, there is another interpretation of reason’s intervention here that harmonizes better with reason’s pursuit of the Good, namely that the reasoned part of Odysseus’s soul demands that he get backup before he attacks the suitors because his death at that moment would actually prevent justice from being served, even as he is trying to pursue it. More specifically, if Odysseus had rushed in and attempted to murder the suitors on his own, he would likely die before completing his goal, and in dying, be unable to rectify the situation to the full extent that it demands. The second is that while spirit is “called to heel,” in Socrates’s words from Book IV, its desire for recompense from the suitors is actually satisfied fairly quickly—Odysseus is able to gather his family’s support and slaughter the suitors within days of his return. These two concerns are significant because they raise a follow-up question: what happens in the soul when spirit is correctly outraged at an injustice, but is unable due to circumstances to rectify it? In other words, if the attempt to rectify an injustice would result in death before that rectification could be achieved, what are the implications for the state of the soul?
There is one main source in the *Republic* for an answer to this question, which is the passage regarding the suffering of the philosopher living in the unjust city in Book VI:

“Then there remains, Adeimantus, only a very small group who consort with philosophy in a way that’s worthy of her… Now, the members of this small group have tasted how sweet and blessed a possession philosophy is, and at the same time they’ve also seen the madness of the majority and realized, in a word, that hardly anyone acts sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might go to the aid of justice and survive, that instead they’d perish before they could profit either their city or their friends and be useless both to themselves and to others… Taking all this into account, they lead a quiet life and do their own work. Thus, like someone who takes refuge under a little wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, the philosopher… is satisfied if he can somehow lead his present life free from injustice and impious acts and depart from it with good hope, blameless and content.”

(496b-e)

This passage echoes the calculation made by the reasoned part of Odysseus’s soul above, wherein reason is choosing survival not out of an animal drive, but out of concern that in dying, the whole soul would render itself incapable of further combating injustice. After all, the “profit” or use the philosopher is capable of giving or being to himself or his friends is doubtless not contained primarily either in physical labor or in, say, emotional support, but rather in the fruits of the reasoned part of his soul’s contemplation of the Good. However, this also suggests that the
spirited part of the soul, which has an essential role in arousing the soul to anger in response to injustice, simply recedes in the philosopher living in the unjust city.

The idea that spirit simply retires in response to the constant onslaught of injustice in the philosopher’s environment in this case is problematic for a number of reasons: in the first place, returning to Book IV, justice in the soul requires that each part of the soul does its own work. If spirit is repressed and rendered incapable of doing its own work, how can psychological justice be maintained? In addition, the definition of psychological injustice given in Book IV is conflict within the soul (444b), so if spirit is allowed to do its own work by reacting emotionally to each social injustice, but prevented from encouraging the soul to take any action, the philosopher’s soul in the unjust city seems doomed to devolve into a state of conflict and therefore injustice—that is, if he tries simply to ignore the injustice around him.

In the correctly ordered soul, then, it seems that the question of how to respond to social injustice can be a major source of internal conflict. In an ideal situation, the guiding hand of reason can subdue and control spirit, unleashing its power only at the right time. However, if there is no release valve for spirit, it seems inevitable that spirit and reason will enter a state of constant conflict, or at least that spirit will become permanently dissatisfied or weakened through disuse, just as in the example of the man who is educated in music and poetry but does not exercise enough given in Book III (410d-411a). In the disordered or unjust soul, the conflict of course arises from reason’s inability to control spirit, and from spirit’s corresponding unwillingness to listen to reason, so to speak; but, surprisingly, even in the just soul, the same dynamics come into play over the long term.
c. Spirit and reason in conflict: the devolution of the soul

In section a., we determined that spirit’s fundamental drive is to create healthy and ordered, i.e., just, relationships within a kinship group, and that when it is given undue influence within a soul, spirit ends up trying to manipulate social rules instead of being guided by them. In section b., we determined that even in the ordered soul, an inability to resolve injustice would lead spirit into conflict with reason. However, it is not immediately clear how these two accounts of spirit in distress mesh: in other words, in what practical ways does spirit in the philosopher’s soul begin to act out when he is living in an unjust environment, and does this account agree with my earlier account of spirit dominating the unjust soul?

In the first place, one major difference between these two situations, at least at the start, is that spirit in the philosopher’s soul is working correctly: in the unjust city, the problem is not that spirit’s priorities are not in order, but rather that the city’s aren’t. By contrast, in the unjust soul, spirit’s priorities have become twisted, such that it begins to see the social rules which it should view as ends in themselves as means instead. However, it remains to determine whether the devolution of the philosopher’s soul when reason and spirit are in conflict due to the harsh environment of the unjust city follows a similar pattern.

In essence, there are three possible accounts of how spirit might lose its way in the philosopher’s soul when it is forced to react to injustice repeatedly without being able to confront it. The first possibility is that spirit, despite the best efforts of
reason, would simply acclimate to the mores of the unjust city, refusing to be aroused in response to injustice because it accepts unjust actions as normative within its kinship group, and therefore not worthy of a response. But this account is highly problematic. In the first place, if spirit was able to absorb beliefs about social relationships that correspond with the Good, either due to the efforts of the philosopher’s own reason or by lucking into parents who taught the soul those correct beliefs, it seems unlikely that spirit would simply give in in the interest of keeping up with the Joneses—or the Athenians, as the case may be! Recalling that spirit is the source of courage, and that Socrates defines courage as “a kind of preservation” (429c) which involves the protection of one’s beliefs through any kind of hardship, it seems highly improbable that a soul possessing of a robust spirited part, such as the philosopher’s, would yield on such an important point, even under extreme duress. Additionally, returning to the text, the imagined exhortation to return to the cave given by Socrates to his philosopher-rulers seems to suggest that philosophers who are born into unjust cities do not or should not consider such a city as their kinship group:

“ ‘When people like you come to be in other cities, they’re justified in not sharing in their city’s labors, for they’ve grown there spontaneously, against the will of the constitution. And what grows of its own accord and owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn’t keen to pay anyone for that upbringing.’ ” (520b)

So the acclimation account of spirit coming into conflict with reason may be dispensed with. A second possibility, addressed in section b., is that spirit undergoes a
kind of atrophy, learning not to react to the injustice all around it. There are two potential reasons for this atrophy: one is that spirit eventually withers because it is continually suppressed by reason and incapable of fulfilling its function; and the other is the idea expressed in the passage at 520b, that the philosopher simply does not feel that he belongs to the city or is responsible for it in any real, active sense. In the second case, it may seem that the reason for spirit’s quietude is not a sign of malfunction, but rather a sign of its health: after all, per section a., spirit is only responsible for ensuring correct relationships within its kinship group, and if the unjust city is not construed as the philosopher’s kinship group, then there is no need for spirit to rouse the soul to action. However, if the philosopher does not construe his city as his kinship group or community, then what community does he belong to? It is possible that he is able to find like-minded friends and family members, but even if that is the case, his community must be rather small and perhaps not entirely fulfilling, since there are so few souls like his. And even if he is able to find such a community, his spirit would only be further angered when they suffer injustice due to the disease endemic to the unjust city. But if he is unable to find a community for himself, then spirit would still remain dissatisfied, as the lack of a kinship group, indeed the lack of an ability to be a social being in any satisfying way, would leave it unable to do its own work. So although the atrophy account of spirit’s relationship to reason in the soul of a philosopher living in an unjust city seems to have the most textual evidence supporting it, in the sense that it harmonizes well with the description of the philosopher’s behavior in Book VI (496b-e) and also with the description of the philosopher’s lack of allegiance to the unjust city in 520b, it still
leaves spirit’s need to do its own work by the wayside. In other words, though the atrophy account has textual evidence supporting it, it still does not provide adequate assurance that spirit could be quiescent in an unjust environment without endangering the health and justice of the soul overall.

Finally, the third possible account of the relationship between spirit and reason when the philosopher’s soul is under a constant onslaught of injustice is that spirit is not in fact silenced, but rather continues to operate and respond to the injustice in its environment. This account seems most convincing in the sense that it allows spirit to continue to play its role, thereby preserving the dictum that each part of the soul must do its own work; however, if spirit is allowed to continue responding to injustice, but, crucially, is not allowed to respond in an active way, then its role would lead it into a continual battle with reason: spirit, crying out against injustice and demanding action to restore correct social relationships, would constantly face a counterassault from reason, which would not permit action because it surmises that action from one individual is incapable of dismantling a whole system corrupted by injustice from root to tip. This brings us back to Book IV and the definition of injustice: i.e., conflict within the soul. If the philosopher’s soul is in constant conflict due to its constant exposure to injustice, it must either permit spirit to take control, thereby sacrificing order within his own soul and possibly his own life, or suffer constantly in an attempt to preserve his own internal order.

If we accept the third account, there is one way that the philosopher might be capable of preserving both spirit’s correct role in his soul and the justice of his soul overall: by retiring from public life, the philosopher might be able to ensure that spirit
is unable to react and cause conflict in the soul by depriving it of stimuli. There is some textual evidence for this account in the form of Socrates’ example of his friend Theages, at 496b, who he says is prevented from becoming corrupted despite the injustice in his environment because a physical disability prevents him from participating in public affairs. However, this account has some of the same problems as the first two; most damningly, spirit is still prevented from doing its own work, due to the rejection of a kinship group that would be necessitated to achieve the goal of exile. In addition, there is no guarantee that the philosopher could remain entirely ignorant of the injustice in his city, and indeed, the desire to escape in order to protect the state of his soul would necessitate some knowledge of that injustice, which would in turn mandate some form of response from the philosopher, either in the form of suppressing spirit’s will to act and doing nothing or in the form of assuaging spirit by acting.

It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that there is no path for the philosopher that permits both inaction and the preservation of his soul’s justice and health. Of all the accounts detailed, the one that I find both most convincing and most interesting is the third account, in which spirit remains operational, and as such, becomes involved in a constant conflict with reason. But what does this conflict look like? Is it similar to the account of an unjust timocratic soul, or does the soul of the philosopher follow a different path of devolution?

As we have established, the conflict begins when the philosopher observes his first injustice, and realizes that he is incapable of rectifying the injustice without losing his ability to act entirely, through death, imprisonment, or whatever other form
of neutralization the established powers of the unjust city can devise to protect the status quo. Perhaps with respect to this first instance, the philosopher conjectures that he would not be preserving justice by acting against the injustice he has witnessed because doing so would a) endanger his life or his freedom and b) have no guarantee of success while also preventing him from making further attempts to correct it, by a). Following this reasoning, he calls spirit to heel, and continues about his business. However, what happens when he witnesses a second injustice, a third, a fourth? When the philosopher becomes aware of the state of injustice that permeates the whole city? I propose that spirit must then begin to inflict repeated psychic distress, because it cannot perform its function of restoring correct social relationships among people. This psychic distress could take a number of forms: based on the role which anger plays in the essential role of spirit, perhaps spirit’s inability to act would cause the philosopher to begin lashing out in anger towards people in his personal life, due to his inability to find a productive outlet for his rage at the injustices he is forced to tolerate. By causing emotional or even physical harm to people unjustly, because he is unable to find a healthier outlet, the state of his soul would deteriorate, both because of the small injustices he perpetrates by lashing out and because even these small outlets for spirit are insufficient to assuage its distress. Another possibility is that the philosopher is able to maintain control until a certain amount of emotional distress builds up, causing him to engage in a bold but reckless attempt to restore justice to his environment, similar to Odysseus’s initial desire to rush into battle with the suitors. The most likely result of such an action would be that the philosopher would be killed; however, in addition, his reputation would likely suffer significantly
due to the natural human propensity to fear change and to the efforts of the current regime to restore its own legitimacy and prevent further attempts to change the political situation—in essence, I am suggesting that if the philosopher were to mount an unconsidered revolt in the unjust city in an attempt to create a more just political system, the city’s current regime would quickly dispose of him and then engage in a smear campaign in order to prevent further rebellion, and that it would perhaps attempt to neutralize members of his family and associates as well, either by preventing them from participating at all in public affairs due to their shameful association with the rebellious philosopher or by killing or otherwise incapacitating them. Therefore, by engaging in an ill-considered rebellion against an unjust regime in his city, the philosopher would not only prevent himself from fully correcting the situation, if such is at all possible, but he would also fail to assuage spirit’s gripe in the first place: in other words, his attempt would lead to a quick drop to the bottom of the social pyramid and/or acropolis, not because he has justly earned such a drastic reduction in status but because of the injustice permeating the system as a whole, and end up reifying both spirit’s rage at the system and the system itself.

Alternately, perhaps the philosopher is able to keep a lid on his personal relationships, to continue calling spirit to heel without granting it an outlet. However, this path still presents a risk to his soul, because if the philosopher is able to refrain from acting to assuage spirit’s desires in any way, there is a risk that it will either atrophy and refuse to become responsive when necessary, or that keeping such a tight rein on himself will exhaust the philosopher, leaving him less able to participate in the search for justice or the Good. To clarify what I mean by exhaustion, we must
examine the idea of the hydraulic model of desire (to borrow Melissa Lane’s term) elaborated in Book VI. In Socrates’s words, “…when someone’s desires incline strongly for one thing, they are thereby weakened for others, just like a stream that has been partly diverted into another channel” (485d). The model’s focus is of course on the main channel to which the philosopher’s desires are guided, i.e., the desire for learning, and makes no reference to what happens to the lesser channels, other than the fact that the philosopher would “[abandon] those pleasures that come through the body.” But for the soul to maintain its health, bodily desires, i.e., desires other than the desire for reason, cannot be abandoned completely; the soul still needs to eat and to live in harmonious association with other souls in order to achieve justice within itself. However, when spirit’s desire to engage in harmonious association is unsatisfied, what happens to the “channel” reserved for it? An unsatisfied desire has the tendency to grow over time, so even though the philosopher’s soul is mostly devoted to the desire for reason, more and more of his desire will be diverted towards spirit’s unsatisfied desire for harmonious relationships, leaving him unable to focus entirely on his desire for learning and knowledge. Even if there is an upper limit on how much spirit’s desires may disrupt the ordinary flow of the whole soul’s desire, which is fundamentally controlled by reason, the dissatisfaction of spirit will still steal away some amount of the philosopher’s ability to concentrate on his whole soul’s desire for wisdom. Indeed, assuming that the “channel” reserved for spirit’s desires in the philosopher’s soul is only wide enough to accommodate the degree of socialization necessary for survival and no more, as the passage suggests, the growth of the “channel” will be proportional to the degree to which the injustice of the whole
city threatens this desire—in other words, the more unjust the city is, the more that spirit will be dissatisfied, and the greater the risk that the philosopher’s “natural” pattern of desire is threatened. In addition, I believe that exhaustion is essentially what the phrase “live a quiet life” in 496e refers to: in order to manage the constraints placed on him by his circumstances and by the need to guard the health of his soul as far as possible, the philosopher essentially budgets the size of his life, cutting down his duties and responsibilities such that they are commensurate with the reduced amount of physical and mental energy he has available. This is why, in response to Adeimantus’s exclamation that this is “no small thing for him to have accomplished” (497a), Socrates responds that it is still a net loss, both for the philosopher and for humanity, because the philosopher is capable of accomplishing so much more. And indeed, the result of the philosopher’s reducing the scope of his life is that a greater level of injustice is allowed to persist, both in his immediate environment and in the world overall, which, especially for Plato, is no small loss. In other words, even if the philosopher maintains some form of justice in his soul by reducing his life so that he is capable of being just within that small sphere, he must nonetheless have some awareness that his performance of justice in that arena is nowhere close to the reality of it, to the Form of Justice, and as such must go through his life simply maintaining, incapable of pursuing true happiness or fulfillment.

In conclusion, there are some aspects of the devolution of the philosopher’s soul that resemble the degradation which the timocratic soul falls into, namely that in both cases, the spirited part of the soul experiences distress due to an unhealthy relationship with the rules of the surrounding society. The difference inheres in the
directionality of the relationship’s unhealthiness: in the case of the timocratic soul, the rules of the kinship group to which it is beholden may or may not be just, but the disease comes primarily from the outsized spirited part’s desire to abuse those rules and twist them to its advantage, rather than following them as it is meant to; but in the case of the philosopher’s soul in the unjust city, it is the rules themselves that are wrong, and which are the root cause of spirit’s derangement and finally the derangement of the whole soul. Essentially, in the first case, spirit is over-performing because the guiding hand of reason is weakened or absent; and in the second, spirit is capable of either under-performing over time or over-performing in the short term and hampering its function in the long term, not because reason is absent, but because circumstances prohibit it from performing in a moderate and appropriate way. The path of inaction, of least resistance, is therefore insufficient to protect the philosopher’s soul from injustice.

III. Reason’s desires in the philosopher’s soul

In the previous chapter, we defined reason’s desires in conflict with spirit, but our picture of reason’s desires in and of themselves was left incomplete. In this next section, I will attempt to give an account of what reason’s desires actually are, and how the philosopher seeks to fulfill them in an imperfect world. In its first incarnation in Book IV, reason appears as the part of the soul which calculates, per 439c-d:

“Now, would we assert that sometimes there are thirsty people who don’t wish to drink?
Certainly, as it happens often to many different people.

What, then, should one say about them? Isn’t it that there is something in their soul, bidding them to drink, and something different, forbidding them to do so, that overrules the thing that bids?

I think so.

Doesn’t that which forbids in such cases come into play—if it comes into play at all—as a result of rational calculation, while what drives and drags them to drink is a result of feelings and diseases?

Apparently.

Hence it isn’t unreasonable for us to claim that they are two, and different from one another. We’ll call the part of the soul with which it calculates the rational part and the part with which it lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites the irrational appetitive part, companion of certain indulgences and pleasures.”

Reason, then, first appears as the guardian of the soul’s health as a whole. More specifically, it uses its faculty for calculation as a means to protect the soul and the body, not as an end in itself. But this definition of reason feels incomplete; in this portrait of reason, reason becomes a kind of functionary, its only role controlling and maintaining the other two parts, neither possessing nor pursuing any separate desires of its own.

However, once Plato begins describing the role of reason in the soul of the philosopher, a more complete, almost spiritual role for reason emerges. Reason in the soul of the philosopher is no mere accountant, tallying up pros and cons and
budgeting energy devoted to the desires of spirit and appetite; instead, it is the part of the soul that engages with the Forms, instrumental in fulfilling the ultimate purpose for which the philosopher soul-type strives:

“…it is the nature of the real lover of learning to struggle towards what is, not to remain with any of the many things that are believed to be, that, as he moves on, he neither loses nor lessens his erotic love until he grasps the being of each nature itself with the part of his soul that is fitted to grasp it, because of its kinship with it…” (490b)

It might seem at first that reason’s function as the part of the soul which knows and desires wisdom is the same as its guardian function, whereby it alone of the three parts of the soul is capable of and responsible for caring for the whole soul. However, in Book VII, we suddenly see these functions come into conflict: from 519c-520d, when Socrates is imagining his exhortation to his philosopher-rulers to return to the cave and rule, reason is both the part of their souls which initially resists the compulsion to rule as well as the part of their souls that requires them to do so. In other words, reason desires to remain in contemplation of the Forms because of its desire for knowledge and wisdom, but it also desires to return to the cave and rule, because failing to do so would be unjust, and perpetrating an unjust act causes the soul to deviate from the model the Forms provide. As Socrates himself asserts in Book IV, “It is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same parts of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time” (436c); since this is the case, how can reason have these two desires which sometimes conflict, and remain one thing instead of many? In other words, what is the
relationship between reason’s role as the guardian of the soul’s health and its desire to have intercourse with the Forms and produce understanding and truth?

In the following sections, I will argue that these desires, which seem to conflict, are actually different iterations of the same desire—to interact with the Forms—and that their difference is produced by the circumstances surrounding the philosopher. I will confine my discussion of reason’s desires to its desires in the philosopher’s soul, both because the role of the philosopher in the unjust city is what ultimately concerns me and because I believe that reason’s role and desires in the philosopher soul-type differs from its role and desires in the other soul types, and that this difference produces a unique conflict in those desires which does not necessarily occur in the other soul-types, because they are not so dominated by reason. I believe that resolving this question of reason’s desires is at the heart of why the path of inaction in the unjust city advocated in 496d cannot satisfy the philosopher.

a. The sole desire of “pure” reason is to know, and ultimately to know the Good

As we have established, reason has a function within the soul as the ruler of the other parts, and it also has a desire for wisdom, which may be separated from its function as ruler of the soul. The desire for wisdom and the desire for the soul’s health are related, but they are not the same, just as the philosopher’s desire for knowledge and his desire for justice are not the same. In order to answer the question of how these desires are related, we must first determine what reason’s desire for
knowledge or wisdom entails separately from its function as the soul’s guardian; in other words, what are the desires of “pure” reason, and how are they satisfied?

In Book V, at 475b, we learn that “the philosopher doesn’t desire one part of wisdom rather than another, but desires the whole thing”; and since reason is the part of the soul which is capable of knowing and understanding, per 490b, reason is clearly the part of the philosopher’s soul which is responsible for his erotic desire for wisdom. But is the desire for wisdom the same as the desire for knowledge, and is the desire for knowledge also erotic, incapable of discriminating between types of knowledge or noticing any incompleteness or imperfection in them, just as the lover of boys described in 474d-475a is incapable of seeing anything in a boy’s appearance as flawed, provided he is young? I believe that the desires for wisdom and for knowledge are not the same, and that reason’s desire for wisdom is erotic, in the sense of all-encompassing and non-discerning, but its desire for knowledge is not. Looking at 505a, Socrates says, “…the form of the good is the most important thing to learn about… it’s by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial… if we don’t know it, even the fullest possible knowledge of other things is of no benefit to us,” because without knowing the form of the good, it is impossible to distinguish between things or to know what is useful and valuable and what is not. This already points to a privileging of the knowledge of the Good and to its primacy amongst all the forms of knowledge, and Socrates confirms our suspicion in 505b:

“Furthermore, you certainly know that the majority believe that pleasure is the good, while the more sophisticated believe that it is knowledge.
Indeed I do.

And you know that those who believe this can’t tell us what sort of knowledge it is, however, but in the end are forced to say it is knowledge of the good."

So reason’s desire for knowledge is not erotic, because it discriminates: it values knowledge of the Good over other forms of knowledge, for without knowledge of the Good, it is impossible to know the other forms of knowledge fully, because it is impossible to relate them to each other without it, as Socrates points out in 505a. But if reason’s desire for knowledge is not erotic, then how can its desire for wisdom be erotic? In defining the difference between wisdom and knowledge, it is useful here to refer to an adage of a more recent vintage than the Republic: “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.” In other words, wisdom has to do with applying knowledge, with relating forms of knowledge to one another: our knowledge of what tastes good is privileged over our knowledge that a tomato is a fruit. So if we understand wisdom as a faculty which discriminates between forms of knowledge, then reason’s desire for wisdom can be erotic and non-discriminatory, while its desire for knowledge can remain non-erotic and discriminatory. In brief, wisdom is the knowledge of the Good, which reason desires entirely. Without desiring the whole of knowledge of the Good, it cannot mediate its desire for knowledge nor completely fulfill its role as the part of the soul which knows, because without being able to discriminate between forms of knowledge, it cannot be said to know each of them fully.

Having established that the ultimate desire of reason in the soul of the philosopher is to know the Good, how can that desire be satisfied? Until now, we
have largely ignored the question of the Forms, but it is necessary to explore and introduce it here, because the Forms are integral both to the definition of reason’s role in the philosopher’s soul and to the completion of its desire for knowledge of the Good. As previously stated, reason in the philosopher’s soul is defined at 490b as the part of his soul which is fitted to grasp “the being of each nature itself… because of its kinship with it.” In other words, reason’s function in the philosopher’s soul is interaction with the Forms, because reason is similar to the Forms in that it is the most ordered part of the soul and the least changeful—in other words, the most perfect—and because reason is capable of understanding why the Forms are good. Reason is the most fitting part of the soul not only to imitate the Forms, because it is the most like them already, but also the most fitting part to interact with them, because it alone is capable of using logic to interpret and further its perception of the Forms in order to facilitate more complete imitation of their perfection.

In essence, reason in isolation can be considered as belonging to the world of the Forms. Taking a cue from Tad Brennan’s essay “The Nature of the Spirited Part of the Soul and its Object,” if we imagine the rational part of the philosopher’s soul disembodied, what would it look like and what would its activities be if it were free to dispense entirely with the concerns of body and society? From 490b, we know that reason is the part of the soul which is capable of and responsible for interaction with the Forms “because of its kinship with it”; taking this kinship a step further, we can imagine that reason disembodied could live in the world of the Forms, or at least could interact with it. But what would reason do there? Would it simply stare at the images of perfection that the Forms provide, its metaphorical jaw agape, for eternity?
At 500c, we have a potential answer for this question. Describing the effect that contemplation of perfection, i.e., the Forms, has on the philosopher, Socrates says the following:

“…as he looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think that someone can consort with things he admires without imitating them?” (500c)

So imitation is the natural companion of contemplation; observing the perfection of the Forms inspires an instinct to achieve that perfection, or as near a facsimile as possible, within oneself. And without a body, reason would be uniquely capable of imitating the Forms, since it would not be beholden to the constraints of physical reality, able to shape itself into an image conforming almost perfectly to the guide provided by the Forms. And since the Form of the Good is the ultimate source of perfection in the lesser forms, it will attempt to imitate the Form of the Good most of all.

At last, therefore, we have discovered the desire of “pure” reason, freed from bodily and societal concerns: to know and imitate the Form of the Good. However, we have yet to discover how this desire is expressed when reason is embodied, and how embodiment might change the form that this imitation takes.

b. Reason embodied: the generative desire of reason in the philosopher’s soul
We have so far discovered that when reason is capable of ignoring bodily and social desires, it desires to know and to imitate the Form of the Good. However, reason in the philosopher’s soul still exists in the physical world (the visible world, in Plato’s terms), and as such it exists in practice under the constraints which the physical world entails. It exists in a body, which requires food, water, and the like; and it exists in a human body, which requires association with other humans which at a minimum does not result in the death of the body. Taking up again the stance of the demiurge in the Timaeus considering disembodied reason, the response to the “crisis of incorporation,” as Brennan calls it, is to create other parts of the soul in addition to the rational part which can take care of these functions, namely spirit and appetite. As the creator of spirit and appetite, and because it is capable of having a complete understanding of their concerns while also perceiving concerns beyond them, reason is called upon to rule over them. As stated before, this executive function of reason is related to its primary desire to know and imitate the Good, but it is not the same, and now we can finally appreciate why: in essence, embodiment limits reason’s ability to imitate the Good, and requires that a different and perhaps more approximate imitation occur. Bodies change, and relationships between people change; so the addition of these changeable parts of existence to the previously eternal existence of reason must necessitate alternate means of imitating the perfect and changeless nature of the Good. Just as the philosopher-rulers are compelled to abandon contemplation of the Forms to concern themselves with human affairs, reason in the philosopher’s soul must make a similar sacrifice, abandoning full-time contemplation and imitation of the Forms in order to moderate appetite and spirit.
However, the return to the cave is not instinctual; in fact it is the opposite of instinctual, because it must be compelled. Similarly, reason must be compelled to perform its function as guardian of the soul, lest it attend only to its own concerns and largely ignore the concerns of the other parts of the soul except where they interfere with its own—e.g., reason would mandate that the body eat just enough to keep it alive to support its contemplative activities. It might seem that this is in fact what the ordering of the just soul should look like: after all, at 485d, Socrates says, “Then, when someone’s desires flow towards learning and everything of that sort, he’d be concerned, I suppose, with the pleasures of the soul itself by itself, and he’d abandon those pleasures that come through the body.” But justice in the soul which exists in the body does not entail the complete abandonment of the needs which relate to the body, i.e. the needs of spirit and appetite; it cannot, because such an abandonment constitutes an imbalance and would prevent each part of the soul from doing its own work, thus violating the very definition of justice given in Book IV at 433b: “Then, it turns out that this doing one’s own work—provided that it comes to be in a certain way—is justice.” Furthermore, at 442d, the just man is moderate “because of the friendly and harmonious relations” between the three parts of the soul; if reason denies spirit and appetite as often as possible, how could these relations be harmonious? Additionally, in Book IX, Socrates describes the priorities of reason within the body as follows:

“...[W]ouldn’t someone who maintains that just things are profitable be saying, first, that all our words and deeds should ensure that the human being within this human being [i.e., reason—parenthesis mine] has the most control;
second that he should take care of the many-headed beast [i.e., appetite] as a farmer does his animals, feeding and domesticating the gentle heads and preventing the savage ones from growing; and, third, that he should make the lion’s nature [i.e., spirit] his ally, care for the community of all his parts, and bring them up in such a way that they will be friends with each other and with himself?” (589b)

He says that reason, “the human being within this human being,” should have the most control, but not all of it, and that it is also reason’s task to care for the other two parts of the soul. And indeed, if reason does not care for the other two parts, if it fails in its secondary duty, it cannot be said to have fully accomplished its first of being in control, because ignoring the lesser two parts of the soul would entail risking their rebellion, but in addition it would mean that reason is not curating the soul’s desires, not ensuring that the appetite or the spirited part are directed towards healthy desires instead of unhealthy ones. Even if the latter two parts of the soul find no outlet, except perhaps in dreams, per 572b (“Our dreams make it clear that there is a dangerous, wild, and lawless form of desire in everyone, even in those of us who seem to be entirely moderate or measured), their impulses, when not properly directed, will at a minimum disturb the reasoned part of the soul and distract it from its goals, and will do so more than if their desires were properly directed.

A soul in which reason dominates to the point of nearly or completely ignoring the needs of spirit and appetite, then, cannot be a fully just soul. In other words, though reason is incapable of being immoderate in the same way as spirit or appetite can (in that if it rules in the soul, it is not overstepping, since this is its just
role), reason is still capable of being a tyrannical ruler, a ruler as imagined by
Thrasymachus, who cares only for himself and his own interests without seeing that
he has a duty towards those he rules. Indeed, there is a kind of example—or image, as
Socrates might say—of reason as a tyrant in the text: namely, the philosophers who
are not compelled to rule described in Book VII. When reason is allowed to pursue its
desire for contemplation and imitation of the Good to the exclusion of the desires of
the other parts of the soul, it is happy, but it is not fully just; though its desires are
noble, it is pursuing them at the expense of achieving harmony in the whole soul,
which is the same as saying that it is sacrificing the soul’s overall health in order to
pursue its individual happiness, which by definition is not just. This reasoning is of
course familiar; this is the logic behind Socrates’s answer to Glaucon when the latter
accuses him of doing the philosophers in the ideal city an injustice by forcing them to
rule instead of spending their lives in contemplation (519d). So reason as a tyrant in
the philosopher’s soul is the cause of the uselessness of true philosophers in unjust
cities: it considers itself allowed to ignore appetitive and social concerns in order to
devote itself to contemplation.

But what is the source of the reasoned part of the philosopher’s soul’s belief
that it is permitted to ignore appetite and spirit in this way in the unjust city?
Wouldn’t reason’s understanding of justice prevent it from perpetrating an injustice
by refusing to tend to appetite and spirit? In part, it is due to reason’s determination
that it is impossible to assuage spirit’s desire for harmonious relationships in the
unjust city: as we discovered in Chapter I, reason decides that the goal of bringing
justice to the unjust city is impossible, and that even trying to achieve it would not
only be futile, but would also prevent the philosopher from achieving justice in the future. But this determination is flawed, because it only accounts for the needs of “pure” reason, not “embodied” reason: in other words, this line of reasoning accounts only for reason’s need to imitate the Good, but not for reason’s need to care for the whole soul. Reason’s error in this case is essentially that it believes it is imitating the Good simply by refusing to allow the philosopher to participate in injustice and by contemplating the Forms, but in fact, mere contemplation and making itself an image of the Good does not account for the fact that reason is embodied and that justice—and imitating the Good—in an embodied context requires that the needs of spirit and appetite be satisfied as well and just as much as the needs of reason.

Returning to the idea that reason’s guardianship of the soul and the philosopher’s guardianship of the city must be compelled, I assert that the compelling force is nothing other than justice itself. Many philosophers and scholars have noted that this idea is problematic, because the whole project of the Republic, as stated by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book II, is to prove that the just life is also the happiest, and that the life which is the most just must also be the happiest of all. If the most just life, the life of the philosopher-ruler in the ideal city, requires that one spend a significant portion of it engaged in an activity that does not provide one with maximal happiness, it cannot be that the most just life is the happiest life. However, I think a distinction can be made here between happiness and pleasure. The common understanding of pleasure is that it is simple, that it is temporary, and that it relies on the gratification or over-gratification of needs. But happiness is understood as something more complex, something that endures over time, and that often involves a
sense of purpose or engagement in a long-term goal that is satisfying both in the process of its achievement and in its completion. In his description of philosophers who are allowed to spend their lives in contemplation, Socrates states that they would fail to govern a city “because they’d refuse to act, thinking that they had settled while still alive in the faraway Isles of the Blessed” (519c). In other words, the pleasure that the philosopher experiences in contemplation is so great that unless he is adequately trained, he will refuse to tear himself away from it. But engaging with the pleasure of contemplation this way is similar to the way in which the other soul-types engage with lesser pleasures: though the object of the pleasure of contemplation is more noble, the all-consuming nature of the useless philosopher’s pleasure in contemplation succeeds just as well at turning him away from the full pursuit of justice and the Good through its overpowering nature. In addition, the life of contemplation lacks direction; though Socrates says that the reason that the uneducated fail to govern a city adequately is that “they don’t have a single goal at which all their actions, public and private, inevitably aim” (519c), this is in fact somewhat true of the philosophers devoted exclusively to contemplation as well. Though they do have a goal in the form of knowing and imitating the Good, they are only interested in this goal in their private lives, because they have chosen to be or ended up excluded from public affairs. In effect, this means that they cannot achieve their goal fully; in order to imitate the Good in a complete way while existing as tripartite souls in bodies, they must figure out a way of imitating the Good that accounts for their embodiment. However, by excluding themselves from public affairs, i.e., from full participation in society, they prevent themselves from so doing,
which may be more pleasurable for them, but is nonetheless incomplete. So the life of contemplation is most pleasurable for the philosopher, in that it simply gratifies the need of his reason to engage with the Good and the world of the Forms. But the happiest life for the philosopher is one in which he does not necessarily experience at every moment the greatest amount of pleasure, but rather a life in which he is granted the opportunity to achieve a greater purpose, to work at a goal over time: the goal of making the world in the image of the Good. This distinction between happiness and pleasure preserves the idea that the most just life is also the happiest, as well as the idea that the philosopher derives maximum pleasure (but not happiness as we have defined it) from a life of contemplation.

We have determined so far that reason in the philosopher brings about happiness, i.e. the satisfaction of the whole soul, by caring not only for its own desires but by in addition performing the role of the soul’s guardian by moderating and assuaging the needs of appetite and spirit, and that in the unjust city, reason is capable of becoming a tyrant, focusing almost entirely on its own desires and giving up on its guardian role due to an erroneous belief that it is impossible in such an unjust environment to tend to the needs of the lesser parts fully. To elaborate further on this point, it seems that satisfying a moderate appetite even in the unjust city is eminently possible, so appetite cannot be the source of conflict here. Rather, for the reasons we explored in Chapter I, spirit is the sticking point: it is spirit’s desire for relationships which harmonize with the principles exhibited by the Form of the Good which cannot be satisfied in the unjust city, at least while the philosopher does not act against the unjust regime in some way. It remains only to give an account of how, in
practice, the desire of “pure” reason to contemplate and imitate the Forms is related to “embodied” reason’s need to care for spirit and appetite.

In order to understand the relationship between these desires, a fuller examination of the passage at 490b than we have so far undertaken is necessary. The full passage reads:

“…it is the nature of the real lover of learning to struggle toward what is, not to remain with any of the many things that are believed to be, that, as he moves on, he neither loses nor lessens his erotic love until he grasps the being of each nature itself with the part of his soul that is fitted to grasp it, because of its kinship with it, and that, once getting near what really is and having intercourse with it and having begotten understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives, is nourished, and—at that point, but not before—is released from the pains of giving birth…”

Initially we have focused on the definition of reason as the part of the soul which interacts with the Forms without characterizing the nature of this interaction in detail. In section a., we determined that intercourse with the Forms for disembodied reason results in an instinctive desire to imitate them; but once reason is placed in an embodied context, the nature of that imitation changes, and is no longer instinctive, but requires some form of compulsion and extra effort. This extra effort is necessary because when reason is embodied, an act of translation is necessary which is not necessary for “pure” reason: “pure” reason only has perfect or near-perfect tools at its disposal, whereas “embodied” reason must make use of imperfect ones, which are capable of deviating quite far from their perfect images defined by the Forms.
Therefore, reason is responsible not only for figuring out how to imitate the Forms within itself, but also of distilling the essential characteristics of the Forms which are capable of being applied to mortal flesh and mortal societies.

As an example of what I mean by this, one characteristic which can be assumed to be common to all of the Forms is that they are eternal. The images of perfection which they present do not change; the proof of this is the same as the proof that Socrates gives for the changelessness of the gods at 381b-d, namely that something which is already perfect can only become worse by changing. In the immortal world of the Forms, disembodied reason might be capable of imitating or exhibiting this quality of the Forms; but in the corporeal, visible world, change is endemic. It is not possible to make the body eternal and unchanging, though many have tried throughout history; therefore, “embodied” reason must not only come to the conclusion that immortality is an aspect of the Forms, but it must also figure out the nearest approximation of immortality that can be achieved within the constraint of a mortal, changing body. In fact, Socrates actually does this in Book III, when he determines that reason must ensure that the appetite is expressed in a way that promotes bodily health, because healthy bodies are most resistant to change (404b), and as such, are a closer approximation of the perfection of the Forms than unhealthy bodies.

This, then, is the nature of “embodied” reason’s intercourse with the world of the Forms (“what really is” in the words of the passage at 490b): not only does it desire to observe and know them, but it also desires to imitate them, and this imitation in an embodied context requires translation from the world of the Forms, the
intelligible world, to the visible world, the imperfect world which contains only reflections of the Forms. “Embodied” reason in the soul of the philosopher has a generative desire that is not inherent to “pure” reason, because “pure” reason is able to use perfect tools to bring about its imitation of the Forms, whereas “embodied” reason is constrained. “Embodied” reason is not allowed to exist solely in the realm of the abstract, but instead must create a hybrid “child” with the abstract world which embodies as far as possible the characteristics of the Forms while maintaining an existence in the visible world. This is the process of “begetting” understanding and truth that is referred to in 490b: the act of translating the abstract principles that govern the world of the Forms into the physical world.

This may seem something of a leap; after all, why does begetting understanding and truth require the philosopher to alter the physical world in some way? Is it not enough for reason simply to understand and construct an order in the soul which mimics as closely as possible the principles of order which govern the Forms? In the first place, an ordered, healthy soul by definition produces a healthy body, per 403d, “a good soul by its own virtue makes the body as good as possible.” This happens for the reason discussed above, whereby the healthy soul produces a healthy body because of its natural desire to imitate the Forms, but more simply and in order not to beg the question, the healthy soul produces a healthy body because the healthy soul has reason making sure that the appetite does not spiral out of control.

But more broadly, the description of the ideal life for the philosopher, i.e., the life of the philosopher-ruler, implies that in order to be fully ideal, the intercourse between the philosopher’s reason and the world of the Forms must result in the creation of a
world that more fully mimics the Forms’ perfection. In other words, the fact that the ideal purpose of the philosopher involves this act of translating the world of the Forms into the physical world suggests that a more active role for the philosopher is mandated than that of a contemplative. Furthermore, the physical terms used to describe the process of the philosopher’s reason interacting with the Forms—“grasping,” “intercourse,” “begetting,” and not least “the pains of giving birth”—suggest something more strenuous than simple contemplation of the Forms with no active component.

Indeed, if the process of “begetting” understanding and truth is supposed to be the happiest life for the philosopher, if this is the task in which he takes the most pleasure, then why does Plato repeat the idea that the experience of interacting with the world of the Forms is somehow painful? This language appears not only at 490b, but most notably in the allegory of the cave at the beginning of Book VII, where the fledgling philosopher-prisoner must be bullied into making the ascent (516a), despite the aching of his eyes and his confusion. It is not the Forms themselves that are causing this sense of pain and bewilderment, but rather the fact that translating between the mortal world and the world of the Forms is painful and arduous. We know that being among the Forms is quite possibly the highest attainable human pleasure, at least for the right kind of mind; and the contentment of the prisoners in their cave suggests that inhabiting the visible world exclusively is not necessarily painful, though it might be a worse existence in the sense that it deprives one of truth. So it cannot be that inhabiting either world is the source of the pain the philosopher feels on the ascent; rather, it is passing between the two worlds.
The pain of making the transition between the world of the Forms and the visible world is the reason why life as the philosopher-ruler is not the most pleasurable for the philosopher. Unlike the contemplative life, the life of the philosopher-ruler requires that he not only feel the pain of the difference between the perfection of the Forms and the considerable letdown, to say the least, that the visible world presents, but also that he confront that difference, and attempt to change that state of affairs. From an Epicurean standpoint, this pain that the philosopher-ruler experiences as compared to the contemplative “useless” philosopher would be an argument for Glaucon’s point in Book VII at 519d, that the creators of the city would be doing an injustice to the philosophers of their city by forcing them to live the more painful life of philosopher-rulers instead of the more pleasurable life of the contemplative. But Plato’s definition of happiness is clearly more complex than that; at a minimum, by the argument on the pleasures in Book IX (especially 586b-c), true happiness requires that one be capable of discerning and enjoying “what truly is,” i.e., the world of the Forms. And the philosopher-rulers do have this capability; much of their education is devoted to ensuring that they are able to perceive the world of the Forms, both through making sure that they are primed for it by studying the correct subjects and by preventing those who are incapable of doing so from advancing to a higher educational level.

But the question remains: does the additional onus on the philosopher-rulers, that of shaping the visible world so that it more fully reflects the world of the Forms, constitute an injustice done to them? After all, although the pleasure of contemplating the world of the Forms for the philosopher is unquestionable, nowhere in the text is it
implied that the philosopher enjoys this secondary activity of ruling; indeed, the philosopher is supposed to hate ruling, so as to ensure that there is no risk of civil war tearing the kallipolis apart (520d). In the text overall, the argument for why philosophers should rule seems primarily to be based on necessity: in other words, the philosopher must rule not because he likes it, but because he is the best at it. He agrees to rule because he understands that even if he hates the idea of ruling, the mandate that he should rule is a just one (520e, Glaucon says that there is no risk that the philosophers in the kallipolis will refuse to rule, “for we’ll be giving just orders to just people”). But if the just life is also the happiest, and an order that prevents the philosopher from living the most pleasurable life, at least, then in what way is the order that philosophers should rule just, and how could it possibly guarantee happiness for the philosopher? We have already found the answers to some of these questions in earlier paragraphs, when we investigated the difference between happiness and pleasure; but we must still determine where the justice of this order is contained in order to answer them fully. In the first place, if justice is doing one’s own work, i.e., the work for which one is best suited by reason of the particular constitution of one’s soul, then the mandate that philosophers should rule is just simply because this is the work for which their souls are best suited, and indeed for which only their souls are suited, since they are the only ones capable of learning the craft of true navigation, in the terms of the “ship of state” analogy in Book VI (488b-489a).

Nevertheless, this answer feels incomplete, both because the question of the philosopher’s happiness is thrust to the wayside, even though it is vital to the central
claim Plato is trying to prove—that the most just life is also the happiest—and because the happiness of those ruled is also not being fully considered. To be sure, in Book IX, Socrates says that the subjects of the philosopher-rulers who are not themselves philosophers are benefited because “…it is better for everyone to be ruled by divine reason, preferably within himself and his own, otherwise imposed from without, so that as far as possible all will be alike and friends, governed by the same thing” (590d). But unlike Plato’s analogous accounts of the usefulness of spirit and appetite’s desires within the soul, the actual people whose souls are dominated by spirit or appetite are not portrayed with a similar sense that they have a necessary role to play in the city, though that role might ultimately be less important than the philosopher’s. But if the philosopher’s purpose is in part defined by his need to reckon with and shape the physical world, if he exists not only to contemplate and attempt to understand the Forms but also to translate them into the lesser world where he exists as a body and as a social being, then the relationship between philosopher-ruler and non-philosopher subject in the city becomes symbiotic rather than almost parasitic. In other words, if the philosopher’s happiness is defined not as the purely pleasurable activity of contemplating the Forms, but as the more arduous and painful but also more meaningful activity of improving the world using the Forms as a model, then his subjects are necessary to him and to his justice because they represent his greatest challenge. They are not inert objects who produce merely physical obstacles to the philosopher’s project of reproducing the Forms, but conscious beings who must be convinced through argument to work with the philosopher instead of against him. The city, then, truly becomes a macrocosm of the soul: the give-and-take
between reason’s need to pursue its own desires and its compulsion by justice to tend to the needs of spirit and appetite is writ large in the philosopher’s struggle to rule the city well (i.e., according to the dictates of reason and the Good) while also appropriately tending to the needs of people who are equally capable of aiding his project of remaking the world in the image of the Forms or of destroying it. In essence, then, the philosopher is not being done an injustice in being forced to rule; rather, he is being granted a purpose that forces him to look beyond himself and a chance not to spend his life cursing his embodiment because it brings him away from the Forms, but instead to work within the constraints that his embodiment imposes on him to incorporate as much of their perfection as he can, and thereby transcend those constraints.

c. Reason’s desires in the unjust city

So far we have established that reason has one desire, to interact with and imitate the Forms, which is expressed through shaping the visible world to imitate the Forms more completely when reason is embodied. But the text only has the philosopher engaged in this task in the kallipolis; in the unjust city, according to Plato, justice does not mandate ruling as it does in the just city. The arguments that Plato gives for this idea appear in Books VI and VII, at 489b-c, 496b-e, and 520b-d. The argument at 496b-e focuses on the idea that it is impossible for the philosopher to defend justice in the unjust city, and the arguments at 489b-c and 520b-d make the claim that the philosopher is not obligated to rule in the unjust city. In Chapter I, we
determined that the philosopher could not possibly expect to maintain the justice of 
his soul if he does nothing in the face of his unjust environment in the corrupt city, 
because the unacknowledged desires of spirit would present a continual challenge for 
him as well as a constant drain on his energies. But what about reason’s desires? In 
the unjust city, is reason at all capable of achieving its “pure” desires or its 
“embodied” desires?

If reason’s “embodied” desires require that the philosopher rule in the city, the 
passage at 496b-e would seem to preclude them from being fully attained; the 
philosopher in the unjust city is “…just like a man who has fallen among wild 
animals and is neither willing to join them in doing injustice nor sufficiently strong to 
oppose the general savagery alone” (496d). In the same passage, Socrates states that 
even trying to become involved in public affairs at all, let alone ruling, would result 
in the philosopher’s death, thus preventing him from aiding justice even by simply 
living out its principles in his own private life. We have already determined that such 
a private life would not satisfy spirit’s desires, but could it be enough for reason?
Socrates describes the life of the philosopher in the unjust city as follows:

“…they lead a quiet life and do their own work. Thus, like someone who takes 
refuge under a little wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, the 
philosopher—seeing others filled with lawlessness—is satisfied if he can 
somehow lead his present life free from injustice and impious acts and depart 
from it with good hope, blameless and content.” (496d-e)

By saying that the philosophers in an unjust city “do their own work,” Socrates of 
course does not mean ruling, but rather the work of contemplating and attempting to
understand the Forms. But as we determined in section b. of this chapter, such a life does not fully satisfy either the demands of justice upon “embodied” reason or the desires of “embodied” reason itself. Perhaps the desires of “pure” reason may be satisfied in the unjust city, but as we have established, it is not sufficient for the philosopher to satisfy these desires alone from the perspective of maintaining justice overall or from the perspective even of maintaining justice in his own soul; returning to the image of the farmer from Book IX, the farmer cannot starve his animals and still be called a farmer in the precise sense, per the schematic that Thrasymachus and Socrates develop in Book I for the precise craftsman (340d-341a).

In addition to the argument at 496d-e, which describes why ruling in the unjust city is impossible for the philosopher due to physical obstacles, there are intellectual or spiritual obstacles to his rule outlined in the other two passages I mentioned in the first paragraph of this section, 489b-c and 520b-d. The argument in 489b-c also relates to the idea of the precise craftsman: in explaining why the philosopher wouldn’t make a bid to rule in the unjust city without some form of compulsion, Socrates says, “It isn’t for the ruler, if he’s truly any use, to beg the others to accept his rule” (489c). This argument seems bizarre at first—after all, if the ruler is good at ruling, he should be good at convincing others to follow his rule, so where’s the harm in doing so? Why is it that “begging” the other citizens to accept his rule is a proof that he is not a good ruler? This argument is in part necessary because of the natural aversion that the philosopher has towards ruling—after all, if there is no compulsion, either in the form of physical force or in the form of the moral force of justice, why would the philosopher beg to be allowed to participate in an activity he despises? But
leaving this aside for now, the argument also has to do with the precise craftsman schematic, because the philosopher begging to be made ruler would constitute a reversal of the very roles he is trying to impose. In other words, the philosopher cannot be a ruler insofar as he has to force others by persuasion or other means to follow him. However, this argument fails to take account of the fact that the only reason his fellow-citizens fail to beg the philosopher to rule is that without his guidance, they have no way of seeing the truth of the matter. Without being properly educated, and having only a weak version of reason in their own souls, the non-philosophical majority has no way of understanding that the philosopher’s rule is necessary to their own happiness. Despite the fact that they cannot discover this independently, and that in the unjust city, they would not have been educated to believe it, however, the majority can be convinced, as the passage at 499d-500a in Book VI shows. After establishing that the kallipolis is possible as well as desirable, Adeimantus raises the question of how to convince the majority that the kallipolis is both possible and the most desirable constitution for a city. Socrates gives the following response:

“You should not make such wholesale charges against the majority, for they’ll no doubt come to a different opinion if instead of indulging your love of victory at their expense, you soothe them and try to remove their slanderous prejudice against the love of learning, by pointing out what you mean by a philosopher and by defining the philosophic nature and way of life, as we did just now, so that they’ll realize that you don’t mean the same people as they do. And if they once see it your way, even you will say that they’ll have a different opinion from the
one you just attributed to them and will answer differently. Or do you think that anyone who is gentle and without malice is harsh with someone who is neither irritable nor malicious? I’ll anticipate your answer and say that a few people may have such a harsh character, but not the majority.” (499e-500a)

In other words, even those who are not philosophical may still be convinced of the usefulness and appropriateness of a philosopher’s rule in the city. So if the philosopher convinces the majority with the same arguments that Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Socrates have elaborated in the Republic, or even better ones, most of them will accept his rule, and perhaps even welcome it, and these will overwhelm the few harsh characters who would not. And explaining the truth to the majority could hardly be characterized as begging, since the philosopher is actually doing them a service by helping them to understand how to live a happy life and by helping them live it. So the idea that the philosopher is not allowed even to attempt to bring justice to the city through his arguments falls apart under scrutiny.

Returning now to the idea that justice does not compel the philosopher to rule in the unjust city (and of course that none of the other citizens would compel him to do so by force, because the citizens believe that they themselves should rule), Socrates gives the reasoning for this line of argument at 520b, where he states:

“‘When people like you [philosophers] come to be in other cities, they’re justified in not sharing in their city’s labors, for they’ve grown there spontaneously, against the will of the constitution. And what grows of its own accord and owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn’t keen to pay anyone for that upbringing.’”
In essence, there is no compulsion by justice for the philosopher to rule in the unjust city because the unjust city had no part in his creation, and indeed, was opposed to it by its very nature. However, this idea is flawed because it almost paints justice as an instrumental good, something valuable not for itself but for its results, because if justice is worth pursuing for itself, then these concerns about whether or not the philosophers “owe” their unjust city of birth their labors should not even come into the argument; rather, the philosophers, by reason of their very nature and their love of justice and all good things, would pursue justice irrespective of whether they owe a debt or not. In other words, this argument falls prey to the weakness of the great majority of arguments for justice that Adeimantus identifies in Book II (366e-367c).

So we have determined that of the three arguments given for why the philosopher cannot rule in the unjust city, the argument that it is not physically possible for the philosopher to come to the aid of justice is the only one that holds up. However, the life he is forced to lead as a result will not allow him to maintain the justice in his soul. If the philosopher is not capable of caring for spirit and appetite in his own soul by ruling, and if he is not capable of doing so by avoiding ruling, what choices remain to him? Is the soul of the philosopher simply doomed to devolve in the unjust city?

IV. The active life in the unjust city

We have determined from the text that ruling in the unjust city is impossible for the philosopher, and that he cannot fail to rule in the unjust city and maintain the justice in his own soul. But is there some intermediate role that the philosopher could
play in the unjust city that would satisfy the desires of spirit and “embodied” reason, but stops short of the danger that attempting to take full political control of the unjust city would place him in? What kind of life in an unjust city would satisfy the demands that being an embodied, social creature places on the philosopher’s reason?

This last chapter will be devoted to an attempt to answer this question, and as such, will require greater departures from the text than the previous two chapters. In Joseph Beatty’s essay “Plato’s Happy Philosopher and Politics,” he writes,

“My argument runs counter not only to many passages in the Republic but also to most commentaries, which claim that philosophy and politics make at best a marriage of convenience and at worst ‘a shotgun wedding.’ If I am correct that the relation of philosophy and ruling in the Republic must be reconsidered in light of the argument that ‘justice pays,’ then well-known epistemological and political doctrines must also be reconsidered. At important places in what follows, then, my account will be ‘reconstruction’ rather than faithful exegesis.” (Beatty, 547)

For this chapter, I will echo Beatty’s appeal to his readers and to the Muses. My aim here is not to try to discover what Plato meant, as it was in Chapters I and II, but to try to construct an image of the philosopher’s life in the unjust city that I believe better reflects his goal as stated at the beginning of the Republic: to attempt to prove that the most just life is also the happiest.

To make our task easier, and perhaps more interesting, I will focus on what happens to the philosopher in the completely unjust city. If there is a way for the philosopher to live a politically active life in the completely unjust city, then surely he should be able to manage in a city that is less than completely unjust.
a. What are the obstacles the philosopher faces in the completely unjust city?

The existence of the philosopher in the unjust city threatens its injustice; similarly, the injustice of the city threatens the justice in the philosopher’s soul. We have already examined the theoretical reasons why this is so; it remains, however, to examine which practical obstacles stand in the way of the philosopher’s attempts to bring justice and the Forms into the world in the unjust city, so that we might determine what measures he could take in order to circumvent them.

In section c. of the last chapter, we determined that the philosopher is capable of convincing the majority by argument, per the passage at 499e-500a. Is this possible in the completely unjust city? Well, the completely unjust city still manages to contain characters that are not completely unjust; at a minimum, the philosopher we are considering, who has not yet been corrupted by the city’s injustice, but in addition, the text of Book IX suggests that every citizen of the tyrannical city need not be a tyrannical person:

“…when such people [tyrannical souls ruled by the appetite] become numerous and conscious of their numbers, it is they—aided by the foolishness of the people—who create a tyrant [who rules the city]… if [the city] resists him, then, just as he once chastised his mother and father, he’ll now chastise his fatherland, if he can, by bringing in new friends and making his fatherland and his dear old motherland (as the Cretans call it) their slaves and keeping them that way…” (575d)
However, even if every person in the completely unjust, tyrannical city is not a tyrannical soul, the city will still have a higher than average proportion of “harsh characters” who will be unwilling to listen to the philosopher’s entreaties. In addition, Socrates mentions that in order to create a tyrannical city, the tyrannical souls within the city are not only more numerous than usual but are also “conscious of their numbers,” which implies that the tyrannical faction within the city will be organized. As such, if the philosopher tries to urge the city towards justice, they will soon recognize him for the threat that he is, and will be able to coordinate in order to neutralize him.

But, given the very definition of injustice developed in Book IV, as well as the gang of thieves example that Socrates brings up in Book I at 351d-e, could the tyrannical faction of the tyrannical city truly be organized enough to represent a threat to the philosopher? The level of injustice in their souls, according to Socrates, should make them incapable of working together without undermining one another. However, they need not be completely organized or efficient in order to kill or otherwise prevent the philosopher from speaking on behalf of justice. In the first place, it would only be necessary for one of them to act on the urge to kill the philosopher; since the city lacks justice, there would likely be few repercussions, or even none. At most, the tyrannical soul who killed the philosopher might have to suffer the consequences, but given the general reputation that philosophy has due to the majority’s inability to understand what it truly is and what a true philosopher is, as well as the fact that the environment of injustice in the city has corrupted the souls of the majority just as it has corrupted the souls of the tyrants, it seems likely that even
the outright murder of the philosopher could occur without much protest. And it’s hardly even necessary that a member of the tyrannical faction of the city kill the philosopher; it is quite likely that the majority, which has been converted to a mob under their harsh influence, would react negatively and even violently to the philosopher’s exhortations on the subject of justice.

So the philosopher faces the threat of losing his life, and therefore becoming unable to come to the aid of justice, if he tries to become a traditional political leader in the completely unjust city. But if he were somehow able to circumvent the efforts of the tyrannical faction in the completely unjust city and attain some measure of political power, is the justice of his soul threatened by such a position? In the first place, it seems that the methods the philosopher would need to use to attain power would of necessity force him to risk his soul. The only weapon he has at his disposal, the only weapon which he could potentially use to come to the aid of justice without using injustice, is the idea of the useful fiction elaborated by Socrates in Book I. In other words, the philosopher might be capable of using deception to infiltrate the tyrannical faction without risking his soul. However, once this infiltration is accomplished and the philosopher is finally rewarded with some kind of political position, it would become impossible to sustain the deception, because the philosopher would be required by justice to enact policies that would promote justice in the city. Sensing the threat that such policies would represent to them and their interests, the tyrannical faction could quickly ensure the philosopher’s removal from power; and given the viciousness of their natures, they would hardly be able to resist punishing him in some way as well.
Even accomplishing this infiltration, however, would also put the philosopher’s soul at risk, because it exposes him to the same forces that corrupted the tyrannical faction in the first place. If he comes to politics as an adult after somehow receiving the correct upbringing or discovering philosophy for himself and living according to its dicta, he is at least partially shielded from the corruptive forces that have destroyed the souls of the tyrannical faction, who would have been his compatriots if they had also had a proper upbringing, as we know from Book VI (491e-493a). But the same passage points out that a noble character can only be saved from the “education” of the mob via divine dispensation; so even the soul of the philosopher who has been properly trained and waits until he reaches maturity to enter politics may still be at risk of corruption. As such, any good that he may do while in office is always at risk of being negated if he becomes corrupted, since in being corrupted, he would necessarily reverse or undermine any of his policies that resulted in the creation or promotion of justice.

So the goal of attaining political rule in the completely unjust city presents far too many risks to the philosopher; even if he is willing to risk the state of his soul in view of the potential reward in the form of the just policies he would enact while he remains uncorrupted, he would also risk furthering injustice in the city when he inevitably becomes corrupted, resulting in a net gain in the city’s injustice. But if outright political rule is not an attainable goal for the philosopher, are there nonetheless suitable substitutes that would allow him to work actively for the cause of justice in the city, thereby protecting his own soul?
b. A third way: the philosopher’s salvation in the unjust city

Although we have determined that outright political rule in the completely unjust city is undesirable, if not impossible, for the philosopher, I propose that there are positions that are similar enough to ruling or that would allow the philosopher to increase the city’s justice while keeping him safe, body and soul. There are two possible positions that I believe could satisfy the needs of the philosopher’s whole soul, and could potentially even work to save some of the citizens from the vices of the completely unjust city, if not necessarily the whole community.

The first such position is that of an informal community leader: someone with no formal political position, but who has influence over a small social group of citizens in the unjust city. To clarify what I mean, this position would be somewhat similar to that of a “community elder” or even a spiritual leader, someone generally regarded as wise and to whom the younger members of the community feel comfortable going to for advice. If the philosopher in this “community leader” position were able to keep his sphere of influence small, he could encourage the members of his community to live justly without alerting the city’s tyrannical faction. Not only could he convince the adults in the community to live more in accordance with the divine principles he gleans from his visions of the world of the Forms, but he could also have some influence over the education of the next generation, ensuring that they might be more just than their parents. However, this position is not fully free from the risks the philosopher would encounter if he were to seek political influence openly; after all, many important political movements throughout history have been
started by spiritual leaders of small communities, and gone on to change the world—Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. come to mind, of course, but even Socrates himself could be counted among their number, given the influence that Plato’s *Apology* and other writings starring his mentor have continued to have thousands of years after their writing. So if even one of the members of the tyrannical faction became aware of the specific influence that the philosopher has amongst a particular group of citizens in the completely unjust city, the philosopher risks death.

However, contrary to Plato’s reasoning in the text, this kind of death might not be a useless one; after all, if the tyrannical faction killed off the philosopher-community leader, they would simply create a martyr, since there’s nothing like dying for a cause that will get people to consider that cause more seriously. If the philosopher were able to build up influence even within the small community of followers during his lifetime, then killing him would hardly result in killing the cause of justice in the completely unjust city; on the contrary, killing the philosopher might just serve as a catalyst that would cause the citizens of the tyrannical city to revolt.

With the philosopher dead and unable to guide them directly, the prognosis of their cause of creating a society that is more in accordance with what he taught them while still alive might seem grim; but if they were convinced enough of the value of his beliefs to revolt, and if they used his tenets to reorganize their society, there is a decent chance that they would be able to come up with a city that is more just than the one they lived in previously, and that they would be able to recognize another true philosopher if he already is among their number or if he happens to be born among them.
Thus, having such an informal influence over a small group of citizens in the unjust city might be enough to change the world; and even if it’s not, the philosopher will still be able to save the souls of a few, himself among them. He may not reach his full potential in this role, but the desire of his spirit to be a member of a community will be satisfied, as well as the desire of “embodied” reason to care for the lesser parts of the soul and to bring the perfection of the Forms into the visible world.

In addition to the role of community leader, an even lower-risk position that the philosopher could have which would preserve the justice in his own soul and potentially increase the justice in the souls of the other citizens is that of an educator. As a humble teacher, the philosopher might be able to avoid the scrutiny as well as the temptations he would be subject to as a politician, but would nonetheless be capable of instilling true virtue and justice in the souls of the younger generation as much as possible. There are a few risks that he would face as a teacher that are not presented by the “community leader” role, however. In the first place, a “community leader” is capable of building up the respect of his community by doing favors for people and gaining their trust in private life through his actions before introducing them to his ideas. A teacher is capable of performing similar tasks, but participating in the private lives of members of the community is not inherent to the role of teacher in the same way that it is to the role of the “community leader,” whose main task is providing for the community as a whole. And, while the teacher might automatically have a level of influence over the children he educates by virtue of their youth and malleability, he risks losing the trust of the parents, who have already been corrupted by the environment of the unjust city, before he can do any good. In other words, if
the children happen to repeat something that the parents disapprove of in private conversation, they might remove the philosopher-teacher from his position, preventing him from inculcating their children with the correct values. So, just as in the “community leader” role, the philosopher-teacher must be careful to gain the parents’ trust before he fully educates their children in virtue. But if he is able to accomplish this, and, crucially, to retain the trust of the children as they grow into adults, he can ensure that the new generation are at least more just than their parents.

The justice of these new citizens’ souls cannot fail to improve the political situation in the city at least somewhat; even if they cannot create the kallipolis, the philosopher-teacher’s influence could at least prevent them from participating in injustices orchestrated by the tyrannical faction. And, just as the tyrannical faction became numerous and aware of their numbers, the more-just citizens of the unjust city might be induced to band together to protect their interests. They might not be fully successful; they might still be prey to the overall injustice of their environment; but the greater level of justice in their souls would allow them to work together more efficiently than the tyrannical faction, because they are not fully controlled by their own desires, capable of ignoring their appetites in favor of working toward a common goal. Even if they are not perfectly able to do this, they are certainly more capable than the fiercely unjust souls of the tyrants.

Thus, even by becoming active in a small way, amongst a small group of people, the philosopher is capable of exerting a positive influence and caring for the desires of spirit and of “embodied” reason through creating a community of souls for himself and improving their lives by encouraging them to live according to the
principles of the Forms. As a teacher, he would fly even more under the tyrannical faction’s radar, but even if they discovered him and decided that he was a threat, he would still have had enough time to influence the members of his new community within the unjust city, and they would still run the risk that killing him off would only increase his influence.

So the philosopher is not completely doomed, even in the completely unjust city. He might not be capable of saving the community as a whole, but he can save part of it; and in so doing, he will also save himself, preventing his spirit from becoming either too enraged to control or too atrophied to do any good, and allowing reason to perform its task of imitating the Forms as well as contemplating them. By creating smaller sub-communities within the unjust city where justice can avoid being completely snuffed out, he also creates the potential, at the very least, for justice to grow within the city, and perhaps finally to conquer injustice.

V. Conclusion

In the epilogue to his collection of essays Socratic Studies, Gregory Vlastos, a premier scholar on Socrates, argues that Socrates was not, as Plato calls him in the Phaedo, the most just man of his time, on the basis that Socrates abdicated his responsibility to his city by failing to protest when Athens was ready to commit not simply injustices but true atrocities. Vlastos writes,
“In the obituary for Gunnar Myrdal in the New York Times we read that this man who joined with rare effectiveness social intelligence to social passion kept close to his desk this quotation from Lincoln:

To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men.

Socrates has been and always will be my philosophical hero. But great and good as he certainly was, he would have been a greater and better man, wiser and more just, if that truth had enlightened his moral vision.” (Vlastos, 133)

I cannot help but agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment with regard to the philosopher as Plato portrays him in the Republic. In my own portrait of the philosopher in the unjust city, I have attempted to rescue him from this charge, to find a life for him that would not allow him either to live or die in vain and without promoting the cause of justice, even in the most unjust of cities.

But if my arguments fail to convince my readers that the philosopher is required to fight for justice by his very nature, if not by some other compulsion, divine or human, I am still convinced that we are bound by a consideration that Plato did not see to fight for a more just and more perfect world, even when the odds are stacked against us, guided by our own imperfect lights: our common humanity. For whatever reason, we have come to be on this earth with a need to live with ourselves and with each other; for whatever reason, we have at our disposal the instruments of thought and argument in order to discover how best to accomplish this. Not to use our capacity to reason in order to build a better world for ourselves, which by definition includes building a better world for others, is not just laziness but also moral depravity. It is not required that we succeed in our efforts; what is necessary is both
simpler and more arduous than that, which is that we continue to try, to make an effort to become more just and to address our failings without fear.

In addition to the idea that the philosopher is only capable of creating justice in the world under ideal conditions, I object to Plato’s assertion that only the philosopher is capable of creating justice. Even if we accept his psychological portraits of the different soul-types and his model of the tripartite soul, it is fully possible for the “lesser” soul-types to become just if properly guided; and because this is so, they are almost if not equally as capable of fighting for justice. This criticism hits on a more fundamental criticism of Plato’s argument in the Republic: he assumes that not everyone is capable of coming up with a true conception of justice. I differ strongly with Plato on this point: I believe that we are all capable, even the stupidest and most brutish among us, of coming to a common understanding of justice and of creating a world that reflects it. It is only required that we care enough to think about it and to argue about it, and that we care enough about each other to enact it.

Despite the flaw in Plato’s moral vision which prevented him from seeing that our common humanity presents a moral imperative to care for one another and to fight for justice, the example that he set with the Republic is a powerful one, even across thousands of years of distance. By attempting to correct what I see as a grave error on Plato’s part, I hope to honor his legacy and to prove the continued relevance of his thought not just to modern philosophy, but to our everyday lives.
Bibliography

The works directly cited in the thesis are as follows:


The following works were not cited directly in the thesis, but were instrumental to informing my arguments and thinking on these issues:


