A GUIDE TO PLATO’S \textit{REPUBLIC}

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Introduction

With Plato we are back at the beginning. Rarely, perhaps never, has an area of systematic inquiry felt the stamp of its founder so indelibly. Rarely, perhaps never, has a discipline had a leader of such gifts. For Plato presented us with a large and finished body of work which by reason of its intellectual and literary quality and its treatment of the subject not only created philosophy, but did so with such power as largely to determine the terms of reference and standards it retains to this day.

Of course there were philosophers before him: brilliant, insightful men of speculative, inquiring mind who raised profound questions about the concepts of space, time and change, about perception, knowledge, truth and reality, and about human nature, morals and politics. But for the most part they were not systematic thinkers, and in any case what little of their work has survived is only in fragments. It seems likely, however, that had their work survived intact we would still marvel at the immense qualitative difference between their insights and Plato’s achievement. Thus in reading Plato, and particularly when reading his dialogue, Republic, we find ourselves not only back at the beginning of philosophy but find ourselves also, strangely, right in the center of many of its current problems and interests.

Republic is Plato’s most ambitious in many ways his most complete work and the most influential. Yet it is not the most puzzling or difficult in what might be called a “technical” sense. There are, to be sure, difficult sections in Republic, particularly Books VI and VII, yet on the whole it is an unusually accessible philosophic work. Indeed, and this may be taken as a mild warning, it will often
seem too accessible, only too obvious and too easily grasped. In this way, the old problem expressed by the metaphor of “the forest and the trees” hits us forcefully in Republic. For, on the one hand, the scope of Republic is enormous. A remarkable range of major philosophic ideas and problems is raised and dealt with, and each of these can be understood and assessed more or less independently. Yet, on the other hand, they are not independently presented. They have somehow been incorporated into a smooth-flowing structure of great sweep and depth. So effortlessly does it flow, in fact, as to make all appear coherent and logical, as though the deepest nature of things themselves alone dictated these relationships, this sequence and understanding. And that, of course, is Plato’s intention and presumably his own view of it.

In my teaching experience, students quite understandably attend to the trees. They tend to take the individual parts or ideas of Republic as though they stood independently and, as a consequence, they also tend to judge the work in a rather hasty, one-by-one, eclectic manner. Thus in losing sight of its coherent structure they miss much or anyway some of its full significance. I tend to err in the other direction: to concentrate on the forest, missing some of the detail, the strengths and weaknesses of its individual ideas or parts. In this guide special effort will be made to guard against both weaknesses. The suggested writing topics will in particular, I think, encourage attention to detail and text and at the same time provide help in seeing the coherent structure of the work as a whole.

In Republic, as in most Platonic dialogues, Socrates is the major figure and Plato’s spokesman. And perhaps this is a good point at which to say something about that curious man, Socrates, and his relationship to Plato, for the Socrates of the dialogue is clearly related to the historic Socrates who lived in Athens from
469-399 B.C., the man who was Plato’s teacher. Indeed, most of our knowledge of the man is based on Plato’s writings.

Socrates was a stonemason but apparently never worked much at his craft, preferring to spend most of his time in the marketplace in philosophic discussion with whomever he could find. He gained a reputation for wisdom in Athens and beyond, and deservedly so since his questions seem to have probed deeply into fundamental problems of morals and knowledge. It appears his line of questioning was skeptical for he claimed not to possess knowledge himself. However his skepticism was special since he did not deny the possibility of human knowledge and a good life based on it; rather he was skeptical that most men he met possessed knowledge or lived good lives, (though they, of course, tenaciously believed otherwise). His skepticism was special in another sense. He denied having knowledge but was utterly confident we should seek it. “The unexamined life is not worth living for man”. That is perhaps the most famous of all the statements attributed to Socrates. It expresses the spirit of his devotion to the life of inquiry, the life he exhorted all to follow. Many of the early Platonic dialogues re-create what might have been some of the discussions Socrates carried on with his fellow Athenians, and record the revelations together with the irritation and embarrassment they produced.

In one obvious sense Socrates was “crank”, insistently pursuing the same topics over and over again with unlimited energy. (What is friendship? What is courage? What is piety? What is virtue, and can it be taught? How does virtue stand to knowledge; is it part of, the same with, or unrelated to knowing? What is the good life? Do you know or merely believe you are living it?) No doubt his crankiness often proved to be a source of misunderstanding, ill feeling and trouble, sometimes even for his friends. But he must have been a crank with a difference
because his analytical and argumentative abilities appear to have been truly formidable, and to be coupled with a moral character which was sublime in its integrity.

He was indicted by Athens on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. Such were serious charges in those days for their meaning would at least border on sedition or treason, or at any rate denote a kind of subversion of the city. But, as almost always in such cases then and now, the actual charges against him were utterly vague and unspecific, and had their origin in an atmosphere so loaded with political ambition, class strife, unrest, intrigue and confusion, as to reduce them in the end to something very much like “un-Athenian activities”. And how does one defend against charges of that sort? So far as we can determine, Socrates’ defense was entirely in character: argued and articulate, defiant if not downright provocative, clever but honest, disturbing, illuminating and brave. Given the atmosphere and the long standing suspicion, even dislike, in which he was widely held, it is surprising (as he notes) that the vote to convict was not even heavier that it was. He was sentenced to die by drinking poison (we have come to call it “hemlock”, but it has nothing to do with the tree of that name), which in due course he did.

Given these bare, historic facts, and some others drawn from independent sources, we know that Socrates is not a mere figment of Plato’s mind. However, as Bertrand Russell once noted, Plato’s mind was more than sufficiently powerful and dramatic to have invented him. But if Plato didn’t invent Socrates, he was inspired by him. Plato’s inspiration has proven to be ours also, for it is the Platonic Socrates who has gripped so many men and women in the more than 2,300 years since his death. It is the Socrates of the dialogues much more than the historic one who has come to be the legendary hero, and you would likely be fascinated with
the account of his trial and death in the dialogues Apology, Crito, and the first and last few pages of Phaedo. In those dialogues particularly, but also in others including Republic, is presented the immense moral and intellectual figure who could out-think, out-drink, probably out-love and surely out-argue any man of his time. There you will meet Socrates, “the gadfly of Athens”, the martyr to truth, free thought and discussion, the man who refused to escape the sentence of death though he could have escaped, choosing to die rather than to sacrifice principle, who met death cheerfully and calmly, up to the very last few minutes discussing with his friends the nature and limits of human knowledge, whether the human soul is immortal, and how a man ought to live and how he ought to face death, even a death unjustly imposed.

There are many translations of Republic available, new and used. I recommend an older one by Paul Shorey, still in print (February, 2012). An excellent translation, now out of print, but often found, is by Francis Cornford, or another, Great Dialogues of Plato by W. D. Rowse. High on literary merit but less reliable philosophically, is the now very old translation by Benjamin Jowett. Whatever edition you use should have (in margin or top of page) the numbers and letters (e.g. 404e-406g) which are standard references to the Greek text and allow clear designation of precise sections without reference to pages.

Traditionally, Republic is divided into ten books. It appears, however, that this division was introduced sometime after it was written, and not by Plato. The division into books sometimes represents a natural division of topic or treatment, but not always. Rowse follows the ten-book division; Cornford does not, dividing the work instead into forty chapters of his own invention, but he does make clear how his chapters are related to the traditional books. I shall refer to books, but also
to specific passages or sequences of passages using the standard reference described earlier (e.g. 404c).

One final comment: Republic is concerned with justice, but the English word is not adequate to the Greek term which it translates. But we don’t seem to have an English word that will do better. With this warning, relax and allow the context to bring out the rich and complex meaning of the concept which is Socrates’ quarry.
The first book of Republic divides clearly into two parts. The early part is taken up with an easy conversation among old friends. The occasion is a party following a religious celebration. The tone is musing yet confident and civil. Important matters lurk under the surface, the power of the passions, old age and death, honesty, but their seriousness is kept at a distance by the casual tone, as is often the case with party talk.

The conversation settles on the nature of justice, and at this stage it is talked about on an ordinary, day-to-day, commonsense level. That level is quickly shown to be inadequate. Yet these modest, civil beginnings provide both the theme and the goal of the dialogue throughout. For the object is to discover the nature of that which is the most deeply appropriate in human relations, private and public. That is what justice is, that which would make life good for young and old, individually and socially. And are we to believe that something like the quality of harmonious, relaxed and confident civility which marks these early passages will also be characteristic of justice and of the just man, when their true nature is revealed?

With the entrance into the conversation of a man called “Thrasymachus” at 336-b, the second part of Book I begins. Thrasymachus is one of the most challenging figures in moral literature. He roars into the friendly conversation “like a beast”, quickly showing himself to be hard-boiled, rude, shrewd, no nonsense character. Life for him is a contest with others for power and advantage. Worldly success is to be won, since it constitutes the true measure of human power and achievement. He dismisses the earlier talk about justice, as “repaying debts”, “giving each man his due”, of treating men with respect and right, as merely so much sentimental drivel.
The contrast with the earlier tone could hardly be more stark, for Thrasymachus both in manner and idea defiantly challenges accepted moral and political standards. He claims that success, getting what one wants, is the true goal and guide, not any sweet regard for justice. He comes close to saying that “might makes right”, and that masked behind all legal and moral restraints will be found naked self-interest (whether of an individual or of a class) backed by a clever use of power, nothing more. Thrasymachus adds ironic insult to injury by arguing that having regard for conventional moral standards is simply stupid since the unjust reap worldly benefit, pleasure and happiness, while the just are systematically exploited and oppressed. In his view the just turn out to be weak and miserable losers, and with that claim the already difficult question of the nature of justice is made even more complicated. We must now not only discover what justice is, but must also answer the question “why be just?” What benefits, if any, does being just confer on an individual? Will a man be happy, or happier, if he is just?

“Who invited him? A man like that can break up a good party”.

Yet despite his rudeness and truculence, and the shocking nature of his ideas, Thrasymachus is a breath of bracing air. He takes us back to the simplest things, to fundamentals. We can no longer be merely polite, give the expected answers and take things for granted. He has dared to say, even to advocate, what we have all thought from time to time but rarely openly express or act on. Is honesty the best policy, after all? Should one not go for power and success? What are the real grounds of morality anyway, and what is the justification for all these restraints on behavior? Who is not aware that justice is usually costly to the doer, or that the unjust so often profit from their injustice? Who does not feel the natural temptation to indulge and assert oneself fully, without regard for the “artificial” restraints we everywhere feel confined by? Are those restraints mere conventions
observed by the stupid, unambitious and tame, but ignored by the smart, aggressive and audacious? And why not? We only live once. Why should not pleasure and worldly success be our guide?

Before reading further in Republic pause and dare to take those questions seriously. How would you answer them? What would you reply to Thrasymachus, or would you be tempted to agree with him? If you don’t pause here the odds are you’ll want to pause for the same purpose by the end of Book I anyway, because you’re going to find, as others have found, that Socrates’ handling of Thrasymachus is irritatingly unsatisfactory. In fact, you’ll probably find yourself a bit on Thrasymachus’ side when you read the account of the quarrel into which Socrates plunges. For Socrates, the great arguer and moral hero, does quarrel with Thrasymachus. He finally gains a verbal victory, to be sure, since Thrasymachus is tricked and bulldozed to retreat, retract and qualify, and finally into pouting, grudging silence. Socrates shows himself cleverer than Thrasymachus, but does he do more than that? Has he really met the ideas of Thrasymachus head-on, and shown them invalid or inadequate?

Having completed your reading of Book I, stop to write a short paper, perhaps entitled something like “What Socrates Should Have Said to Thrasymachus”, or “Thrasymachus Has Not Been (Cannot Be?) Refuted by Socrates….The Logic of Their Quarrel”. To do that short essay (say 700 words or so) you will have to get Thrasymachus’ position clear, and then trace carefully both the strengths and weaknesses of the points and distinctions which Socrates brings up one after another against him. You will find writing the essay challenging. You may also discover that Thrasymachus’ position is more durable, on the one hand, and Socrates’ points more subtle, on the other, than you at first recognized. After you have read the whole of the dialogue you will probably want
to return to Book I to re-consider the exchange between Thrasymachus and Socrates, for there is much that remains puzzling about it. Why is Thrasymachus presented in the light he is? Why does Socrates not come off looking better than he does? Does Plato present this exchange in the terms he does mainly for dramatic effect or does it convey other significance?
From the opening words of Book II it is clear that Thrasymachus has permanently broken off the earlier casual discussion of justice. Both his manner and his ideas have revealed something raw yet significant. The cat is now out of the bag. Two other guests at the party, Glaucon and Adeimantus, quickly express their opinion that Socrates’ verbal victory over Thrasymachus did not get the cat back in. They remain unconvinced that Socrates has refuted the argument of the immoralist head-on. They certainly don’t want to believe the moral and political world is as Thrasymachus has described, yet they are not just sure it isn’t.

Glaucon and Adeimantus then go on to describe what they think is the view of justice held by most people, average men and women “in the street”. What ordinary people really think turns out to be in some ways an extended and deepened, though at the same time a less audacious and grand version of what Thrasymachus had been claiming all along: justice has no genuine or intrinsic value (in itself) for the doer, no matter what benefits it accords to others. Therefore, it is at best practiced grudgingly. Most men would gladly dispense with the personal burdens that being just entails did they not fear worse things. Men would be unjust had they the power to do the immoral things they really desire without fear of retaliation or punishment.

To bring the point home, Glaucon recalls the folk fable of the innocent shepherd, Gyges, who on finding a ring which allows him to become invisible when he chooses drops all pretence of goodness and embarks on a gross and successful career of wrong-doing. Gyges’ new career reveals his true character: lustful, ambitious, greedy, and indifferent to the rights and welfare of others. It
reveals, moreover, that his earlier apparent respect for justice was superficial, hypocritical, and followed only for lack of power to do otherwise successfully.

The reader should pay particular attention to the myths, allegories and other illustrative stories Plato uses from time to time. They are chosen with care and skillfully used. They usually make a substantial point in a way more persuasive and memorable than almost any amount of straightforward argument would have done. There are a number of them in Republic and they play an important role in its meaning.

Well now, how much of Gyges, or on its grander scale, how much of Thrasymachus is there in each of us? What would we do with the Ring of Gyges, or with any other power which allowed us to do what we wanted with little fear of discovery? Do we believe justice is an intrinsically valuable thing, to be prized and practiced for the inward benefit it confers on the soul or character of the just person (quite independently of whatever value it has for those whom we treat justly, and independent, also, of whatever worldly benefits it incidentally brings the doer)?

Glaucon and Andeimantus thus challenge Socrates, and through Socrates we, too, are challenged to show that justice is of intrinsic value, of benefit for the doer, and that the one who chooses justice, even at worldly cost to oneself, is better off somehow, is even happier in some sense, than if he did not. Now this is one of those points at which the reader must not keep Republic at arm’s length if he is to understand fully what Plato, through Socrates, will be arguing in all that follows. You will recall that Socrates had immediately agreed with Thrasymachus (at 339-b) that practicing justice is of advantage, it serves an interest. By that he means that it is of advantage or serves the interest of the doer of justice, as well as those,
of course, who are its recipients. Thrasymachus claimed, on the contrary, that justice was of advantage only to recipients but harmed the doer, and that’s why it’s foolish to be just. Well, would it be foolish to be just if one could get away with injustice? Does the advantage, profit or utility of it go entirely to the recipient, altruistically, and if so, why should one be altruistic? Socrates is not going to argue altruism. No one in the party has framed the question in those terms at all. Socrates has been challenged to reveal the nature of justice itself, meaning at least that he is to show that there is intrinsic benefit conferred by justice on the just person. That quest occupies Republic from this point in Book II (we are now 367-d) pretty much to the end of the dialogue, or at least to the end of Book IX. But if we don’t appreciate the full dimensions of the challenge, the background against which Socrates frames his reply, it will likely all seem rather a remote and arbitrary exercise and also confusing.
From about 367-e to 427-b (that is, from roughly midway in Book II to about midpoint in Book IV) there is a surprising shift not only in the topic but also in the nature of the discussion. The dramatic quality of the dialogue, the lively conversational tone with its play of personality is left behind as everyone seems to forget there’s a party going on. To be sure, flashes of it reappear from time to time, but for the most part Socrates thoroughly dominates as he sets forth a sustained and complex account of “….the real nature of justice and injustice, and the truth about their respective advantages”. Glaucon and Adeimantus figure in the conversation but pretty much become straight men. They comment, assent and ask for clarification, but contribute little else. Thus though the conversational form is maintained its life-like vitality largely disappears.

But there is also a change in direction in the discussion, since in order to carry the inquiry further Socrates suggests they follow a special plan. The suggestion is introduced casually and is justified in terms seemingly innocuous. It is that since justice takes at least two forms, individual and social, and since the latter is larger than the former, it will be easier to discern if they imagine a just state coming into existence before their eyes. With that model first clearly in view they could then turn to discover justice in the individual. The plan thus innocently proposed is in fact of considerable importance, and the justification that justice is larger in the state than in the individual and therefore easier to make out, is really only a way of altering perspective, of drawing attention to something else. Literally speaking, moral principles, in this case justice, but courage, honesty or temperance also for that matter, are not things which have size. Some may be more important than others and they vary also in their frequency and scale of appearance from time to time. But they are not easier to discern by reason of their
importance or the scale of appearance; indeed they may well be more difficult to
discern on the large, social scale where complexity is great.

The talk about larger, therefore, has little to do with size. It has to do with
priority and importance. Socrates is suggesting that we really can’t understand
justice if we view it as a private property of individuals removed from the political
communities in which they live, as though virtue was created and manifested in
merely personal relations. Socrates is drawing attention to something he considers
most significant, that there is a deeply intimate, causal relationship between the
moral structure, embodied in the constitution of the community, and its virtue, and
the moral character of its members as individuals. These qualities are not merely
analogous or parallel, they are thoroughly related to each other functionally.

Sometimes this important Platonic proposition concerning the relation of
individual and society is rendered as “The state is the individual writ large”. That
turn of phrase is apt and famous, though still a bit misleading, since the Platonic
emphasis would in fact make it come out “The individual is the state writ small”. But
whatever the emphasis, the general proposition is of first importance and is
one you should think about. In some ways it runs counter to our way of viewing
the relation of individual and society. We sometimes seem to think of virtue as a
personal achievement, even that it is gained despite or in the face of society; as
though the political and social structure are obstacles which must be overcome if
individuals are to achieve moral development and autonomy. As you will see as
you read on, the notion of “individualism”, of personal autonomy and private
judgment as the sources of virtue and human wellbeing so popular with us, play
little role in Plato’s formulations. In fact they are judged by him as among the
chief hindrances to the achievement of individual and social virtue.
This general perspective is evident throughout these sections of Republic but is given special, memorable emphasis in the Myth of Metals, which appears at 414. You should pay particular attention to that myth. It has two parts and each is of importance. The meaning of the second part is more obvious, but the first part is, if anything, of greater significance, and bears heavily on the question of the relationship of state and individual. When you have read these sections you might profitably write a critical essay on that myth, dealing especially with the first part. Is the myth an utter fabrication? Is it an attempt to deceive men into accepting a false, misleading or even vicious view of their relation to each other and their community? Or is it a way of stating something like the truth in a form more easily grasped and understood? Answers to those questions vary greatly. You should make your effort to answer them, preferably in writing.

Well then, from 368 to 427-b Socrates sketches the bare-bones, essential structure of what he thinks would be a just community. The constitutional features he incorporates are often surprising, disturbing and radical, as I’m sure you’ll agree. Absolutely central to his description is the firm belief that human individuals vary in their innate abilities. He couples that with the proposition that division of labor (based on individual aptitude) is the most sensible and efficient mode of social organization. That leads to the formation of a “class state” in which three prime functions are assigned to three distinct sectors: the productive function to Artisans, the police-military-executive function to Auxiliaries, and the legislative-ruling function to Guardians. The distinctions in role and therefore in authority are at least intended to be clear and firm, thus giving rise to the serious problem which Thrasymachus had already presented. What is to keep the Guardians (aided by the Auxiliaries) from misusing their ruling authority and
power? Why will they not behave as Thrasymachus described, to exploit and oppress others in order to serve their own individual and class interest?

For his answer Plato turns to what may strike us as the old-fashioned idea of character and the training of character, for which he apparently believes there can be no genuine substitute. His argument seems to be that in the long run only strength of mind, discipline and devotion can keep rulers true to their obligations and responsibilities. Only good men, only truly just men, can be relied upon to resist the corrupting temptations which authority offers, and not even they, perhaps can resist them forever. Thrasymachus and his kind, of course, are already of thoroughly corrupt character. They view public office as merely a grander opportunity to pursue their own, and their own most gross, interests. Therefore, in his attempt to solve the problem which Thrasymachus represents, that of the responsible exercise of authority, Plato gives detailed consideration to the education of future Guardians and Auxiliaries. There, in those early influences which shape attitudes and values, interests and goals, when emotions and passions are being disciplined, when the character of the adult is being fashioned in the young….there Plato finds what he thinks is the key.

There have been other attempted solutions to the problem of the responsible exercise of authority. It appears that Plato, at least late in his life, was aware of some of them. In the dialogue Laws he utilizes several, one of which we know as “the separation of powers”. Such devices as separation of powers, checks and balances, limited tenure in office, seek to achieve in a mechanical or constitutional way what Plato in Republic seeks to achieve through the devotion and character which it is the prime purpose of his system of public education to foster. Plato was perhaps not only the first to argue for a system of public education, but first also to argue that its chief goal is civic. It is to prepare, or more strongly put, to initiate
the young into their civic roles. The performance of those relies on virtue, private and public. Would that, could that hold equally for a non-aristocratic, say a democratic society? The system of education of the very young will also be used as a method of screening and selection with regard to the future role which individuals will play, Plato thus believes that teachers must always be working with “recruiter’s eyes”. How do you respond to that? It is there, in the educational institution, in the school, that individuals will be tested for their abilities and promise and be assigned their ultimate social role and station.

You are going to be upset, if not outraged, at many of the things Socrates proposes in this connection. Censorship, for example, will be used and not faint-heartedly. The curriculum will be thoroughly devised and controlled, even down to the kinds of music and physical exercise, and the dances the children will be trained in (and by). The adult models they are encouraged to emulate will be selected, polished up and presented in a favorable, almost artificial light.

Socrates also goes on to describe the basic living conditions of the Guardians: simple to point of austerity, quasi-military in nature (barracks, common meals), no private property and no families as such, children being reared in common nurseries, sexual relations strictly regulated, both as to selection of partner and frequency. When it is objected that there seems to be little provision in all this for happiness, Socrates blandly replies that he’s not interested in the happiness of any individual or class, he’s interested in the happiness and welfare of the community taken as an integrated or organic whole, in which each will find happiness according to his/her own nature and role.

Finally the basic duties of the Guardians are assigned. They are, in addition to normal legislative tasks, mainly to see that the economy is controlled, that
extremes of wealth and property do not occur in those sectors of the community where property is allowed. And to ensure that NO changes take place in the educational system, including its curriculum. Since the very integrity of the community depends so much on the success of its educational system, changes in it will quickly erode the unity in the midst of differentiation of function, and will erode the conception of public service, which provides its central conception and purpose.

Such are the things that go on through Books II, III and part of Book IV. The brief sketch just given doesn’t begin to capture anything but highlights and will not elicit anything like the strength of what is almost surely going to be your deeply negative response, not only to its detail but also to its general view on the legitimate extent of governmental power, including what Plato claims is one of its fundamental powers: the power to teach. In an effort to help you to organize and sort out these matters, and to focus your critical judgment on the things Socrates has proposed, I’m going to list some questions for you to consider, and suggest that you again write short essays on several of them.

1. What is the social and political significance of the fact of innate, individual difference, in intelligence, in spirit, in physical and other abilities? How much should society try to do something about that, to try to equalize it for example, and how much should society accept of it, incorporating it in its structure of education, public role and authority?

2. How are varying social roles and tasks (vocations, professions, jobs and offices) assigned in our society. How efficiently is it done? How fairly or justly? Is there what we call “equal opportunity”? What
changes in our system would you suggest, and are these changes away from or towards Plato’s recommendations?

3. Plato recommends a political and social aristocracy, an aristocracy of the wise. How much political aptitude and wisdom must there be for that plan to be feasible? Can it be found and trained? Since we, presumably, are democrats, do we therefore reject the idea of a special role for wisdom and understanding in politics? How much authority should the wise have, as compared with the unwise remainder? Is our democratic system intended to be a form of “elected aristocracy”? Could Plato accept that possibility?

4. What do you believe the major functions of public education should be? Is one of them the production of civic virtue, of citizens equipped and eager to perform civic roles and discharge public responsibilities properly? Can education begin to supply civic virtue; can it be taught? Does a democratic system need civic virtue in its citizens?

5. What is wrong with censorship, and why do you find Plato’s justification of it unsound? Would you distinguish, (as Plato does not), between censorship addressed to children and/or addressed to adults? Why or why not?

6. Do you believe that the control, direction or even the elimination of private interests (economic, familial, religious, other) is within the proper jurisdiction of political authority? Do you agree with Plato that they are generally divisive, and the chief source of serious trouble within society? Are “my” and “mine” a major ground of injustice, exploitation and oppression, as Plato claims, and is it proper to use public education in an effort to break their grip?
Now those are all controversial, demanding and complex questions. They are the sort an intelligent person probably never answers to final satisfaction. But they are yet the sort which an intelligent and responsible person never long ignores. Moreover, until one attempts to do justice to those questions, one’s negative response to Plato’s admittedly radical proposals remains just that….a negative response. One must generate replies and counter arguments in order even to understand, if not to refute him.

428-448 (remainder of Book IV)

In the section from 427-c through 448 Plato at last presents us with the conception of human nature and society, and of human excellence or well-being, on which the whole of Republic rests. We have come to the heart of the dialogue, that which animates it throughout. It is here that Socrates reveals his understanding of the nature of social and individual justice, together with their equally important mutual relationship. If this conception of human excellence (or virtue) can be mastered, much in the dialogue that might otherwise appear merely clever or arbitrary falls into integrated though still controversial place.

What happens is this: Having sketched the constitution of a sensible community, Socrates now turns to see wherein lies its justice. He suggests we search for each of the four virtues recognized as cardinal in Greek culture: wisdom, courage, temperance, justice. As we shall see, the other virtues are not added to the search merely to round things off neatly. Virtue is seen by Plato to be essentially one even if it has aspects, for these are inseparably related to each other.
(Ask yourself whether you consider those virtues cardinal, the moral qualities central to human life. Which would you delete, if any, and what would you substitute or add, and why?)

His discovery of justice and the other virtues in the state proceeds quickly and with apparent ease. The class structure of the state, the differentiation of functions and authority, provides the key and proves to have significance far beyond productive and administrative efficiency. Wisdom is speedily identified with the prime quality of the Guardian, governing class, whose selection and training has from the beginning been directed to the achievement of wisdom. Courage is with equal facility located in the Auxiliary class, and for similar reasons. Temperance is more awkward. It is a prime quality of the Artisan class, but by no means their exclusive possession since it must be present in all classes if there is to be social harmony. It has to do with recognition and acceptance of one’s appropriate social station and duty, and is therefore the quality of self-control or self-mastery necessary to every element within the community. Without it, ill-founded ambition and dissatisfaction with one’s lot would make any system of distinctly different social and political roles intolerable. If temperance can be developed, however, then the inescapable diversity of stations and powers will be converted into a social concord of mutual benefit.

Justice, finally, is not a new factor added to the rest nor is it to be seen in any specific aspect of the community. Put simply, social justice is that quality which results when the needs and the aptitudes of the community are combined through an intelligent assignment and a responsible performance. Or put more simply still: when the wise govern, the brave police and guard, and the artisans produce. Thus the key to social justice is the smooth and happy operation of the principle on which the community was based from the outset: social division of labor
following individual aptitudes. Social justice will be achieved when each division wisely restricts its aspiration and energy to and derives satisfaction from the distinctive task for which it is suited and to which it has been assigned, stoutly resisting the temptation to interfere in the performance of another role. On Plato’s analysis, therefore, social justice is a consequence of other things, the prior exercise of the virtues of wisdom, courage and temperance as earlier described.

“How neat” you may say, “any scheme so obvious can’t possibly do justice to justice”. And you may be right, but hold your fire despite the obvious target. There is more to the story, and its telling may temper your sense of what has happened so far.

Having dealt with virtue on its civic or social side, Socrates next proceeds to an analysis of virtue in the individual. In order to do that, and also in order to reveal what he believes is the deep parallel between the civic constitution and the individual soul (remembering that state and individual are, so to speak, larger and smaller versions of each other), he must first show that the soul has a complex, not a simple structure; that it has natural parts or “faculties” each with its own powers and jurisdiction, and that these are parallel in function to corresponding elements in society.

His argument concerning the division of the soul (which is derived essentially from the existence of what may be called “mental conflict”) is compelling, on the whole, even if serious questions can be raised about the number and nature of the particular faculties he ascribes to it. He finds three distinct faculties, reason, spirit, and appetite, and describes their nature in graphic, memorable terms. In order to understand and test his view of the soul, try formulating your own version. What basic powers would you ascribe to human
nature, and what are their relationships to each other? You might particularly reflect on the role and power of what Plato calls “reason”, and consider what he takes to be a central problem, how harmony among faculties is achieved and what are its consequences.

At this stage but not later in Book X Plato’s use of “soul” might be taken to mean whatever principle or power it is which is the systematic, regular source of human activity”. Despite diversity and range, human behavior is not random. It displays order and pattern. A limited number of types or categories of human action can be seen throughout the species. That leads naturally to talking about the underlying springs of action, the structure of powers which enables humans to do these things and to react in characteristic ways to things which are done or happen to them. That underlying structure of faculties is soul, thus Plato (and other Greeks) could also sensibly speak of the souls of animals or even plants. It was not meant thereby that animals or plants are merely diminished, degenerate or incomplete humans, rather that they display systematic capacities for action and reaction. Thus there must be for them also an internal set of operating faculties or powers which give rise to this….a soul.

It requires little analysis for us to recognize that the aspects or parts of the soul, as named and described by Socrates, stand at least in rough parallel to the corresponding divisions of the community. Their nature and function is similar, though the Artisan-appetite parallel is clearly inadequate, on which comment will be made shortly. It is also plain that the virtues of the individual will be the product of similar wise ordering of the relationship of those parts. But what, now, is one to make of this in some ways simple, but in other ways audacious and disturbing view of virtue in society and individual? Its presentation in schematic terms (it could almost be represented by a diagram) may invite treating it less than
seriously, while its content may invite dismissal as an arbitrary attempt to disguise what is no more than invidious distinction and class rule as though it rested on a deeper moral, political and psychological ground.

At any rate, Socrates obviously believes there is nothing arbitrary or invidious about it. He insists that it corresponds to what is profoundly given in the nature of man and society. The view he defends is sometimes called an “organic” conception. Such a theory of state or society argues that individual character, significance, welfare and virtue cannot be understood without reference to the deep constitutional and cultural structure of the community of which the individual is product and part. Moreover, and conversely, the constitution and culture of the society cannot be understood without reference to the character of its individual members. The two are functionally related in a manner analogous to the relations of organs and the larger, living systems or creatures of which they are the parts. Since Plato does not actually claim an organic status for the combination of society and individual, the model is suggested only. He does appear to be claiming, however, that if man is to achieve justice, the prerequisite of social peace and welfare, psychic harmony and well-being, it can only be by attending to the one complex embracing system of human power and virtue: the individual in society. It is true enough, as Plato makes plain, that from one perspective this system may be seen as national or civic character, and from another, that of individual character. But justice, and social and individual well-being, cannot truly be divided nor be obtained fully in one sphere while the other remains either untended or corrupt. Any attempt to understand justice as separable, either as individual or as social, is both misleading and mischievous. We are the products and parts of our society. For better or worse we bear its indelible stamp imprinted on our soul. So also, we in our turn as individuals imprint our small stamp on the constitutional
and cultural quality of our society. The two are intimately and mutually dependent, both in causal and conceptual (or logical) terms.

More specifically, Socrates is arguing that justice, the queen of the virtues, is in fact dependent on them for its existence. Each of the other cardinal virtues arises from the proper exercise of the faculty to which it particularly attends. Justice is the product of the harmonious, balanced operation of all taken together. Individuals achieve the personal state of justice through the wise governance of their faculties, and are thereby the bearers of these virtues. Yet individual virtue receives its nurture and expression pre-eminently through education and social role, thereby bestowing its quality on the community as well. To see ourselves as naturally at odds with our community, or as predators or parasites on it (as Thrasymachus, in the first instance, and the account of Glaucon and Adeimantus, in the second, claim) is to take a wrong and unnatural path. Even Socrates himself, it is hinted later, is not so full a human as he would be in a better Athens, an harmonious community where he had a significant, recognized station which would nurture and elicit more of his already remarkable powers and would allow him to express those in a manner of more benefit to the community. And if that is true of Socrates, then how much more so for the rest? The dissociation of individual and society leads at best to a life of partial fulfillment and partial happiness, or at worst to a form of spiritual ill-health and self-destruction. And since the hurtful dissociation stems from an ultimate injustice—an imbalance both in the individual soul and in the community—no one would knowingly choose injustice over justice, any more than one would knowingly choose that which promotes physical disease.

That last remark raises an interesting and important question: why, then, has Thrasymachus chosen injustice? Why do others choose likewise? Plato’s answer
to that question is implicit throughout Republic, and explicit in other of his dialogues. It is that ignorance is the source of human evil. You might profitably wrestle with how he can make that strange claim and what sense you find in it. But there are other problems which also merit attention. Before going on to the next section of Republic it will be useful for you to pause to think and write about one or several of them.

For example, how closely is Plato’s account of justice tied to the class state he has sketched? Would a classless society be possible, and on what terms? Would a classless society more or less automatically solve the problem of justice?

There is also the related problem of temperance. Is its importance here mainly dictated by the differentiated structure within Plato’s state? Or do you see a vital need for temperance in any state? What role, if any, does it play in personal well-being, or is it now an outmoded moral conception?

What is your assessment of the fact that Plato has managed to talk so long about justice, without saying more about the distribution of economic goods, on the one hand, and about courts of law and equal treatment before the law, on the other? Moreover, if this be justice, why so little talk of equality or of civil rights? And why so little talk of individual and political freedom too, for that matter? Why do they seem to play so small a role (none?) in Plato’s just state? What has he left out and what in his theory makes it so easy for him to do it?

Are you satisfied with Plato’s treatment of the appetites and of the thoroughly subordinate position he insists they must take? Is his theory of the soul and its healthy state too puritanical, too ascetic? Do you accept the pre-eminent role he assigns to reason? Does Plato’s balance in the soul strike you as being somehow unbalanced?
And what of his treatment of the Artisians? Plato says little about their faculties, their powers and virtues, or the state of their souls. He even says little about the virtue in virtue of which they assume their productive role. Why this silence; what does it reveal? Is it just and if it is not what would be necessary in order to make it so?

Finally, and in general, are you in sympathy with Plato’s basic line of argument, that justice is ultimately a function of psychic harmony and social concord achievable only through the governing of individual faculties and social functions? What have you learned from his account? Does it still appear as arbitrary and far-fetched as it did at the outset? If you got into a discussion about justice now, what would you borrow from Plato, and what would you reject?

In writing a paper on one or several of those topics avoid merely re-phrasing either the topic itself or Plato’s words. Analyze and criticize the argument, pursue its illustrations, muster counter-examples, and test his formulations by placing them in other contexts. Use your own words.
From 445 through 478 Socrates deals with several subordinate but important matters: equality of women, the abolition of families for Guardians, marriage regulations, and the rules of war. Each of these is interesting, provocative and radical in its own right, and the arguments are straightforward. You may disagree with one or all of these recommendations. The abolition of the family is highly controversial, plainly, and the “rigging” of the marriage lottery is dishonest, even if we accepted its goal, which most of us probably would not. Much has been made of these particular features of Republic, too much in my opinion. Some of them are not central to its basic theme, though they no doubt reveal something about the at-least-temporary state of the author’s soul, to use his own logic against him. Read these sections with interest and care, raise criticisms, but do not dwell overmuch of them. Nonetheless you will likely note Plato’s argument for the equality of women. His argument for their equality is strong and is perhaps the, or one of its earliest expressions. But it is not an “equal rights” moral argument. It is, rather, practical….any society would be foolish to deny itself full use of one-half of its human energy and intelligence. Later in the dialogue you may also note that his tone when referring to women does not measure up to his argument for their equality. Far from it.
From 471c (in Book V) through 542 (end of Book VII) the dialogue is given over completely to a discussion of the nature of knowledge. You may well ask, “If Republic is a work on justice and politics, why this lengthy, sometimes technical treatment of knowledge?” The answer to that is straightforward: the aristocratic state, the state wherein only the wise rule, requires that the Guardians or kings be philosophers.

Socrates recognizes how odd, how paradoxical that sounds, and one must admit it has lost none of its oddness over the course of the intervening centuries. Yet Socrates goes on to explain that by philosophers he does not mean all those, or even many of those who call themselves such or are generally so-called. He means by philosophers those who are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and who have in substantial degree attained their goal. There will not be many such persons at any time because, as he reveals throughout these sections, the road to what he will admit as truth is long, strange and arduous. Yet those who reach the goal are of the greatest value to the city. They alone are equipped to be its governors, for without knowledge and wisdom at the helm “….there can be no rest from troubles for states, my dear Glaucon, nor yet, as I believe, for all mankind”. Over 2000 years later I find that sentence provocative and sobering.

Thus the discussion of the nature of knowledge and how it is attained is presented in order to validate the crucial differentiation of social function within the just community: that between the wise who rule and the non-wise who play no proper part in the councils of state. An aristocracy, even one less emphatically so than Plato’s, requires more than a whole-hearted devotion to the public good on the part of its rulers. It also requires that the aristocrats who rule it possess if not a
special, then at least a superior level of knowledge or wisdom which specially fits them to fulfill the governing responsibility.

As one should by now expect from so radical a thinker, Plato’s treatment of knowledge in Republic is altogether remarkable. It is remarkable both for what it does and what it does not. It does not, for instance, merely tidy up and explain common sense views on the subject. In fact, it runs counter to many of the most ordinary thoughts on the matter. It also does not provide much in the way of real argument. That appears elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues. On the other hand it does provide a set of brilliant illustrations and explanations, by way of simile, allegory, diagram, finally a model curriculum, from which we gain a sense, if not a full understanding, of Plato’s root distinction between knowledge and mere opinion (or belief).

The visual faculty plays a large role in this treatment, and there is a heavy reliance on what is essential to sight, the contrast between light and darkness. Naturally enough, knowledge and understanding is identified with light, with clarity and precision of sight, whereas mere opinion is identified with the dark, indistinct and obscure. It is not likely Plato was the first to talk about knowledge in these terms, and it’s obvious he was not the last; both ordinary and philosophic language are full of these metaphors. But no one has used these terms to better or more memorable effect.

Now the manner in which one treats the theory of knowledge distinguishes two ways of reading (and teaching) Republic. One method, the shorter, treats the theory of knowledge primarily as suggestive or leading. It claims that the political/moral integrity of the work can be maintained so long as Plato can argue that there is at least some difference between knowledge and mere opinion of
sufficient importance to warrant differentiation in social function (i.e. between governors and governed). This method, then, de-emphasizes the rich and problematic complexity of Plato’s theory of knowledge, sometimes almost treating its appearance in *Republic* as an unfortunate digression. There’s some support for that view within the work itself since, among other things, Socrates himself apologetically refers to it as a digression. Moreover, there is indirect support for such treatment in the fact that no other work on politics in our tradition, no matter how profound, comes even remotely close to *Republic* in attaching so much significance to any particular theory of knowledge. In all such works we find, as a consequence, much less systematic treatment of the subject and its implications for a theory of the state. Apparently, then, it is possible to talk long and well about politics, about justice, about the relations of individuals and government, without saying much except by implication about human knowledge, its nature and attainment.

It is also true, nonetheless, that we may be the long-run losers by such an approach. Perhaps the problem of knowledge is central to the problem of politics, much in the way Plato apparently thought, even if not necessarily solvable in terms of the particular theory of knowledge he developed. Moreover, when this shorter version of *Republic* is chosen, the reader if lucky, or the teacher if well-grounded, will call upon considerable independent familiarity with Plato’s theory of knowledge, likely based upon other Platonic dialogues or secondary sources. Without some such familiarity even Plato’s illustrations of his theory will be difficult to appreciate.

The other, longer method tries to meet Plato where he says he is. That requires considerable effort and is still not likely to be entirely successful. His theory of knowledge is both strange and difficult, especially on first reading.
Moreover, and more importantly, it does seem to be true that we can maintain the basic integrity of his political/moral/psychological theme even if we de-emphasize the theory of knowledge in its complex detail. Thus the temptation is strong, even following the second method, to grant Plato a distinction between knowledge and opinion, if not his own distinction then some anyway, and to understand and assess the work from that standpoint.

In this guide I am going to present a compressed version of the longer method. I do so in the belief, perhaps mistaken, that we will be the gainers somehow if we grapple with his long “digression”, even if it isn’t truly central to his political theme in the way or degree he believed. Besides, if we don’t grapple with it, we’ll miss some of the beauty and power of his illustrations, and right or wrong they’re too good to miss.

This section concerned with knowledge more or less divides into four illustrations. Each reveals Plato’s position in a somewhat different way, or from a particular aspect, but the four center on one encompassing problem: the nature of knowledge and how it is attained. I suggest that for now we ignore the first illustration, the Simile of the Sun. We shall return to it, but let us concentrate on the other three first.
Plato’s theory of knowledge rests on one basic insight, which in turn has a number of important consequences. That insight, the bedrock of his theory is this:

There is an essential and ineradicable difference between knowledge, on the one hand, and opinion (or belief), on the other. Opinion is not a weak and limited version of what might become true knowledge with further investigation and analysis. Rather, knowledge and opinion differ in kind.

There are two distinct but complementary reasons for this. One is that knowledge and opinion are apprehended through, are discovered or generated by, quite different faculties. The other is that what is apprehended, the object or thing attended to in cognition, is of a radically different kind in the one case and the other.

It is not clear which of those two reasons has logical priority and, as noted, they do work to support each other. Nonetheless, the claim that the realm of knowledge is composed of a radically different set of objects from those of the realm of opinion is, at the very least, apt to be puzzling. Let me try to clarify the point in as simple a way as I can, acknowledging it will be crude, somewhat inaccurate and without much qualification.

It is clear from everything Plato says that the distinction between opinion and knowledge roughly follows the distinction between sense impressions (hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling) and thought or thinking. Now plainly there are important differences between the senses and thought, but does that mean, as Plato claims, that thought is directed to a set of objects which is so distinct from anything the senses deal with as to divide the world of cognition into
two realms? Plato answers “yes”. Knowledge, the product of thinking, consists in the mind’s grasp of the principles, laws or forms which lie behind or beyond the thing or event we experience through the senses. Things felt, seen, heard are particular, material, sensible, and remain so forever. Yet what the mind or intelligence grasps, and the **only thing it can grasp**, must be of a nature congenial or suited to thought. Plato calls the stuff with which thought deals **IDEAS**, which are inherently intelligible forms, clearly and precisely knowable, general or universal in their scope, ordered, logical and rational in their significance.

From this it is clear that when Plato speaks of ideas, we must not understand him to be referring to psychological events, as when we say “I have an idea”. For Plato, ideas are not the products of minds, much less of brains. On the contrary, they are discovered by the mind or intelligence which has natural access to this realm of rational objects, as the senses discover material objects through their natural access to that realm. In neither case does the apprehending faculty produce its objects. Thus Plato is seriously maintaining that ideas or forms **really** exist. There simply are such things, in total independence of our thinking of them. Plainly, however, they do not exist in a spatial-temporal mode. There is no place and no time in which they can be located. Their mode of existence is literally “ideal”, but that mode is, for Plato, utterly real and in fact is more real. It is superior to material existence.

Let me bring forward an example. It is perhaps not one Plato would have accepted had he known of it, though it would have claimed his serious attention. Nonetheless it may throw some light on the distinction between knowledge and opinion, thinking and sensing, and perhaps render more plausible Plato’s conception of the nature and reality of ideas.
Consider, on the one hand, the planets and the Sun. They are particular material objects. Men have observed them from the beginning. We are aware of their apparent motion through visible changes in relative position. In one sense, then, we “know” them or are acquainted with them in a simple, straightforward way, through visual observation. Based on these observations, moreover, men have also generated “opinions” concerning their nature and systematic relations.

Consider, on the other hand, Newton’s laws. They are a set of propositions, a set of ideas about motion in general, the motions of large bodies. Newton discovered what men had long suspected or believed, that there is a rational, lawful and systematic order in the relation of Sun and planet. His laws set these forth. But to discover this Newton went beyond the merely sensible world, the realm of sight and opinion, to turn his mind to an ideal, quasi-mathematical, intelligible world. And if Plato could accept the example at all, he would claim that with our grasp of Newton’s laws we for the first time “really know” or have genuine knowledge and understanding not only of the solar systems but of all large bodies in motion as well, when viewed as ideal systems. For, according to Plato, the solar system and all such material systems are but the crude and particular instances modeled on the ideal forms or universal principles of all such things as they really are. Plato would go on to claim that so long as we confine our attention to sensible particulars, to the ceaseless flow of sensory experience, then for so long are we confined to the having of mere opinion. Knowledge can never be discovered if we attend to the wrong objects and that by relying on the wrong faculties.

Consider another example, one Plato himself uses. Think of objects whose shapes fall into fairly clear geometric patterns, circular, triangular, rectangular objects. They occur in nature and as artifacts, and can be represented in drawings, quite simply as circles, triangles, etc. All of them, even the drawings, are
particular material objects which we see with our eyes, and which we can measure and then describe with the aid of various instruments. In a quite ordinary sense, then, we know or recognize geometrical things through our senses.

Now consider the system called Euclidean geometry. It, too, was a discovery, but in which protractor, compass and straight edge played little part. Indeed the senses themselves played little part, for the system it is true of does not comprise material objects at all. It is, rather, a discovery of mathematical intelligence directed in some sense to portions of what we may rightfully call “ideal space”, which has precise forms, rational orders and relations, and intelligible, necessary laws. The theorem which Pythagoras discovered is one of those laws. It sets forth essential properties of a right-angled triangle.

Again we might say, if we adopted the Platonic view that we “really know” or have genuine and certain knowledge of things geometrical only when we discover the intelligible principles or ideas on which, so to speak, the merely visible, material and particular instances rest. To know what is true of these matters we must get beyond the merely sensible. We must use intelligence to discover the rational and lawful forms which crudely are exemplified in the things our senses apprehend.

If we return again to cases of material objects in space and time there is a further Platonic claim. Plato asked himself how we recognize discrete, determinate things from among the almost infinite presentations of sensory phenomena. How is it we know even such homely things as trees, sheep, mountains and beds? If we attend to them only as material objects then plainly there are a lot of them, only a few of which we’ve encountered, and together they make up classes. Some philosophers argue that we have generated the concept of the class from our
sensory experience through repetition based on resemblance. Plato insists, in opposition, that we would never have been aware of the repetition unless we already knew the form or principle in virtue of which an object is recognizable as (resembles) a tree, bed, sheep, etc. The grasp of that form is independent of our sensory experience and precedes it in time, since the very categories of sensible experience depend upon it, or so Plato reasons.

Think, finally, of Cephalus paying a debt. (He was the old man who appeared very early in the dialogue, the man who believed that justice had at least one essential feature: the payment of what was due.) Such an event can be witnessed, it can be seen and heard. But how do we recognize it to be an act of justice? Again Plato would answer: “Not ever with our eyes, or any combination of our senses. We recognize it as an act of justice only with the mind’s eye, only through our possession of a conception of the general principle, the universal form or idea of justice itself, of which the act of Cephalus is but a crude and imperfect particular case.”

The example dealing with Cephalus draws attention to an important feature of Plato’s theory of ideas, namely that there are also forms or ideas of moral things, of temperance, courage, justice and all the rest. There are, indeed, forms for everything that really is, which emphatically includes what we call “moral principles”. The significance of their inclusion in the realm of true knowledge will be touched upon shortly.

That which Plato illustrates through the division of the Line and the entrance to the Cave, therefore, marks a gap or chasm, not a threshold. The lower level of apprehension, opinion, represented by the Line below the division and the experience inside the Cave, is forever dependent on the imagination and the senses.
These faculties and the objects to which they attend are altogether inferior. It is a world of mere “becoming”, it comes into being and passes away again. It is a realm of “appearance”, since despite its apparent substantiality and spatial-temporal order, in fact it represents little of a fixed and rational nature. It is a realm of fleeting impression and successive change, always imprecise, uncertain and problematic. As a consequence it offers neither the right kind of stuff nor enlists the appropriate faculties for the discovery of knowledge.

The other, higher level of apprehension, represented by the Line above the division and the daylight world outside the Cave, is the habitat of reason and intelligence, the world of forms or ideas. On this level only is knowledge possible. Here alone, Plato claims, can we discover the reason of things, here alone can we understand why things are as they really are.

Plato is well aware that his theory of ideas reverses ordinary opinion on the question of knowledge, producing dismay and disbelief. After all, sensible things, the things we can see and touch, are the things we know or think we know first and best. We attach real significance to things and only an imaginary or “ideal” significance to ideas. Plato also recognizes that weaning ourselves from this natural but mistaken view will be difficult and uncomfortable, especially if undertaken quickly, as in moving from darkness immediately into broad daylight. But the transition from observing to reasoning, from believing to understanding, needn’t be made in that rude fashion. It is possible, Plato says, to initiate the mind or soul, to educate and train it by easy, progressive stages. It will thereby become accustomed to look to forms, not to material things. It will become skillful in dealing with ideas, will develop increasing command of them, moving steadily from simple to more complex and powerful principles.
This program of initiation is described in the academic curriculum he provides for the future Guardians (appearing at 531-c through 534). Yet even though the Divided Line and the Allegory of the Cave have given us some warning, that curriculum still comes as a surprise. What an arid and abstract course of study: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, harmonics, Dialectic (whatever that may be!). Such an unbalanced, formal program seems at best calculated to train for a mathematical-logical, perhaps scientific profession. To our way of thinking it would more likely unfit than fit a person for the give and take, the complex, practical life of political rule. And that comment leads to an important question. Where in Plato’s curriculum, indeed where in anything he’s said about knowledge at all, is there to be found any distinctive element of political understanding or knowledge? Yet wasn’t that the object of all this, to train those who would assume political authority and who would be fit for the role because of something special they understood which others did not, and which was provided by their special education?

In thinking about that question, it may help you to write down the contrasting program of education you (or we, generally) might prescribe for our future governors. (I am assuming that some education, some knowledge and training of the mind is felt by us, also, to be requisite to governing and governors.) One would expect our curriculum to be quite different from Plato’s. The reasons for that contrast are important and of at least two kinds. The first has to do with the different views each of us, i.e. we and Plato, has of the powers and goals of education, and that in turn is partly traceable to our different views on the nature of knowledge and how it is attained. The second reflects our different views on the nature and limits of governing, the kind of abilities its legitimate exercise requires in fact. So, in setting forth an alternative curriculum, set forth also the reasons for
it, how it is related to our theory of knowledge and our view of what it takes to be a
good ruler.

Plato’s position on the question is before us, at any rate, even if it is not
entirely clear. We have all heard the expression “if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen
them all”. Well, in a profound and challenging sense Plato should have said that
first…for he more than any other believed it and had arguable grounds for claiming
it; with this crucial difference: the “one” Plato speaks for is the idea or form of all
the many material instances. And in some sense he’s right, for if we mean, and we
usually do, that having seen one redwood tree, or one European cathedral, or even
one salmon or one egg for that matter, or one anything on the sensory level of
experience, we’ve seen them all, then we are much mistaken. For of particulars
there is an indefinite variety. Each instance is individual and different, each is
undergoing steady change, each is truly particular in some ways or other. Plato
recognized that and drew from it the conclusion that only the form or idea is
constant and universal, and only it can be known truly for what it really is. Thus if
it were correct, Plato’s theory of knowledge would greatly simplify our task, even
though we would still be faced with an immense and exacting inquiry.

Such is the goal of the academic curriculum he prescribes: to remove the
students from what he sees as the endless, mushy world of sensory particulars, of
shadows, directing them towards the simple, precise and elegant world of universal
forms. Master those, he says, and the endless variety of particulars takes on its
true, if limited significance. Failure to master those leaves us forever in the
darkened cave, vainly trying to make sense of a fleeting, successive yet
inconsistent, unpredictable and confused, finally confusing welter of impressions,
sensations and opinions.
Before leaving this immense topic, something must be said about Dialectic, about the Simile of the Sun, of Goodness Itself, and finally about the relation of that theory of knowledge to the central theme of Republic.

Unfortunately, not much which is helpful can be said about Dialectic. Few philosophers since Plato have claimed to understand it, let alone to argue that there is a dialectical system or method of inquiry leading to knowledge of the sort Plato seems to have in mind. As Plato himself suggests, mathematics and logic provide the closest yet still seriously inadequate model of what Dialectic would be. Mathematics is a systematic inquiry, conducted \( a \text{ priori} \) (i.e. without reference to or reliance on sensory experience), into ideas or sets of ideal objects and concepts, and it does produce necessary truths of great simplicity, power and significance. Their strict significance, however, is confined to the realm of mathematical objects and relations. In addition, the status of mathematical objects themselves, whether they are “real” or something else (for example, whether they are products of the human mind), is the subject of deep controversy. Yet what Plato appears to be claiming on behalf of Dialectic is a similar, \( a \text{ priori} \) system of inquiry productive of necessary truth about every idea or form whatever. Now it’s not only or mainly the scope of that inquiry which daunts us, it’s the nature of it. In addition, such hopes as we might entertain grow faint when we admit that Plato never once gave us a satisfactory, non-mathematical example of Dialectical inquiry or produced the results of such inquiry in the form of a necessary truth which was not trivial.

Having said that, it must also be said that we can’t rule out the possibility of the realm of ideas nor of a systematic inquiry into it. Indeed, we appear to have knowledge, certain knowledge, of at least a few such general and self-evident truths, and they have not yet been shown to be derived or derivable from experience. Nonetheless, most philosophers are doubtful that a realm of ideas in
general, of the sort and significance Plato claims, exists, or that if it does there is any a priori system of inquiry by which we could rigorously investigate it. Moreover, what would be the relationship between the set of Platonic ideas (and our certain knowledge of them) and events in space and time? Plato recognized that problem himself and was deeply perplexed by it; so perplexed, indeed, that he couldn’t really solve it. All he could provide was a name for what might have been a solution if we could only understand what it means and how it works. His name for the relationship between ideas and things in space and time was “participation”. Things in space and time are said to participate in their respective forms (never vice versa) thereby enjoying whatever degree of reality, determinacy and knowable significance they do enjoy. At this point Plato pays a heavy price for, one, having split the total realm of objects so decisively and radically into two camps (ideal objects and all other objects) and, two, for splitting human cognition so decisively and radically into two parts, reason and intelligence, which deal solely with the realm of ideas, and sensation which deals only with material objects forever inaccessible to thought. It should be said however that most theories of knowledge have this problem in some way if they distinguish sensory from mental (ideal) objects and their theories. How do we generate truth, where does it lie? “Participation”, Plato’s term, does not really explain it, though it does label it in an interesting, suggestive way. Thus even if Dialectic were a possible human enterprise, and perhaps it is, it is not clear on Plato’s terms, at any rate, what significance the results of that inquiry could have for human souls and bodies living in space and time.
THE SIMILE ON THE SUN

The Simile is about the ultimate, the most lofty and powerful of all knowable things, Goodness Itself or, more simply, The Good. Socrates claims it is the culminating form discovered through Dialectic. It is that object which when known allows all else below it to be understood in the fullest, revealing each form to be true or appropriate in its way or kind and all to stand to each other in relations of logical propriety. When one once knows the Good one is able thereafter to discern the goodness in all variety of things which possess it and to discriminate that quality in things from whatever takes on its appearance but is not truly good. Without that knowledge, Socrates argues, the Guardians’ knowledge would be dangerously defective. Without knowledge of Goodness they would not be capable of ruling with genuine wisdom and could hardly dispense genuine benefit.

Socrates also claims the Good has generative powers of some sort, that it somehow creates or causes other things to be what they are, as analogously the Sun generates and sustains life on this planet. But this claim for Goodness Itself (which should not be confused with the Christian God as the highest object of knowledge and worship as Supreme Creator), together with almost everything else claimed for Goodness Itself, has baffled men ever since Plato first presented the notion. He admits (here and elsewhere) that he can’t really describe or analyze it. That’s one of the reasons he has recourse to this suggestive and powerful, but finally puzzling and inadequate simile. Either of two alternative conclusions might be drawn from this.

a. There is no such object of knowledge as Goodness Itself, and therefore there can be no proper conception of it. Talk about it is produced by a fervent desire for
a thoroughly integrated, rational and moral universe, but on inspection it reveals little more than a logical and moral, though deeply poignant, confusion.

b. There is an object of knowledge which may reasonably be called Goodness Itself. It is the highest object of knowledge, the culmination of inquiry, which bestows final significance on all else known or knowable. Yet knowing Goodness Itself, or coming to know it, is a most special kind of experience and is moreover, not subject to description, analysis or expression. It is a kind of vision or seeing, perhaps a vision of something so reasonable, meaningful, beautiful and compelling as to be capable of affecting all understanding, judgment and action thereafter.

The second interpretation plainly appeals to some kind of mystical apprehension for which there is a little, though not much support to be found in Plato. Because the question of Goodness Itself is so unsatisfactorily treated by Plato, and is apparently related to Dialectic which is itself not clear, I suggest we simply suspend judgment on the matter of Goodness Itself. Even if Plato was not often flat foolish or wrong on matters of basic insight, which this certainly has claims to being, it is also true that he presents The Good to us in a way leaving much to be desired. For now, therefore, let us say no more and worry no more about Goodness Itself.

But we can’t leave all questions in that way. More must be said about the general significance of the Simile of the Sun and about the moral significance Plato claims for knowledge in general.
It has already been noted that pre-eminent among the forms or ideas, and therefore pre-eminent among the things of which we can have (certain) knowledge, are found moral principles or objects. Let me now enlarge on that by suggesting a general interpretation of the Simile of the Sun. What Plato may be claiming through the Simile (especially as it is related to Dialectic), is first, that knowledge, true understanding of the way things really are, is not morally neutral. Things as they really are possess an intrinsic value and moral dimension and relation, they carry inherent significance for human life and action, and this significance can be apprehended. That leads to the second part of the claim, that moral understanding is an integral, genuine part of knowledge. It is not separate from hard facts or therefore from science (in Plato’s sense), nor is it achieved through faculties or methods different from those of systematic cognition in general.

One consequence of this broad interpretation is that to be generally ignorant, unintelligent or of undisciplined mind and yet to understand the goodness of things or actions is impossible. Habitual dispositions of the soul or character, like temperance and courage, must be made to do for the relatively ignorant (e.g. the Auxiliaries and Artisans). Indeed, for those in whom knowledge is not or cannot be present, virtuous attitudes and dispositions are a downright necessity, in their own as well as others’ interests. But the virtue of Guardians must rest on a different base finally and be of a different order. Guardians must know why something is good (or must be done) in order to be certain that it is good (or must be done). How could they deliberate and choose, legislate and rule otherwise? What would distinguish them from the rest and provide the warrant for their exclusive jurisdiction otherwise? In short, then, what Plato seems to be claiming in general, through the Simile of the Sun, is that genuine knowledge is the final
ground of virtue, and genuine virtue rests ultimately on knowledge, thus the famous Socratic dictum that “knowledge is virtue, and virtue knowledge”.

Needless to say, the Platonic view of the relation of morals and knowledge is not universally agreed. It is hotly argued to this day. Opinions on the question cover the whole range from, roughly, Plato’s position all the way to the claim that there is no relation between morals and knowledge, since the former rests entirely on mere sentiment, on taste or private, subjective preference. It will be worth your while to consider the question yourself. How does virtue and goodness stand to knowledge? What is the relation between science and value, or in simpler terms, how does the head stand to the heart? Does the heart have reasons that Reason knows not of, as some have claimed? Does that mean that there can be ignorant saints and vicious wisemen? Is it possible for there to be good yet unenlightened and unprincipled rulers?

Those are difficult questions and their importance today is perhaps even greater than before. We now possess a large body of knowledge, in the form of natural and social science, whose practical and theoretical consequences we have great trouble appreciating, and even greater trouble governing. Does that fact indicate that Plato was wrong, that his claim for the final unity of knowledge, the unity of fact and value, science and morality, was simply mistaken? Or may he have the last word after all…that what we call “knowledge” is, after all, only a more sophisticated form of opinion, thus of little aid in telling us the why, the how, and of what value?

Finally, what is the relationship between Plato’s remarkable theory of knowledge and the general theme of Republic? We know what he says it is, but what are we to make of it? Has he, for example, so closely tied his understanding
of the office of ruler to a particular theory of knowledge that if the latter is seriously in doubt or subject to great modification then the former can no longer be maintained? Or, alternatively, is it possible to maintain much of his general view of the abilities, virtue, office and training of the ruler, just so long as Plato is able to defend some significant distinction between knowledge and opinion, including “knowledge of morals”? For myself, I am inclined to interpret and defend Plato in terms of the second alternative, but you should make an effort to come to your own understanding on the matter.
With the end of discussion of the nature and role of knowledge; concluding Book VII, the going gets much easier in Republic. One could say “the going is all downhill from this point on”, but hesitates at the pejorative sense that might convey. Nonetheless, all the difficult conceptual material is now behind us. In fact, to complete his account of justice Socrates must really only consider one further matter, the relation of justice to happiness. That is argued in Book IX. Interesting and important matters are dealt with in Books VIII and X, but Republic would be conceptually complete had those books been left out altogether. They add richness and depth but are no essential part of the argument. For the sake of simplicity, however, let’s deal with the remainder of the dialogue as we’ve dealt with the rest, in its order of presentation.

Book VIII (543-570) is short and given over to a discussion of various types of states, the nature of their respective constitutions and dominant character types, and the story of their decline. Plato recognizes five basic constitutions. The distinctions between them are substantial and qualitative, not formal, and they are discussed in order from highest to lowest.

Aristocracy: in which wisdom, temperance and just social harmony dominates.

Timocracy: in which honor, ambition, courage and manly virtue are dominant.

Oligarchy: in which wealth and the acquisition of wealth, and indulgence of the “necessary” desires sets the tone.
Democracy: characterized by liberty, equality and the lack of civic discipline, which leads to the indulgence of all desires.

Tyranny: in which the worst enslaves the rest, the unnecessary desires are pursued without limit, and fear dominates all.

The discussion of these states and their corresponding personality types is presented in such manner and order as to suggest a theory of history, an account of the deeper causes and implications of social and political change. Interpreted in that way, what Plato says is insightful and provocative, though finally inadequate. Even as an account of the extremely varied fortunes of Greek constitutional life it cannot be read too literally. Nonetheless, Plato deserves credit for being perhaps the first to suggest that profound social change necessarily reflects the operation of deeper principles and patterns, of laws if you will, to which the outward, visible events conform. The relation of social classes and class conflict is taken by Plato to be central to these changing patterns, carrying with it both as cause and consequence an emphatic change in the attitudes, values and actions of the dominant personality type (the ruling class) in the community’s membership. Thus revolution, most notably, the overthrow of the ruling class, cannot be understood as accidental, causally contingent, or historically idiosyncratic. Such a traumatic event has deep grounds in character, economics, class relations and values.

What Plato suggests in Book VIII, then, thereby recalling us to his own theory of knowledge, is that there are systematic, underlying patterns of social and political change, inseparable from the structure of soul or character of individuals. If we want to understand and (within limits) control these developments, then we
must get through and beyond the welter of particular events, specific personalities and personal ambitions, the merely transient forces and factions, to grasp the constant and lawful, the real structure of social relations and needs which they reflect. In short, Plato suggests a general theory of the systematic character of historical change. Plato was not the last to think along these lines. Most notably, perhaps, is Karl Marx, the 19th Century philosopher-economist, who also made much of class division in society and its central role in historical change.

That is one perspective to maintain as we read Book VIII, but it shouldn’t command all our attention for there is another of equal importance through which Plato reveals more about his own special view of the relation between character and constitution. In the earlier discussion Socrates’ remarks were general and presented schematically. Here, however, illustration is provided in detail, in literally biographical richness. That detail may strike the reader as merely fanciful, but there is point in Plato’s mode. It not only enriches but brings out in homely terms the fundamental thesis of Republic: the real intimacy, the actual quality of the nature of individual character in its relation to civic constitution.

There is no need to summarize what Plato describes. For the most part his meaning is clear. Several features, however, deserve comment. One is that when Socrates refers to the aristocratic state, for example, or to the timocratic or oligarchic constitution, he does not mean a society in which all or most members are of the aristocratic, timocratic or oligarchic character. It is enough, rather, that the dominant type that makes up the ruling class be of the designated kind. In any society all types will exist, but one type and the set of values and virtues prized by it will impose its stamp on the community’s constitution. For example, our society is sometimes called “bourgeois”. That label does not mean that all or most members are of the “bourgeoisie” (independent, middle-class merchants, farmers,
producers, etc.), but that the values, attitudes and goals of the bourgeoisie dominate the society and are reflected in its laws, morals and constitutional forms.

Plato’s story of the progressive ill-health or social pathology of states gives great emphasis to class struggle. As we know, Plato himself argues the necessity of classes, the clear differentiation of social role and station based on aptitude and training, and directed to the general good. He tried to show that out of these classes could be created a functioning social harmony resting on the virtues of reason, temperance and justice. Plato here argues that when those virtues weaken or disappear, as they are always tending to do, the inescapable class structure of society remains, but now has a different base and quite different consequence. What had been a precariously balanced system of general benefit, to which each class contributed in its own way, increasingly becomes an ugly struggle of naked class interest. When aptitude and function as the ground of social role are no longer recognized, raw power, personal ambition, and wealth increasingly take the lead. Plato’s focus on the importance of social class based on wealth, and the generally bad effects it produces, continues to merit our attention. He saw it as a major source of injustice. Since we live in a society preoccupied with wealth and which admits great disparities of it, we should seriously ponder his claims. Is his account no longer relevant or valid?

Another feature worth consideration is Plato’s surprising respect for timocracy. It is the second-best state and the military character, motivated by honor and courage but possessing no special knowledge or degree of wisdom, is the least removed in type from the just man. Such a respectful ranking is apt to strike us as odd and probably worse than odd, especially when it’s coupled with Plato’s very low respect for democracy and the democratic man.
Plato concedes that if democracy is the best of the worst, it must also be seen as the worst of the best. What is it we know and Plato didn’t, or vice versa, that would account for this perverse ordering? Even after allowance is made for an important difference between Plato’s democracy and ours, i.e. direct as distinguished from representative government, his deep distrust would seem to remain. Moreover, even after allowance is made for what the intervening centuries have revealed about the military state and the military character, which prompts us to rank it very low, perhaps Plato’s admiration of it would likely remain intact. Why is that? It plays too central a role in his whole account to be dismissed easily.

Perhaps you should try to sort this matter out in writing, and as you do pay particular attention to two features. The first is the nature of the goal of the respective constitutions. The second is the relation of the individuals to that goal; how do citizens serve it and what qualities of mind, character and body do they possess through which to render the service? Serious reflection on these questions may well lead you to affirm your original view and to reject Plato’s. But the exercise will have been a waste of time if it hasn’t led you to a deeper understanding of your democratic faith, while at the same time also gaining a deeper grasp of what it is about discipline and disinterested service which leads Plato to praise the virtues of timocracy so highly. Though I’m not betting on it, you might even discover that a little of the timocratic is necessary to a stable and intelligent democratic system.

Since so much of Book IX centers on a discussion of the despotic character and the tyrannical state, nothing will be made here of Plato’s remarks on those topics in Book VIII. Let us, therefore, turn now to Book IX.
Book IX (571-594) is taken up with Socrates’ reply to the final and in some ways the most difficult of the challenges thrown down by Glaucon and Adeinantis (and, of course, Thrasymachus). You will recall the demand to be shown that justice pays somehow, that the just life is the happy life and, by implication at least, that the unjust life is unhappy, perhaps miserably so. To meet the challenge, Socrates now sets about explicitly to compare the just and unjust lives with regard to their happiness or misery. This will involve consideration of the kind or quality of happiness and misery each enjoys, not merely the amount. In the comparison Socrates relies on the contrast between just and unjust societies as well.

The specific arguments used by Socrates, basically two, are easily grasped even though one of them rests on subtle distinctions which are not themselves free of problems. You may conclude that they won’t bear the weight Socrates rests on them. Plainly, however, they are sufficiently cogent to warrant serious attention. But before considering those arguments it may be helpful to take a look at the whole enterprise, to place the general project in perspective.

What Socrates and Plato are engaged in here is an altogether natural, yet at the same time ambitious enterprise indeed. Its ambitions are at least this grand, that if it were successful it would so resolve many of our difficulties, at least on one level, as to lead all except the perversely mad or the ignorant to try to follow it. Quite simply, what Socrates and Plato seek to establish is that virtue necessarily carries appropriate rewards with it in this life, and that vice necessarily extracts an appropriate price for its evil. Happiness is the general name of the reward for the virtuous person, and misery is the lot of the evil-doer, partly because of but also in
addition to the good or evil the virtuous and vicious bring to others. As virtuous or vicious agents, therefore, we reap in this life what we sow.

That claim is very old. It is, for example, the theme of the argument between Job and his comforters in the Old Testament. One risks little in asserting that the argument that virtue and vice necessarily carry appropriate rewards in this life has always been attractive at least to most people, and is unlikely ever to lose its appeal. There are few moral systems of any sort which do not incorporate such a provision, explicitly or implicitly. The reasons for that are obvious: it provides compelling grounds for all to choose virtue over vice, and it supports what is in important ways our impersonal or disinterested claim on the universe that it be both rational and moral.

The first of those reasons requires little comment. It would be enough to reply to anyone, even to Thrasymachus for example, that a sufficient reason to prefer virtue to vice (even if there were no other reasons) is because only thereby can one be happy, only thereby can one live a full, satisfying, good life. Who could fail to be affected by such a showing? And, as we shall see, such a showing need not provide only mean or grubby grounds for preferring virtue to vice.

The second reason is more philosophical, but is so at a point where philosophical attitudes genuinely touch on some of our most basic responses to life. Suppose, for example, the proposition that for the agent misery is as likely as happiness to follow upon virtuous action, and that happiness is as likely as misery to follow vicious action. (We are talking about the happiness or misery of the agent, not that of the recipients, however they fare and whoever they are.) That proposition would, I think, be hard to accept. It would construe the universe to be
at best non-rational and non-moral, according to some pretty fundamental, commonsense views of things anyway.

But now suppose the stronger proposition, that misery for the agent regularly follows virtuous actions and happiness regularly follows vicious ones. (If we add that therefore viciousness is clever and virtue stupid, we have something close to the position of Thrasymachus.) That proposition would, I think, simply be beyond most men’s powers to accept. It would make the universe out to be intrinsically absurd on at least one of its vital sides. How could our disinterested moral and rational faculties accept a steadily perverse relationship between ethical and merit and reward, between action and desert, crime and punishment, virtue and satisfaction? What attitude could we adopt while still maintaining our affection and respect for a universe which at least allows, if it does not require, a rational morality?

Whatever that attitude might be it would have some negative features. Internally it would split us in a remarkable and corrosive way. Even a modest yet proper concern for our own spiritual welfare, including our happiness, could in no way be made a function of our own good moral character and action. Externally it would make a shambles of all programs based on punishment and reward, and do likewise probably for all attempts at moral education and training. Thus it is a matter of no minor importance whether there is a positive connection between virtuous action and at least some kinds of beneficial effects for the agent, and between vicious action and some kinds of punishing effects. Without that connection the problem of motivation (to prefer virtue to vice) is perhaps insurmountable, and the general consequences for the human world bad. It would be a less good and less happy place, all in all.
The challenge then, for Socrates and Plato, and for others too, is clear: is it true there is a positive inherent, intrinsic connection between virtue and happiness, vice and misery? And if it is true, why and how is it so? Wanting to believe it, even the psychological and social benefits of believing it, do not make it true. In fact, Thrasymachus himself may want to believe it, for even he could admit it would be a better, a more rational and just world if it were true. Yet he finds or claims to find it otherwise: good people lose and suffer because of their commitment to justice, while the bad succeed and prosper because of their vice. The evidence leads him to the conclusion that happiness follows immorality, misery follows virtue. Most other men seem not as deeply persuaded as he of that conclusion, but do we not all have grounds for at least an anxious, nagging suspicion that he is right?

To make the argument that Thrasymachus is not right but desperately wrong, Socrates argues from the extreme cases. He compares the thoroughly just man and just state with the thoroughly unjust man, the rapacious despot, and the worst state, a naked, cruel tyranny. Of course, neither represents the ordinary case. Most men and most societies fall between the extremes, and the happiness or misery consequent upon their virtue or vice will be correspondingly proportioned. And now to the discussion itself.

The arguments Socrates presents to show that justice pays are of two sorts. The first seeks to establish that the social world itself confers substantial “happiness-making” benefits on the just and denies them to the unjust. The second turns to the inner world, the nature of the experience, the pleasures and satisfactions which the just and unjust enjoy respectively.
In the first argument Socrates claims that as a matter of fact the just person enjoys a greater degree of personal security and freedom, ease of movement, and more and better friends than the unjust. Since he takes those features to be undeniable parts of happiness as it’s ordinarily understood, the just man is, at a minimum, the happier man and is so by reason of his justice.

That is not a weak argument and the facts may generally operate much as Socrates says they do. Nonetheless the argument does not seem to me to be, as it stands, very compelling, and certainly not sufficient to the depth of the case Socrates must really make. It draws too much of whatever force it has from contingent assumptions we have been given no good reasons to accept. Suppose, for example, we choose a very clever unjust man, even a thoroughly cruel and rapacious despot, but one who is successful in his deceit and dissembling, who masks his aims by consummate rhetoric, who plays sides off against each other, and arranges his shifting, domestic alliances and policies shrewdly? Suppose, more importantly, that we are dealing with a person who by now genuinely finds his satisfaction in things and qualities other than those cited by Socrates? It is not impossible that he finds qualities like personal freedom, ease and confidence of movement, security and friendship, less central to his happiness than other qualities, like delight in the exercise of raw power, excitement, competition, danger even, as well as the indulgence of his gross appetites. Indeed, by Socrates’ own account of human character and its development it is very likely that the badly nurtured soul of such a person is so warped and perverted as to find satisfaction in ways quite different from those of other people, though not so different as to be beyond our powers of comprehension or even beyond our proneness to their temptations.
Neither of those suppositions can be ruled out yet. Until they are or are otherwise shown insufficient it is at best a highly contingent claim that happiness follows justice in the way and for the reasons Socrates has brought forward. And even if Socrates’ case were true in general, that things work out that way for the most part, nothing he has shown renders them necessary, yet nothing less than a necessary case will do for a final rebuttal of Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus can always claim that a cleverer unjust man will be the happy man. That is, in fact, what he did claim.

Considering the argument in that light should lead us, as apparently it led Socrates and Plato, in another direction. That direction requires us to give careful consideration to the possibility of there being different kinds and qualities of happiness. By this move Socrates shifts attention from the outer effects, what the world confers on the just and unjust respectively, to the nature and value of the inner experience of the just and unjust. (It should be noted that the outer, material effects received all of Thrasymachus’ attention, and are commonly taken to be the prime or sole standard by which these things are assessed.) As we by now have come to expect, the distinctions which Socrates draws between kinds and qualities of happiness generally parallel what he considers to be important differences between the appetitive and the non-appetitive parts of our nature.

Socrates asks us if we do not find, as he does, that there are distinct and different pleasures attendant on the exercise of our distinct and different faculties. He is confident, of course, that our experience will confirm his and concludes, in simple terms, that there are pleasures of appetite, of spirit, and of reason. With this discovery we have the possibility of a new standard of happiness. For if the distinct pleasures can be compared and ranked on a common scale, then in the way and to the degree that happiness is essentially related to pleasure, the person who
has the most of the best pleasures will be the happiest, or anyway the happier person.

At this point you should stop to assess what Socrates is arguing. There are a number of questions worth raising. Do you find different kinds and qualities of pleasure attendant on the exercise of different faculties? If you do is that a fact of much significance, and why? More importantly, are the differences such as to allow a comparison leading to a regular ranking of good-better-best? What is the relationship of pleasure to happiness anyway, and what is the relationship of the “best” pleasures to the characteristic activities of the just and unjust persons, as Socrates has described such people?

Needless to say, Socrates finds satisfactory, if sometimes only implicit answers to those questions. He claims that the distinct pleasures can be ranked… but only accurately so by those who have deeply experienced all three. The competent judge can only be the just and reasonable man, for only he can properly appreciate and assess the true “pleasures of the mind”. He and those like him regularly agree in the ranking: the pleasures of appetite are, with qualification, good, the pleasures of spirit are better, and the higher pleasures of the mind, those which attend the exercise of reason and the satisfactions accorded the activities of the well-ordered soul are best. Therefore, the just man is the happy man, at any rate the happier man, since he enjoys the most of the best pleasures. The unjust man is the least happy, outward appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, because he takes greatest satisfaction in the least good pleasures, even if he enjoys more of them.

Now if pleasures can themselves be distinguished according to degree of relative goodness, a fact on which this argument depends, then curiosity is
naturally aroused concerning the nature and ground of that difference. Socrates pursues the question, though not exhaustively, by suggesting another distinction between what he characterizes as “pure” and “impure” pleasures. As stated, it comes dangerously close to the claim that some pleasures, the pure ones, are real, and some others, the impure, are illusory. No one, including Socrates, can validly make that claim, nor should one flirt with it. If something gives pleasure then it does. It would be highly misleading to suggest it is illusory or unreal when in fact what one really wants to draw attention to are other features about it which are negative or ambiguous somehow, or are simply undesirable for one reason or another. And the same holds for pain. But the essential fact of pleasure or pain cannot and should not be impugned.

Therefore, what Socrates can rightly and with insight call to our attention is that some pleasures are impure because they are inherently dependent for their existence on relative and contrary states. Many, though not all of the sensual pleasures are of this type. For example, much of the pleasure in eating is dependent on the concomitant state of hunger, of drinking on thirst, of scratching on itching. Thus some pleasures closely associated with satisfaction of sensual appetites only follow upon a state of want, deprivation, dissatisfaction or discomfort. These pleasures are most intense when the necessary negative state is most intense (up to a limit), and as the negative state is extinguished so is the pleasure taken in the activity which extinguishes it, to the degree where we are restored to a “neutral” point on the pleasure-pain scale.

What Socrates is drawing attention to is something familiar to us all but which he claims has not been accorded its proper significance. It is the intrinsically paradoxical quality attending some of our dearest delights. At its humorous extreme it can take the form of “hitting yourself on the head with a
hammer, ‘cause it feels so good when you stop”. But from these homely and familiar precincts Socrates derives the more general and more important proposition that most of the pleasures associated with the satisfying of appetites are relative in their nature and intensity to the strength of the appetite, to the intensity of the hunger so to speak, and are thus impure mixtures of positive (i.e. pleasurable) and negative (i.e. painful) features. And in any case these pleasures are notoriously fleeting whatever degree their intensity. From this he concludes that at this level of our experience (and it is the level from which most of the strength of the case made by Glaucon and Adeimantus, and Thrasyilmachus also, is drawn) we always pay a price for our pleasure and would, obviously, prefer a form of pleasure which did not entail a price. If there were pleasures of equal or greater pleasurability which did not entail a price in pain, deprivation or hunger, they would be pure, unmixed, and for that reason, presumably, better.

Socrates goes on to say that there are such pleasures in fact. They are pure, not dependent on or mixed with a negative, painful element. They are simple, free gifts not associated with any prior or concomitant state of deprivation or discomfort, nor is the pleasure involved merely a paradoxical function of the move towards neutrality on the pleasure-pain scale. They are wholly net gains, and again it comes as no surprise when we are asked to note that the pleasures attendant on the exercise of reason in all its forms, the subtle satisfactions or pleasures of the mind, are of this pure and gratuitous kind. From all this Socrates concludes that, to the degree happiness is essentially related to pleasure and to having the best kind of pleasure, the person who most enjoys and enjoys the most of the pure pleasures is the happier person. That person cannot be the unjust man, the utter slave of his worst appetites. Rather it is the just and temperate man, he of well-ordered soul
who takes pleasure in the exercise of his rational faculties and finds greatest satisfaction in the expression and fulfillment of his higher, moral nature.

These distinctions among kinds and qualities of pleasure and happiness, and these arguments concerning the necessary, intrinsic relationship of virtue to genuine happiness, are finally recast in a powerful metaphor which appears very near the end of Book IX. The metaphor of the “many-headed monster” memorably captures the nature of and constant conflict within the human soul, as Plato understands it. The dark and light sides, the raw and the civilized, appetite and rational, the self-asserting and the humane, the struggle within ourselves between our selves, the precariousness of spiritual health, and the profound benefits of maintaining a wise equilibrium between our parts under the direction of a respectful exercise of reason, is there graphically depicted. Even if we are not altogether convinced by the arguments, or even not at all convinced by them, we may to some degree recognize ourselves in and moved by the metaphor.

The metaphor, indeed the whole of Book IX deserves prolonged reflection. Throughout it the question recurs: “is it true; is this the way we really are?” Has Plato somehow plumbed the very depths of our nature, our social relations and our happiness? Does our ultimate spiritual welfare, our happiness if you will, require or even merit the kind of ministration Socrates so strenuously insists on? Must we out of an understanding of our own well-being be self-governed in roughly the way Socrates has argued? Is there, finally, only one genuine and choiceworthy form which human happiness can take, and is the only route to it the cultivation of reason, temperance and virtue, as Plato makes it out? How much material and worldly loss, and how much pain and suffering is yet consistent with Socrates’ views of happiness, (no matter what the degree of justice, internal order, or equilibrium and virtue?) Many a virtuous man has been on the rack and would not
have been there except for his virtue, but can any virtuous man on the rack be called happy? And how does he compare in happiness with the vicious man in the same condition? What is his precious possession which can never be possessed by the vicious man? Are the appetites the great and steady source of human evil and misery, as Plato strongly suggests, and is our misery only deepened in a vain effort to satisfy them? Can reason and virtue possibly govern them if they are of the power and nature Socrates describes? Even if the arguments have established the greater happiness of the just man, have they at all established the misery or suffering of the unjust? What are we to conclude if they have not? Is the motivation to choose virtue over vice still sufficiently strong? Is happiness really and necessarily the intrinsic reward of virtue, or must we lamely make do with virtue being its own reward, its own and only reward? (As a comment: Plato’s denigration here of passion and sensory, bodily pleasure, his puritanical side so to speak, accords awkwardly with what we know of the activities of his master Socrates. Plato, of course, is aware of this as is clear, for example, in his dialogue Symposium.)

These and other questions should nag at you as you read and ponder Book IX. Write out your interpretations of the arguments and your answers, muster criticisms. Re-read earlier portions of the dialogue and then revise your written views. You will discover how much more structure and meaning it all takes on, even if you don’t come away satisfied that Plato’s understanding is fundamentally correct.

Book IX ends with a poignant and often echoed summons. It asks all to tend to their spiritual welfare by adhering to that grand law, the divine constitution of man’s nature and his city “laid up in heaven”. That constitution can be seen with the mind’s eye. It can be known to be true. We can be the spiritual citizens of that
city and follow its law, even though no city like it has yet or ever will exist on earth, and though no other person thinks it worthwhile to pay it heed.

And with this Plato’s great dialogue Republic should end. All the tasks set forth have been fulfilled, with whatever success you must judge. But it doesn’t end.
595-621 (Book X)

Even as we recall that the division of Republic into ten books does not represent Plato’s own organization of the work but was supplied later by others, we are still apt to be dissatisfied with Book X. It neither fits easily with the rest of the dialogue nor is a model of well-argued unity itself. The quality is not distinguished, not by Platonic standards anyway. This has led some to question its authenticity, but those severe doubts have largely disappeared. The material of Book X is now conceded to be Plato’s, perhaps added by him later as a kind of appendix.

There is an uneasy quality about the treatment of the first theme in Book X. We are put on our guard from the outset for even the transition from Book IX to Book X is not smooth. We are taken abruptly from the lofty summons of loyalty to a constitution “laid up in heaven” to self-conscious reassessment of the highly restricted role accorded art earlier in the dialogue. By returning to the subject and seeking further justification Plato reveals his own uneasiness.

And well might he be uneasy. It is difficult to name another person of comparable intellectual, moral and artistic stature whose views on the autonomy and worth of art are so systematically illiberal, (and I am using the word “illiberal” here in its descriptive, not its merely political, or economic, sense). How does Plato get into that position?

He is by no means unusual in his linking of the question of the role and autonomy of art to its social utility, i.e. in linking the kind and degree of freedom art is to enjoy to an embracing view of the social benefits or harms it produces. Societies can hardly be indifferent to the message and quality of artistic production. There are at least some values, attitudes and behavior which any
society must encourage and others which it must discourage, simply in the interest of its health, safety and welfare. Though the specific ways in which art shapes values and attitudes, and influences various forms of behavior, is so subtle and diffuse as to be difficult to pinpoint, few doubt that its role is great. It is also obvious that societies do not always act on their concern with the role of art in a wise fashion. But that the concern itself is both inevitable and legitimate is no less obvious.

History, ancient and modern, is replete with instances in which communities, acting through their governments but acting in other ways as well, have moved to direct, edit, censor or ban particular works of art which they rightly or wrongly judged threatening to their health, safety or welfare. Plato joined that large company when, earlier in the dialogue, he provided us with a number of instances of the sort which he felt were necessary. Many will find even that much of that kind of action illegitimate, but since he was there chiefly concerned with the education of the very young it is by no means clear that his recommendations are illegitimate in principle.

This aspect of the matter, important as it may be, does not begin to represent Plato’s systematic illiberality. Perhaps the latter was implicit in the earlier sections, but it becomes explicit when he returns to the subject here in Book X. If he was earlier, he is no longer making a case merely for the governance of particular kinds of faults of particular works of art. He now recommends that art in general and from the outset be vigorously governed and strictly be confined to a celebratory role. He argues that art must be treated as a kind of “service industry”, enjoying no autonomy, harnessed instead to rational, social and political values not of its own discovery and perhaps not representing its own commitment or understanding.
In outline at least, his argument is simple. Having already linked the autonomy of art to an embracing sense of its social utility, he now links its social utility to the knowledge or truth art can rightly claim to possess. He then tests that claim by applying his own theory of knowledge to it. It fails the test abysmally. According to the doctrine of ideas art is intrinsically wanting. It does not deal with or even have access to real things as they really are. It is inherently parasitic and derivative, working by a kind of clever imitation, making copies of things which are already at a second remove from reality.

Plato willingly concedes that art has power. Indeed, if it didn’t there would be no problem. Art charms, entertains and captivates, but does so by appealing to the inferior side of our nature. It is directed to and strengthens the pleasure-seeking, pleasure-taking, emotional and appetitive side. What’s worse, its appeal is so seductive and deceptive that it creates the utterly false impression of genuine knowledge, of enlightenment, as though “this is the way things really are”.

But of knowledge art does not partake, and of understanding, therefore, it creates only the illusion. Thus by its very nature art is confined within the Cave. It is clever, no question about it, it distracts and gives a kind of pleasure, but it can finally only result in the ruin of the minds of its audience or in the perpetuation of their mindlessness. For these reasons, then, it must be governed by others and be restricted to the merely celebratory, service role he describes.

Now “them’s strong words”; none stronger that I know of in the history of serious thought. I shall assume here that we believe that Plato must be grievously mistaken somehow, or at least that he cannot make these words stick in anything like the extreme form, certainly not across the board in the way he recommends. Still, merely by presenting a theory which purports to justify his policies Plato has
managed to shift much of the burden of argument on to our shoulders. It won’t do merely to rest smugly on our belief in artistic freedom, insisting that his claims are preposterous. If it has done nothing else his argument has put us in the position where we begin to feel the need for a theory of our own, perhaps one which will distinguish more delicately than his does between reality and the Cave, between knowledge, truth and enlightenment, and illusion, mere opinion and sensation. Generating such a theory is a tall order, and that order will not be filled here, but some of the requirements it must satisfy are clear enough in outline. It would require a patient and detailed analysis of what are, perhaps, various modes of human cognition and their objects. It would require a patient and detailed analysis of the nature of art, the insights of artists and how these are expressed in various artistic modes. And it would require, finally, a balanced and sensitive analysis of the relation of freedom, including artistic freedom, to human welfare, social and individual, together with deep consideration of the sources of human energy, imagination and creativity.

Such an account might allow us to say with confidence that the theory of knowledge on which his argument rests is altogether too crude, or has been too crudely applied. It might allow us to distinguish, for example, between the artistic “heavyweights” and the rest, between the great ones and the others. Without begging the question, it nonetheless seems in order to begin with the hypothesis that any theory which relegates the Homers, Dantes, Shakespeares, Miltons, Austens, Eliots, Tolstoys and Dostoyevskys, (confining this short list to poetry, drama and fiction), to say nothing of Plato himself as a consummate artist….any theory which relegates such as these to the Cave, as offering no genuine enlightenment, is so crude as to need serious amendment. Our experience tells us
that such as these are not mere corrupters of the mind, and an account must be generated which deals with the difference.

In presenting this line I do not mean to suggest that some of our need for a theory to counter Plato’s has not been supplied in the intervening centuries. Some of it has been. For example, John Stuart Mill’s essay *On Liberty*, takes up one aspect of the problem, that of freedom, and though it is not, as it stands, an exhaustive account nor free of problems of its own, it is seriously addressed to Plato’s profound challenge.

But in presenting this line it must also be noted that it rests essentially on the possibility of making important distinctions. It does not rest on anything like total rejection of Plato’s view. Thus it is evident that the case just made against him is the easiest one. Defending such as Homer, Shakespeare or Tolstoy against a merely celebratory role, an abject submission to what could be little more than the narrow, partisan, transient, banal, prejudiced and unenlightened views of society at a moment in time and of its government of the day….to defend such as these against that is important but still the easy case. For what has been suggested is only that there are at least some artists who are not dwellers in the Cave. It is not to suggest that there is no Cave, much less that all who claim to be artists are out of it! Thus Plato’s fears concerning the influence of at least those artists who remain in the Cave cannot be dismissed yet. And if the suppression or control of art by society runs the strong risk of being banal, prejudiced and stupid, as was said, it must also be admitted that banality for banality, prejudice for prejudice, and stupidity for stupidity, almost nothing can compete with most of the art with which we are everywhere surrounded, including much that purports to be serious art.
What could better express the qualities of mind and the level of understanding Plato designates as the Cave than much that appears on television, in the movies, in literature, and in contemporary music? Can we honestly deny it mainly constitutes distraction and illusory escape, at best a kind of mindless entertainment, though pretentiously giving rise to the false sense of significance Plato indicted? Can we seriously maintain that this bombardment, so often little more than the gross expression of motive for financial profit, does not encourage intellectual, moral and emotional immaturity? Even as we grant that there are oases in this desert, genuine instances of enlightenment and taste, the question remains whether oases are enough and whether there are enough of them. If we answer “yes” to that question one might be pardoned for suspecting that our vision of maturity has already been corrupted, at least partly by the very forces Plato challenges, and that it is a measure of their influence that we scarcely recognize the mental and spiritual poverty they have produced in us. Is it possible that our standards of excellence and enlightenment have been undermined, as Plato claimed would take place, that we no longer recognize vital distinctions between truth and illusion, knowledge and opinion, maturity and immaturity, or between values and an indulgent, tolerant form of nihilism, and that this is nowhere more evident than in our bewildered indifference to the artistic influences to which we subject ourselves?

On the other hand, it would be dangerous folly to deny that our problems may be almost as severe if we seek to correct, holus bolus, what many would concede to be these serious “errors”. It is no simple task to direct, edit or censor artists and their productions without great disruption. It would be a monumental task to govern art sensitively and sensibly. The risk of the imposition of other forms of intellectual, moral and emotional immaturity is great, even when or
perhaps especially when done in the name of the integrity of the public mind and the health, safety and welfare of the community. That that risk is not confined to the theoretical level only, a glance at what takes place in various other nations these days will confirm. That, too, can be ugly and demeaning, nor is its long-range utility unquestionable.

Thus as I see it and taken all in all, Plato has indeed raised a serious problem for our consideration. It is now and will continue to be our problem despite our mutual indifference to it and despite our likely quick rejection of the solution he proposes. The integration of art and artists into society has rarely for long been smooth, gracious or confident, at least not in complex, populous, heterogeneous communities where the notion of freedom has taken a strong hold. How art is to be governed, by whom, and with what reference to legitimate social concerns, is but another manifestation of the more general, eternal problem of freedom and authority. It is worth our time and particularly worth yours as you seek to come to terms with Republic, to try to provide a more coherent and balanced resolution of the problem. Since writing tends powerfully to concentrate the mind, I suggest you address this problem also in that way, perhaps first and best by considering those forms that are most familiar and surely influential, movies and television.

The second theme of Book X, that with which the dialogue concludes, is concerned with the fate of just and unjust souls in the world hereafter. Before he can reveal those awesome secrets, however, Plato must first establish that there is life after death or, since he believes in the reincarnation of souls, that there is life after life...indefinitely.

His attempt to prove that the individual soul is indestructible (i.e. is immortal and thus the possible object of any action whatsoever) is, in fact, the only
real argument in this section. Of course, the general theme of personal immortality and cosmic or divine retribution has fascinated mankind for a long, long time, and still continues to fascinate. Plato’s treatment of that theme is, as always with him, dramatic and imaginative, but it scarcely constitutes an argument that any kind of retribution awaits individual souls hereafter (even if they are immortal), much less a compelling one. When discussing the idea of soul in Book IV, I suggested we could interpret it in a mild non-religious, descriptive sense, as the complex vital system of mind and body in a human person. I warned then, however, that such a sense would not work when we deal with soul in Book X. For here Plato treats soul as being somehow an independent thing or entity that survives on its own after the death of the body. That treatment seems to convert soul into a kind of spiritual substance, that yet is related to time. It was before related to the body in a vital way but now is somehow still available to be addressed on the occasion of its being judged.

I have great, likely terminal difficulty comprehending that notion. But as you may recognize, it is a very important notion because something much resembling that notion of soul has played a central role in Christian doctrine since at least the 3rd Century (C.E.). The neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus had a great influence on early Christian thinkers, and many scholars believe the Christian doctrine of the human soul grew out of Plato’s in this indirect but influential way.

However that may be, even to take up this theme represents a shift from the general line of inquiry pursued in Republic, though since the shift is expressly acknowledged we are not being misled. The general theme of the dialogue has been to chart the intrinsic nature of justice and the intrinsic benefits it confers on those who are just. To be sure, Socrates departed from that when, in Book IX, he mustered arguments trying to show that there are extrinsic rewards for justice as
well; that the social world consistently bestows rewards and satisfactions on the just which it denies to the unjust. Those arguments were considered earlier. Socrates produces variations on them here: that the just in fact receive honor in the long run, that their influence is great, that their families enjoy high social status, etc. Whether you find such arguments more cogent and persuasive the second time than you did the first is for you to determine.

But Socrates’ main object here is to describe another set of extrinsic rewards of justice (and penalties for injustice) of such prodigious significance as to make the choice of the just life the only rational act. Quite simply what he claims is that remarkable, inescapable and unambiguous rewards and punishments are dealt out to our immortal souls by the Gods, following which we are fated to an indefinitely prolonged sequence of lives whose quality is determined largely by the moral choices we make in the life presently being lived. Yet none of that can happen, of course, unless the individual souls are still available, so to speak. Thus Socrates must first establish that the soul does not perish with the body at death.

His argument to prove the indestructibility of souls is clever in itself and worth pursuing in other contexts for other purposes. In form it is essentially a special application of a more general type of argument called “argument from analogy”. The latter is a common form of reasoning of great utility, engaged in by all of us very often. Science relies on it for leads to many of its most fruitful inquiries. At its simplest, in an argument from analogy we infer the existence or nature of unknown properties of an object from the likeness of that object to another whose properties are already known. In this case Plato infers an unknown (and in principle, perhaps, forever unknown and unobservable) property of the soul, its indestructibility, from its claimed likeness to other objects, homely, usually material objects, whose properties are known, particularly properties
connected with their degeneration and dissolution. As I said, Plato’s is a special instance of argument from analogy and it needs for its validity the truth of what might loosely be called “general laws” concerning the degeneration and dissolution of objects. The use of laws in arguments of this sort is itself valid, providing, of course, that such laws are known to be true.

In form, therefore, the general line of reasoning used by Plato here is familiar and when used well is powerful indeed. However, this kind of reasoning is subject always to two severe restrictions. First, no argument from analogy is ever conclusive in itself, no matter how suggestive or fruitful it may be. In the last analysis, we must independently establish the hitherto unknown properties of the object in question. The argument from analogy may lead us in the search but it simply cannot by itself prove what the results of that independent inquiry will reveal. Second, what the argument from analogy indicates concerning the probability that the unknown property of an object will be like the known property of another object depends altogether on the closeness of the likeness between the objects compared.

With these things in mind, then, you should carefully consider Plato’s argument. First write out what you take his argument to be, as clearly as you can. I find that I can pretty well capture it in four premises and a conclusion. Then go on to give a written analysis of each of the premises, trying to make out their meaning with precision. If you find them ambiguous in meaning, spell out the consequences in both directions. Test their truth by possible counter-examples, and assess the closeness of the alleged analogies which they rely on. Finally, write out your assessment of the argument’s validity in general. You’ll find this exercise well within your powers, and also discover solid satisfaction in your ability to meet Plato precisely on his own terms of argument.
Having established the immortality of the soul to his own apparent satisfaction, Socrates then gives an account of its fate hereafter. Some features in that account are familiar to us already. For example, the notion of intense and protracted reward or punishment is similar to the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell, but since temperance was a cardinal virtue with the Greeks it is indeed pleasant to find that Plato’s version is much more moderate than is Christianity’s. Less familiar to us is the doctrine of the endless reincarnation of souls. That doctrine is important in Hindu and Buddhist thought, and one version of the latter is surprisingly close to the one Socrates presents. Several features of it are worth special comment. One is that chance plays a determining part in our fate hereafter; merit alone is not sufficient to account for our fortunes, or so Plato reasons. That is an interesting complication of Plato’s story and worth some reflection. Another feature worth thought is that the souls of animals are also reincarnated, apparently following the same procedure as for human souls. In fact there seems to be considerable exchange of roles between animals and humans. I take kindly to Plato’s generosity here, but find its deeper logic somewhat unclear. Is Plato claiming that all souls are really human, after all, capable of rational and moral choice, but from time to time inhabit non-human bodies? That is surely a possible position to hold and one might come up with arguments to recommend it. But as Plato presents it we are given little reason to accept the proposition. On the other hand, if Plato is not claiming that, then how are the souls of animals capable of participating in the procedure at all and why are they held morally accountable even to this degree?

It is probably necessary to note here that many, perhaps most commentators find Plato’s recourse to a doctrine of punishment and reward hereafter discordant. Quite beyond the question of its validity as a convincing argument, they interpret it
as a gross reliance on fear or favor as providing the ultimate, compelling motive to choose justice, and claim that such reliance severely detracts from Plato’s central concern and vision. There may well be merit in that observation, for if Plato did mean more and other by it he didn’t allow Socrates to bring that meaning well to the fore. You might profitably puzzle over the question: is it necessarily motive only that is served by a doctrine of punishment and reward in life hereafter?

And in this connection, finally, it is also worth noting that Republic is not the only Platonic dialogue in which our possible fate after death figures in an otherwise straightforward analysis of moral life. There is, most notably, a similar “postscript” in Plato’s dialogue Gorgias, which has other similarities to Republic as well. In it we meet another challenging immoralist, Callicles, who is sometimes called “Thrasymachus’ twin”, since in character and idea he is closely related to the figure in Republic. The theme of Gorgias centers on the moral life and why we should choose it, and concludes with, shall we call it, a sanction hereafter. If you have found the theme and treatment in Republic rewarding you would find Gorgias rewarding also, especially since it is more humorous, ironic and dramatic than Republic, though its scope is nothing like so grand. I recommend you turn to it sometime.