The Tension Between Morality and Philosophy in The Platonic Dialogues

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THE TENSION BETWEEN MORALITY AND PHILOSOPHY IN
THE PLATONIC DIALOGUES

by

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ABSTRACT

The following honors thesis examines the perennial tension between self-interest and altruism as it figures in the political thought of Plato. Plato is well known for having rigorously elucidated this tension in his dialogues, particularly as it arises in the relationship of philosophy to politics. Nevertheless, scholars continue to disagree about the precise nature of Plato’s analysis. Does he regard the life dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom as the acme of public service, as most commentators maintain? Or is the philosophic life by Plato’s lights an insuperably selfish enterprise, as certain interpreters have suggested? Using hermeneutic methods developed by Schliermacher, Friedlander, and Strauss, this honors thesis uses closely reads four dialogues to uncover Plato’s responses to these queries. Plato’s answers matter because these questions are our own. The Academy that he set up endures in the modern university, just as modern academics continue to face charges of elitism or partisanship. Whether Plato considered such charges true of his own enterprise, or merely of its various vulgarizations, is of interest in its own right. But it is also of importance to anyone working in modern academe, inasmuch as we aspire to intellectual standards first articulated in Plato’s dialogues.
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INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the modern man seems to live the best life. He has enslaved reason to provide him with a warm bed, a large home, fast transportation, and ready entertainment. He has employed science as a bodyguard to protect him from the frailty of his body and the weakness of his nature. He counts among his indentured servants portals to ostensibly limitless knowledge, and even boasts the wit sufficient to put a man on the moon and a computer in every pocket. Comfort and power have become his bedfellows, and he likes their company best. Thus, to the modern man, reason appears to be an eminently good thing, for he owes his life of plenty to it.

Thinking himself reasonable, the modern man writes laws based on and in service to this notion of goodness. Among these are moral laws that govern how members of the community must treat each other, and which aim to care for the whole of that community, a community in which the modern man has no choice but to reside. Knowledge is good, such a moral lawmaker thinks, for it will make everyone safer and more comfortable as it did me. Then it must also be good, he believes, to disperse knowledge, or to educate, as many within society as possible, and to base society on reason. In order to do that, he concludes, society must turn its back on the essentially irrational, arbitrary and thus unjust customs and traditions of yesteryear, and forge ahead to a radically different, more just, and more perfect future that cares for all. All must be given the right to decide for themselves what is right and what is best, as they all also reject the authority of the past viewed to be incompatible with the individualistic power of the present.
In many ways, the world in which we live today reflects this conclusion. Modern government has redefined justice by egalitarian norms that they believe to be eminently reasonable. Democracies of the developed Western world, much unlike the maligned monarchies, theocracies, and empires of the past, claim to respect the equality and universality of human rights - of property, of liberty, and of physical protection - because reason dictates that human beings need certain properties, certain liberties, and certain protections to survive, and to feel fulfilled enough that they will not kill each other. Individual citizens of such nations internalize these norms, and speak of them daily as if to signal their own virtue. Public school teachers are the real heroes, especially when they teach particularly disadvantaged children. Education is the real savior, whatever education means. “Educating” each other about our own experiences- not to mention listening to and validating those of others, especially those less fortunate than ourselves - is not only intrinsically worthwhile, but a public service. And public service, whatever else it is, is epitomized by getting one’s hands dirty; to spend all one’s time at a food bank, to ignore other ambitions and teach young children to read and write, and to know as much as possible about the world around us is certainly a laudable thing. Reason and critical thinking, and the encouragement thereof, are evidently innocent and obviously good. So says modern reason.

But in saying so, an observer might note, modern reason admits a contradiction. For these moral rules also seem generally impatient with the devotion to reason. What is moral, it seems, is what is actionable, or what is liable to rectify the inequalities of the world. Because so many of those inequalities still exist, political inactivity quickly becomes impermissible. Who are you, modern moralism seems to ask, to overlook those
inequalities, to ignore those who suffer from injustice, or, worst of all, to let the most vulnerable and most miserable continue to suffer? So in one way or another, moral goodness is publicly judged and validated by the resume you have managed to create, complete with a list of your virtuous actions. You know the kind: the resumes that recount how many causes you have taken up, how many organizations you have joined, how many handouts you have given, how many testimonials you have posted, and how much indignation you are able to conjure when those less fortunate than you are wronged. Learning is useful, it seems, not because it is intrinsically valuable - for that proposition, modern moralism has little patience - but because it is morally useful; it makes you more qualified to take action deemed morally virtuous, and hopefully, one day, change the world.

For this reason, moral rules and their most zealous followers love to criticize those who dedicate their lives to reason. Such dedication, a devout moralist might claim, is selfish, for it keeps one’s hands clean of public service. The professors of the modern university might then be maligned as irrelevant to the public, and, sitting in their ivory towers as their critics claim they do, might be called elitist, a trait in irreconcilable tension with the moral rules that modern society has written in stone. Indeed, they frequently are. So intellectuals who are (or at least aspire to be) holistically devoted to their love of reason are neither viewed to be innocent nor good.

If these criticisms are levied against intellectuals precisely because they are intellectual, precisely because they dedicate themselves to thought and to practicing reason above all else (including the moral rules that reason creates), then modern moralism must, albeit paradoxically, harbor threads of misology. Modern government
and its moral values, reasonable as they claim to be, must continue to be defined by an opposition to or hatred of reason; it must be, at least in part, characterized by the anti-intellectualism that pervades its political rhetoric, by the presence of religion in politics, by the coups that lurk against democracy, and by the essentially unreasonable notions, events, and longings of the human spirit that modern reason often fails to or even hates to thoroughly confront or understand. In some sense, what might be called morality must be threatened or offended by the life of the mind, or what might be called philosophy. Put another way, there must be a tension between philosophy, and those most devoted to it, and morality, and those most devoted to it. This tension must be both unquantifiably important and urgently relevant, for it runs beneath and continues to affect the political life upon which all human lives depend. In this thesis, I will investigate and attempt to illuminate this significant tension between morality and philosophy with the help of an ancient authority: the dialogues of the Greek philosopher Plato.

Definitions

If I am to properly begin this investigation, I must do as any philosopher worth her salt would command: define my terms. While many concepts will come into play throughout this investigation, the two most crucial to clarify at the outset are “morality” and “philosophy.” To begin with the former, many definitions of morality have arisen in the history of political thought. In her *Virtue is Knowledge*, the contemporary scholar Lorraine Pangle helps to illuminate some of those definitions. There, she outlines three types of virtue, all of which can be understood as a type of morality. She starts by contrasting the “eudaimonist” view, a view also illuminated by Gregory Vlastos in Ch. 8 of his ‘Socrates,’ that moral “virtue is the essence of happiness” (Pangle 10) and the
“utilitarian” view, that moral virtue is the “means to happiness.” Each of these subtypes have a “moral” version, which refers to moral virtue as political convention traditionally understands it, through rules and customary norms, a “hypermoral version, “which claims or suggests that morality, more or less as it is conventionally understood, is not only binding on us but the only thing worthy of serious attention at all; and a trans-moral version that defines virtue or human excellence in a way that leaves behind many of the elements of conventional morality, including beliefs about duties, obligations, and condign rewards and punishments”(Ibid).

She then introduces the “heroic” subtype, which, at its core, claims that moral “virtue is always good because it is supremely noble, even if it often fails to bring happiness”(Pangle 15). Moral virtue is, by this account, a sacrifice, one that demands a kind of self-forgetting. In sacrificing herself, the moral hero thinks that she cares for the political community fully, and thus provides it a service. Yet while its worth is often described in these terms, what distinguishes the aim of heroic moral virtue is its “nobility,” for it is its ‘seemliness’ which defines its intrinsic worth; it is that essence that makes it choiceworthy to the moral hero. It is this “noble” type of morality with which this thesis will be concerned.

The Greek understanding of the term “the noble” is complicated. Literally translated as “τὸ καλόν,” it can also mean the beautiful, the good, or the fine. For the purposes of this investigation, we will reserve the term “good” to be defined differently, and focus on this aspect of “beauty.” The noble is, by this account, so beautiful or refined that it demands love and admiration of the human soul. This is especially true of moral beauty, for the political community stands most ready to admire it. To place this concept
of “moral beauty,” we might first remember classical heroes like Achilles, Hector or Odysseus. We might also consider modern examples, such as an old woman throwing herself in front of a bus to save a small child, or a young man trekking across a war zone to save his brother from an enemy prison camp. Feats such as these are impressive because so few would dare, so few could make themselves, and so few would have occasion to demonstrate this self-sacrificial kind of moral virtue.

These are extreme examples, and this “noble” kind of moral virtue has much more accessible, much more conventionally moral examples: members of the political community can sacrifice their time, their money, their emotional and mental energy, their expertise, or their passion for the sake of others, and all of those are essentially noble feats. Using the most extreme of the examples available to us and describing this virtue in “hypermoral” terms merely helps us to illustrate more clearly the heart or epitome of the kind of moral virtue we are here investigating. While we will come to see that political morality is divided into many virtues, and is itself wrought with tension, this noble morality, now more clearly illustrated, is the heart or essence of the kind of moral virtue with which this thesis is most concerned.

With that established, we need only define “philosophy,” at least for now. While philosophy has come, especially in modern times, to be equated with such understandings as “critical thinking” or “thinking about serious things,” that conflation is, comparatively, a crude reduction. In classical times, philosophy was something much more expansive. To grasp this expanded understanding in relevant terms, we might do best to turn to Plato himself. Plato’s dialogues often dramatically recount tales of his predecessor and teacher, Socrates, and his interlocutions with various ancient Greeks. His Republic is no
exception, and there, Socrates and his interlocutors outline something of the nature of philosophy. At the end of Book V and the beginning of Book VI, Socrates and Glaucon decide that the philosopher is a “lover of learning” (475c), a “lover of the sight of the truth” (475e), and a “desirer of wisdom, not of one part or another, but all of it” (475b). Thus, philosophy is revealed as not only a mere practice, a dialectic or skill or science, a hat to be donned and doffed, but an essence to embody. Philosophy is not only something that you do; no, to Plato, it is something that you are: the philosopher is she who loves all of wisdom, and wisdom above all. And according to the Platonic Socrates, “a man who is really a lover of learning must from youth strive as intensely as possible for every kind of truth” (485d).

Yet also according to Socrates and the wisdom of his famous “turn” (see Dustin Sebell, 2016, or Catherine Zuckert, 2004), the knowledge that is especially needed is knowledge of the world, and knowledge of the world requires knowing the human place within the world, and, first and foremost, the place of each soul in the human world. Thus, the Socratic philosopher must strive to understand, first and foremost, the human things and the human “soul itself” (485d). Philosophy, then, having been defined as a way of life and a way of being, can now also be defined by how it pursues wisdom. The philosopher seeks wisdom by attempting to understand the human soul and the human world that hosts it, a world that is naturally political (Aristotle’s Politics 1.2). And that pursuit, whatever its moral status, justifies to such a world what is now called “philosophy,” (be that epistemology or mere critical thinking), for it outlines the place of philosophy within it. With that said, “morality” and “philosophy” can be both more
clearly understood and investigated as separate entities that both demand holistic devotion.

**Justification for a Socratic Approach**

Defining philosophy in this way implies that a Socratic lens offers something to our inquiry, and that the Platonic dialogues will provide our inquiry with wisdom. This implication is worth challenging and questioning, for not only are there many lenses from which to choose, but this particular one is also much removed from our own space and time. After all, Plato lived from roughly 427 to 347 BC; he lived in Athens, which, though it was a democracy, was very different from modern ones: it was smaller; its politics were much more intimate and intense, and it even had vastly different international contexts. So what does Plato offer the modern reader? What does the Socratic lens bring to our inquiry?

There are several answers to these questions, only the most important of which I will mention. The first, as it happens, we have already started to address: Plato’s unique definition of philosophy and reason as that to which the philosopher dedicates herself. To understand “reason” as a trait, an essence, and a way of life is necessarily a more expansive understanding than the modern, every-day use of the term. That contrast and expansiveness will prove useful if we are to understand the fundamental tensions between the life dedicated to reason and that dedicated to morality, for those tensions are still unclear to the common man.

Plato makes a second offering to us as readers, one just as fundamental to his texts. As a function of his understanding of philosophy - that which devotes itself to wisdom, and achieves wisdom by reasoning through the human things - Plato’s dialogues
are essentially and inherently political in nature. Plato’s dialogues illuminate and even focus on the political communities that host human beings and the truths, necessities, dogmas and doctrines upon which those communities depend. Morality is one of those doctrines, and as such, Plato’s dialogues become relevant to our inquiry, for they fundamentally aim to clarify the same topic.

Even so, one might perhaps reject such an overlap, on the grounds that Plato’s context was so different and so influential that his perspective on the matters of reason and morality could not possibly provide anything salutary, or at least anything directly relevant, to our understanding of the matter. Indeed, there are many scholarly critics who would dismiss a Platonic perspective on this inquiry for that very reason, from historicists, like Thomas Kuhn, to contemporary scholars, like Quentin Skinner and Emily Hall. This kind of criticism is ironic, for it is often those very critics, great defenders of social constructivism, who tout the educational value of diverse worldviews. But it has much more important, much more fundamental problems: this criticism not only underestimates Plato himself (by denying even the potential of him rising above the influence of his contexts), or the Socratics more generally (seeing as it denies their questions could be ours), but it misses one of their most important points, and in doing so, I suggest that it dismisses the proper study of their works prematurely. This point, which always bears repeating and emphasizing, might be put summarily as follows: there are problems and questions that have always and will always exist in the human world, for there are traits, capacities, tensions and longings that exist in the soul merely by virtue of it being a human one. There may be practical limits to how much we can comprehend the effects of this tensions across contexts, but such tensions still, Plato appears to want
to say, exist across contexts, at least in a fundamental sense. We might live in a more prosperous, more comfortable, and more scientifically knowledgeable world today, for example, but it too has its own prevailing norms and opinions, and its citizens might have a similar fervor about their attachment to such norms as they did in ancient Greece. And to the extent that these enduring traits and problems do exist, they are and will always be the most urging, most pressing, and most relevant matters of the day, for they run beneath and shape everything else.

Construed broadly, this seems to make sense. Consider: will not the human being always have a body, and need all sorts of protection and nutrition to sustain that body? Will not the human being always die and always be aware of that doom? And while they live, will not the human being always need peace and some degree of clarity upon which she can act? Will not the human being always desire, always have longings of some kind? In short, does not and will not the human being think, feel, love, and want to be loved, just by virtue of being human? It would seem so. There are wants and needs that characterize and fundamentally shape the human experience, and those wants and needs will endure despite their context. So too will certain problems always arise from those wants and needs, for wants and needs inevitably conflict. Even if, as many note, that context makes the human things emerge differently, a study of their context might reveal eternally discernible patterns. Thus, Plato and his Socratic counterparts seem eminently reasonable and at least partially or basically correct in suggesting that the true study of human nature, or philosophy properly understood, is or should be at its deepest core an acontextual quest, a quest that, at least in some ways, need not be limited by space and time. Philosophy, as the Socratics understand it, is the only avenue which can lead to
truth above and beyond what our contexts and conventions know to be true today. If we, in the hope of happening upon something true, are to question what we think we know about morality and reason, studying works of Socratic philosophy then seems an apt path to travel. With that in mind, relying on Plato to help us answer a fundamental question about the human world appears all the more appropriate, and the justification for such a reliance quite solid.

**Methods**

I will approach this investigation by relying on hermeneutic methods developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1998 [1838]), Paul Friedlander (1973 [1958]), and Leo Strauss (1952, 1964), which, in closely reading philosophical works, emphasize their rhetorical and even grammatical structures as a part of and a way to uncover their philosophical content. I have chosen to rely on these hermeneutic methods because they are the most emphatic about approaching the dialogues as literary texts, and their broad comprehension of these texts will provide a rich field of inquiry for deep, complex, and important questions such as this one.

As stated above, my approach will also respect the self-understanding of Plato as a philosopher who considered himself to be exploring universal problems that transcend particular historical contexts. It will further emphasize how Plato employs language, drama, and even irony to convey his insights. This emphasis - though limited by a language barrier, as Plato wrote in Attic Greek - will be strong. As I investigate the words of Socrates, I will, as diligently as possible, attempt to tease out the contradictions he makes, to call attention to those messages that lurk implicitly, and challenges that are made indirectly.
The fundamental reason for this attempt is perhaps best communicated by Thomas Pangle and Timothy Burns in their introduction to *Key Texts of Political Philosophy*. They explain: “in every culture it has appeared, political philosophy has meant questioning what is sacred, doubting what one is not supposed to doubt. This means that the questioning that is at the heart of political philosophy is a dubious and even dangerous enterprise” (Pangle & Burns 5). In other words, political philosophy is dangerous because it must call into question those notions and rules we most hold dear, and human beings require rules upon which they can rely with a reasonable degree of certainty. Because of this danger, political philosophers, Socrates being the first, have always had to be careful. Persuasion and speechmaking have always been arts of beautification and omission, certainly, but Socratic philosophers have an additional onus of editing themselves, for their subject of study is the most loved, most cherished and most important of all to their audience. Thus, multi-level political rhetoric must become a key part of works of political philosophy. This is especially the case when dealing with something as important to the political community as morality. As such, I will be especially vigilant in my attempt to illuminate this rhetoric and how it might alter the meaning of the dialogues and Plato’s intention in writing them.

To those familiar with philosophical interpretation, my explanation of the methods this thesis will employ might sound very similar to what is called “Straussian esotericism.” Named for Leo Strauss, the famous Platonic scholar of the twentieth century, this approach also emphasizes the esoteric - meaning implicit, latent, or unsaid - elements of the text. There are reasons for this emphasis, and they are difficult to dispute: Plato chose to write dialogues, and not treatises; Plato dwells on the subject of poetry⁴;
the discourse between Plato’s characters often seems to be, more than a codified argumentative form, sophisticated and artful⁵; and Plato investigates subject matter that is both seemingly fantastical⁶ and, as previously discussed, ardently cherished by his audience. The Platonic Socrates, too, is famous for his “irony,” or the practice of concealing the full extent of his wisdom. He also frequently contradicts himself. This means that Plato’s texts will always be inconsistent and rationally incomprehensible if all of their words are considered sincere, and if an investigation of such texts only keeps to the surface (See Arthur Melzer, 2014). In sum, since drama and poetry create a distance between the message and author, since Plato made the conscious choice to say what he meant indirectly, and because what the Platonic Socrates does say is contradictory, diligent interpreters - at least those who truly want to uncover the meaning of the dialogues - are left with duty to look beneath the surface of the text.

There are many and various critics of this approach. Famously, Shadia Drury and Myles Burnyeat have criticized Straussian esotericists, on both interpretative and morally pragmatic grounds. Many have followed in their footsteps, across analytical and continental traditions. Yet despite these numerous fault-finders, many contemporary scholars continue to employ this approach. Indeed, scholars like these expand “Straussianism” to mean something much more comprehensive and much more controversial than emphasizing the political message and rhetorical delivery of philosophical texts; it now carries with it a series of recognizable readings and interpretations of texts and authors that span across the history of political thought. For the sake of this thesis, I will neither expand the Straussian tradition nor only ascribe to mainstream readings of that tradition. Instead, I will use the method of Straussian
esotericism, not as a sacred practice to which I am dogmatically wedded, but rather as a working hypothesis and a beneficial way to reason through these immensely complicated works of philosophy, and come to my own original - and hopefully interesting - insights.

**Structure of Work**

This thesis will be structured into four chapters. Each chapter will, using the methods described above, investigate a different element of the relationship between morality - understood as conventionally noble, heroic morality - and Socratic philosophy, and each chapter will use a different Platonic dialogue to elevate its investigation. Chapter one will use Plato’s *Protagoras* to explore the moral foundations of philosophy, and the moral capabilities and powers thereof. While it will cover the entirety of the dialogue and be more expansively interpretive in nature, chapter two will be more focused: it will use Plato’s *Symposium* to illuminate the direction of the philosophic longing or love, and whether or not moral virtue demands that the philosopher moderate or even nobly satisfy some of those longings. Chapter three will utilize Plato’s *Apology* to elevate this understanding of the sacrifice, made by the philosopher on behalf of morality, by probing how grave and inevitable such sacrifices are. Finally, with the help of Plato’s “myth of Er,” found in Republic Book X, chapter four will question the worth of such noble sacrifices. It is my expressed hope and marked intention that through these investigations, my readers and I will come to understand more thoroughly the tense relationship between political morality and the philosophic way of life, and upon that knowledge, stand more ready to explore a better way of life.
Notes

1. Kuhn famously introduced the paradigm of contexts in scientific inquiry. Since that introduction, contextual analyses, disguised as philosophical ones, have abounded. See Thomas Kuhn, 1996, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for further clarification.

2. Quentin Skinner defends such hyper-historicism in his “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” Emily Hall, of King’s College, London, debated Cliff Orwin, of the University of Toronto, in 2021, on this matter. She, a cambridge-school historicist, claimed that Aristotle’s philosophy was more valuable than Plato’s.

3. The prospect of “enduring human questions” is both preceded and controversial in scholarly literature. For an explanation of how such a prospect might be defended, see pages 8-9.

4. The relationship between poetry and philosophy will be more fully addressed in Chapter four, on the myth of Er.

5. The subject of argumentative or philosophical “form” in discussion is a heavily researched, complicated one. Roughly understood, there is a Socratic “dialectic,” *elenchus*, or the elenctic method. It involves a series of questions and answers, and aims to illuminate the philosophical underpinnings of any position we hold. See “Dialectical School,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for further context. [https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dialectical-school/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dialectical-school/)

6. See note 1, chapter four.
Works Cited


CHAPTER I

PROTAGORAS AND THE MORAL POWERS OF PHILOSOPHY

What does becoming moral actually require? Images are conjured as piecemeal answers: we remember moments our parents made us own up to breaking the rules, and face the music; we think of coaches who made us play as a team or directors who made us share the spotlight; we treasure precious moments of kindness; we imagine mandatory charity and dream of involuntary goodwill. But there is nothing whole, nothing complete, nothing satisfactory about these fleeting images. Their partial and ambiguous nature suggests that this question demands more rigorous contemplation. Whatever the answer is, this much can surely be said: morality, especially conceived as self-sacrificial moral heroism, is far more than superficial gestures or sanctimonious posturing. Moral education, then, as the way of instilling morality, must be thorough and transformative in nature, whatever else it is. If this is to be believed, then the Socratic lens we have adopted for this investigation appears justified, for more fervently than those of other philosophical traditions, the Socratics believed that if a student is to become truly moral, then their soul must be - in some sense or another - turned.¹

Yet this approach carries with it its own issues. At first glance, Socratic philosophy could be viewed as merely a more thorough form of education, focused on the development of critical thinking. If that was all it was, Socratic philosophy would appear a servant to morality, conceived as heroism; it would be reduced to a rescue mission dedicated to those enslaved by ignorance. In many ways, this description resonates with the rhetoric familiar to modern audiences. After all, is not education the real savior? Are teachers not the real heroes? But a closer examination of the nature of Socratic philosophy complicates this picture. Plato is often
read as describing the Socratic philosopher as she who must abandon her own, she who must transcend rules to devote herself to the pursuit of wisdom.\(^2\) If this characterization is correct - and there is ample reason to believe it is - and if morality requires rules, then the Socratic philosopher cannot have a simple or perfectly harmonious relationship with moral virtue. In other words, there must always be a tension between the Socratic philosopher as philosopher, and the self-sacrificial morality of the political community.

What is more, there may be a related tension between Socratic philosophy and moral education. In part, this has to do with how Plato justifies the prioritization of wisdom above all other worthy human goals. Plato pays significant attention to the question of virtue, especially in two related dialogues, Protagoras and Meno. Scholars agree that here as elsewhere, the Platonic Socrates operates as an educator as well as a philosopher. This common academic account, especially articulated by Lorraine Pangle in *Virtue is Knowledge,\(^3\)* also dwells on how Socrates concludes that in the best human soul, virtue is one, for all virtue collapses into wisdom(\(\sigmaφία, sophía\)). If wisdom is the arbiter and essence of all virtue, then this would justify wisdom as the most important human goal. But sufficient attention has yet to be paid to all the consequences of that conclusion, not least: what should that mean for moral virtue? Does that mean that for all intents and purposes, moral virtue is to be set aside for the sake of wisdom? And what does that mean for the Socratic philosopher in education? Are philosophers to be comparatively unconcerned with moral education? Are they to dismiss the distinct importance of their own moral development? Are they to dispense with their role as moral educators?

To answer these questions, this chapter will delve into one Platonic dialogue: *Protagoras.\(^4\)* As a brief plot overview, this dialogue constitutes Socrates’s account of his interaction with the famous sophist Protagoras, delivered to - and for the benefit of? - young
Athenian Hippocrates and an unnamed crowd. Traditional accounts of *Protagoras* dwell on how Socrates illuminates the unity of virtue, but this chapter will concur with Robert Bartlett’s suggestion⁵ that this dialogue is equally devoted to the characterization of sophistry, or more specifically, sophistic education. According to Protagoras, this form of education offers its students not only skills of elocution, but more centrally grants them “good counsel concerning one’s own affairs,” so that he might “be the most powerful”(318e5-319a2). Sophistic education, as an offshoot of sophistry, might then be defined by the pursuit of enhancing one’s political excellence.

In many ways, it seems that *Protagoras* is the dialogue most respectful of sophistry. Unlike other dialogues, where Plato refers to sophistry with off-handed disdain, Socrates here gives dutiful weight and attention to the virtue and vices of sophistic education. This may very well be because sophistry shares important characteristics with philosophy; as the dialogue recounts, because sophistry is unconventional, sophistry, like philosophy, is often publicly cloaked⁶ in a similar manner; both sophistry and philosophy examine and question political norms and seem to seek an improved version of them; and in both sophistry and philosophy, virtue seems to be divided into two forms: pedestrian and elite.⁷ Perhaps more relevantly, the roles of both sophist and Socratic philosopher seem multifaceted: they both must educate and seek wisdom in their own right.

These similarities might lead readers to confuse Socratic philosophy with sophistry. Indeed, as we will later discover, Protagoras himself seems to believe that Socratic criticisms of sophistry are mere hypocrisy.⁸ This chapter will attempt to challenge that assertion by emphasizing the differences between Socratic philosophy and sophistry. These differences are both subtle and pronounced, but I will contend that the contrast between the two practices be
reduced to one idea: that Socratic philosophy is more concerned with true wisdom than sophistry can be. In this dialogue alone, images of the sophists huddled in packs, immersed in geology and astronomy (318d9, e4), while Socrates roams around, apparently unconcerned with these comparatively small potatoes, seems to confirm this analysis. Indeed, Socrates only becomes interested in this discussion when Prodicus speaks, and only because he notes him as “all together wise man” (316a). It is clear, then, that sophists and Socratics act differently.

But the nature or virtue of Socratic philosophy is much less clear. For if Socrates lives his life according to curiosity, happening upon a conversation or educating others whenever it suits him, can he really be called moral? Can his followers? By way of closely reading this dialogue, I will argue that Socratic philosophy, properly undertaken and performed, is indeed a deeply and diversely moral activity. I will do so by analyzing the moral powers of philosophy that Socrates reveals in the dialogue: philosophy can, at least by my interpretation of the text, identify morality in its various forms, expose immorality, and prove that morality is a worthy human goal. I will contend that these powers suggest the competence of Socratic philosophers as moral educators. Put another way, this chapter will argue that if the soul of a student must be turned to truly become moral, then philosophy is the most - perhaps only - capable tutor to administer that transformation.

Identifying Immorality: Exposing and Discouraging Immoral Teachings

We will begin by evaluating the contention that Socratic philosophy, useless and irrelevant as it may seem, has the indispensable and unique capacity to expose immorality and identify morality. To that end, our investigation will follow the plot of the dialogue, and track the role of Socrates throughout. As the main action of the dialogue begins, Socrates is roused from his sleep by young Hippocrates, who tells him that Protagoras has arrived in the city - a fact of
which Socrates is already aware, for he has followed the travels of the famous sophist with interest (310b). Hippocrates begs Socrates to come with him to the home of the “noble” and wealthy Callias, who hosts Protagoras and his comrades. In seeing such alacrity, Socrates asks Hippocrates simple yet stultifying questions, roughly amounting to: what exactly is a sophist? What do they know and what do they claim to teach? Blushing⁹ Hippocrates is unable to provide satisfying answers to such questions, able to respond only that sophists must be “knowers of wise things,” teachers of “clever speaking” (312c-e). When probed about what he means by these definitions, Hippocrates is “unable to tell [Socrates] anything further” (312e).

It is this silence that will come to define the moral action of the dialogue. In noting that Socrates Hippocrates is “manifestly ignorant” (313c) of the “risk” “to which [Hippocrates] intend[s] to subject his soul” (313a), and unknowing of whether sophistry is something “good or bad” (312c) Socrates undertakes the mission of supervising the “rearing” of Hippocrates’s soul. The two men agree that such rearing unfolds “doubtless by learning,” and must be overseen by a “physician expert in what pertains to the soul. Of course clarifying questions arise from such an agreement, not least: what qualifies a “physician expert in what pertains to the soul”? What defines “learning?” There may be many practical answers to these questions, but beyond all else, it is clear Socrates believes that proper learning must care for the soul and make it better, an edification upon which all political fates depend (313a). In a moral sense, this would mean that a proper educator would need to make their students more morally virtuous, and more concerned with moral virtue as a human goal.

In order to do that, however, as Socrates loves to point out, students of such an educator would first need to take a step back, so that they may come to know what morality is. In Protagoras, though, Socrates approaches this somewhat differently than he does elsewhere (e.g.
Republic). As the dialogue unfolds, the most meaningful strides in defining morality actually come from illuminating what it is not, and which tutors fail to instill it - namely, sophistic education. I will argue that throughout the dialogue, Socrates reveals the secret immorality of Protagoras and those like him by exposing those many immoral lessons that are essential to sophistry, and, in however limited a manner, manages to articulate the danger such lessons pose to political society. My interpretation will contend that Socrates achieves this, in short, by luring Protagoras into admitting various concealed lessons that reveal him to be not only self-interestedly ambitious, but also morally dangerous.

The first of these concealed beliefs is, in some ways, not concealed at all. It was common knowledge that sophists asked a fee for their services; indeed, Hippocrates knew about and could afford such a fee(311b-e), and Socrates repeatedly emphasizes What is concealed, however, is how that comes to affect the sophist’s understanding of education. When Socrates agrees to follow Hippocrates to the home of Callias, where the conversation will take place, and when Socrates is finally able to strike up a conversation with Protagoras within earshot of the other men present(317d), it is only with pressure that Protagoras recounts what he believes to characterize the kind of education he offers, that being “good counsel in one’s own affairs,” aimed towards power, specifically political power.

A certain kind of selfish immoralism is immediately apparent in this admission, especially from a modern perspective where the intentions of political actors are reputedly maligned and the latitude afforded them so constrained. Not wanting to satisfy ourselves with appearances, however, there is a certain duty encumbered on us to investigate whether Protagoras is really motivated by self-interested ambition, if he claims to teach the best way to make that ambition bear fruit, and if that ambition is really dangerous to political society.
Yet on this rare occasion, our immediate, moralistic judgements seem confirmed. Protagoras - again, with some pressure from Socrates - repeats that those who come to him will learn his art of sophistry, that through that art, he will “go home in a better state”(318a), and that “better,” to a sophist, means that they “most powerfully” “carry out the city’s affairs”(319a). It is for this reason that Protagoras reveals that he believes himself to be “worthy of the fee I charge and still more,” and why that is also “the opinion of the student himself”(328b-c). What is more, Protagoras admits that he “has suffered nothing terrible” in openly admitting that this is his craft(317c), an admission that is itself a “precautionary measure”(317b). In sum, Protagoras admits he practices education in a private manner to make his students powerful, which they believe to be best, and as a result, he himself has become powerful and rich.10 A clear characterization of sophistry arises from this admission: sophistry believes education should be conducted for private benefit, not public gain. Such a characterization is just as clearly morally dangerous, for it distances the intention of developing civic virtue, or making men “good citizens;” in fact, it posits that “good citizens” are those that most ingeniously pursue their own ends(consider 319a). This position will always endanger the city from a moral perspective, because in the absence of civic virtue, the city fails to be more important than the individual, and since the interests of the one and the many will always conflict, the well-being of the many will suffer as a result of this lesson being taught.

But in what specific ways will they suffer? What might we term this prominence and prioritization of self-interested ambition? One possible response is “injustice.” Socrates will explore the virtue of the just in greater detail, but even in the most vague sense, justice seems concerned with what is fair and what is right for political society, and commands citizens of the city to follow its rules. Certainly, sophistry, as described by Protagoras, conflicts with this
vision, for the most powerful create their own rules, and only “pretend to possess justice” (323b). Whoever “the many” (317a) are that profit from “justice and moderation and being pious” - what Protagoras deems to be “political virtue” - they are not sophists, who concern themselves with a different virtue (330a, 352d). The sophists are then distanced from political virtue, see themselves above civic virtue, and as such, must oppose political morality, including moral justice. But if in doing so, they also profit in power and money, a second not-so-concealed but morally dangerous lesson appears at the heart of sophistry: injustice is profitable. In that light, Protagoras appears to be one of the first of those to so dangerously believe education is only a business - those who always seem to be far too close to home. Socrates manages to shed such light on the sophist.

After Protagoras recounts the nature of his profession and what he claims to teach, Socrates imbues the conversation with the word “virtue.” It is upon this basis Socrates seems justified in beginning to discuss the nature of virtue in its entirety, and whether virtue is teachable (beginning at 319b) - the discussion that is the basis of the whole dialogue to come. Socrates not-so-convincingly claims that he does not believe virtue to be teachable, and asks Protagoras to convince him otherwise. Seeming to care little for the one best or most appropriate style of speech for the occasion, Protagoras decides to present both a myth and argument to do just that.

Protagoras’s myth concerns Prometheus (literally, forethought), Epimetheus, and their delivery of various powers to the creatures on earth, creatures that the gods had created. Read both allegorically and closely, this myth comes to resemble the Socratic description of myth in Republic II-III, as that which structures and informs the creation of personal character. To put it another way, this myth latently expresses those things one must fundamentally believe if you
are to dedicate yourself to the kind of life the sophists believe is best. On the whole, it turns out, the sophists have a rather bleak outlook on life (Bartlett 73), preferring to see the world as quite charmless and inhospitable. To them, humans are weak, vulnerable, despicable creatures, prone to injustice, cowardice, and sickness of the mind and body (321c-322b). Yet the problem with the world is not only with humans. The gods, represented by Zeus in this myth, prevent cities from perishing “altogether” (322c), but have no care for the fate of the individual. In sophistry, it seems, there are no gods to guard you against other human beings who might hurt you, no gods to look after, love, protect, or guide you. That falls to you and you alone.

And all of that is true, does not sophistry appear justified? If other human beings are weak, evil creatures that deserve no gratitude, care, devotion, or moral dignity, why pursue anything other than what you perceive to be your own interests? Why care about the city or the morality on which it depends? If there are no gods of love, gods of mercy, gods of justice to either punish or help you, why should you pray to them or be pious? In sum, why should you follow rules at all, moral, pious, or otherwise? After all, it was Prometheus that followed the rules, and Prometheus who was blamed for the crimes of Epimetheus (322a). Prometheus the rule-follower also seems to be Prometheus the sucker. So aren’t you justified in looking after number one, getting ahead, and breaking whatever rules you see fit, as long as you can get away with it? Isn’t that the duty, dark and brutal as it may be, that falls to every capable and realistic political man in this dog-eat-dog world? To survive? To “preserve [our]selves” (322b)? And is there not, at least conceivably, a certain economic or spiritual prosperity that results from this recognition, a prosperity in which the city might share? In short, does not necessity justify injustice? This myth implies that the answer is yes, and suggests that the real human world requires the prudent lord to live unjustly. As Machiavelli puts it: if all men were good, this teaching would not be
good; but because they are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them” (Princeton, 18.3). The Sophists seem to concur with such an assessment.

It is perhaps precisely because of these lurking premises that Socrates begins to examine the nature of justice and piety. As we will come to see, Socrates and Protagoras actually agree about the conventional definition of these political virtues, but they have a very different reality of the place of justice in the human soul, and the relationship of each soul to the city. For now, though, Socrates begins his gracefully playful, yet high stakes dance with Protagoras. Socrates, on the basis of what has been said, asks Protagoras about the relationship between the virtues he has mentioned, some of which he claims to teach, but to all of which he pays lip-service. The first relationship he chooses to press Protagoras about is that between justice and piety. He repeatedly asks Protagoras to equate the two (331b, d, e), asking him to keep in mind what might benefit an imaginary student he teaches. Socrates knows full well that Sophists are themselves greatly concerned with cloaking their beliefs, and thus in some ways, this passage might be read as the Socratic plead to Sophists to present themselves with moral care.

Regardless, because he has heard and, as always, taken careful note of his myth and argument, Socrates presumably knows full well that the deepest part of Protagoras will resist such a conflation. And so Protagoras does, choosing instead to evade, hurry the conversation along, or ramble about the parts of the face and how something might be similar and dissimilar all at once (331c, d-e, 332a). As is so characteristic for Socrates, he notices that Protagoras is “finding this annoying,” and decides to “leave it be” (332a), but only to change tact. Socrates decides to approach the problem from another angle: asking if all virtues only have one opposite. If they do, then justice need not be piety; each can be laudable, but in their own way. In knowing this, Socrates traps Protagoras into admitting the opposite. As Bartlett tells it, “if
[Protagoras] were to openly oppose him, he would have to agree that piety is unjust, and justice impious” (Bartlett 75). In the face of this trap, the sophist is left with few options. Knowing that he is surrounded by those who would judge him, Protagoras could only “agree,” “albeit very unwillingly” (333b). So Socrates is left with a victory all around: not only did he manage to get Protagoras to unwillingly agree to the premise he needs to continue with the argument, but in pressing the issue multiple times, making him repeat his resistance to the topic, forcing him to show his annoyance, and then commenting on that frustration, Socrates also makes the third dangerous lesson apparent, if only to the careful audience member: to a sophist, impiety is just.

And from a moral perspective, rightfully so. Consider: if justice somehow allows injustice, because impiety towards the rules and towards nonexistent or unhelpful gods is justified, then impiety is just. If morality depends on both rules and reverence, then such a teaching would fundamentally undermine the moral character of the city, and damage most of its citizens. Thus, to expose the nature of such teachings becomes a moral action in and of itself, for it protects the city from their potential dangers.

Closely related with this misunderstanding of the nature of justice is how Protagoras sees the virtue of moderation, at least as it applies to him. Like with justice, moderation on the one hand appears to Protagoras to be a political virtue (323a), and on the other, when examined, shows itself to be something applicable, even useful to the elite that he understands himself to be. After Socrates manages to bypass Protagoras’s “coy” evasions (333c), he asks Protagoras what he means by moderation, and how it relates to justice. Moderation to Protagoras, it seems, is “being sensible.” And what is being sensible, asks Socrates? “Deliberating well,” Protagoras replies, but only if that deliberation means “they fare well” (333d). So if we, as readers, were to ask ourselves again: what is moderation to Protagoras? We might find ourselves answering: to
pursue one’s own “advantage” (332a). With that, the fourth hidden sophistic belief is revealed, and it too, for the same reasons as before mentioned, is morally dangerous. We only know of those dangers because of the Socratic maneuvers that, with pressure and finesse, exposed them to the light of day.

In the same stroke, those same maneuvers managed to open a can of worms far more important to political morality, to philosophy, and to the men in attendance. For if moderation is pursuing one’s own advantage, then “some things are good” (333d), but from this, a question inevitably follows: what is good? If it is what is advantageous, what is it that is to our advantage? The prospect of having to answer such a question leaves Protagoras “feeling riled up for a fight and contentious” (333e). This anger could be interpreted to be an anticipation of what will come to be a difference over what is good, but in the opinion of this analyst, it is more likely that this spirited anger stems instead from a kind of anxious insecurity, a fear of being unable to properly recount what he sees to be good. For ultimately, Protagoras reveals just such an inability. He, though quite beautifully, equivocates at great length about how some things are good for dogs, others human beings, other “budding branches and young twigs,” but he manages to convey only that “the good is something so complicated and varied” (334c). This relativism may earn him applause, but it would not if those applauding knew how the lack of a unified (even if abstract) moral goal can be fundamental to the success of a political society. In understanding this, one can see how this passage can be read to reveal the fifth, and most central and important, of these secret immoralisms lurking in sophistry: they do not really know what the good is. In that light, the Socratic mantra that vice is ignorance first comes into play in this dialogue.
To overcome this rather ingenious - if also dangerously ignorant - act of blindingly beautiful speechmaking, Socrates stages his own rather ingenious fit. Recognizing that if Protagoras is allowed to evade his questions, he will never be able to expose the true nature of sophistry, or, for that matter, win the debate, Socrates claims that he is unable to keep up with Protagoras (334d), and begins “to get up as if to leave” (335c). This threat of departure seems to be meditated and with the specific goal of altering the rules of engagement, for not only does he speak of such rules at great length (334d-335c), but he also has nowhere else to go (Bartlett 76). In response, the audience, Critias, Callias, Alcibiades, Hippias, and Prodicus most active among them, jointly alter the rules so that Socrates is allowed more leeway to ask questions (335e-338e). This is itself a show of virtue on the part of the crowd, one related to and perhaps because of Socrates’s presence, but that show will be interpreted later. For now, we are most concerned with the production that is jointly performed by Protagoras and Socrates, who now has the leading role.

In that role, Socrates, unsatisfied with Protagoras’s relativistic posturing, is able to more bluntly probe into what actually, if subconsciously, defines what is good to the sophists. After Protagoras insists on a long and deeply personal battle of wits over lyrics of poetry, Socrates is able to resurrect this topic (351b). In what has, in scholarly literature, become one of the most famous themes of the dialogue, Socrates brings to the surface one vision of the good: hedonism. As it turns out, Protagoras both believes that “living pleasantly is good” and associates it with the noble (to kalon), meaning the beautiful or the fine (351c). Yet still being aware of his vulnerable reputation in public surroundings, the sophist insists that pleasure is only good if it takes pleasure in the noble things. This qualification is soon reduced to nothingness, however, as Socrates raises the point that all pleasures can overcome us, and that process of overcoming
has dangerous ramifications- for ourselves, and, implicitly, on the entire city that depends on the
self-restraint of our most immoderate impulses(352c). Thus, Socrates reveals that Protagoras,
whether intentionally or not, is genuinely attached to a base kind of hedonism that poses real
moral danger to the individual and to society.

A careful reader might note at this junction a few confusing elements of the text. The first
among them has to do with why Socrates, if he is moral, does not oppose hedonism outright.
The answer, this interpretation contends, has to do with how Socrates alters his arguments for
each of his interlocutors. The common academic account often notes how Socrates leaves
pointed silences, or allows certain arguments to appear like they remain standing; instead, he
prefers to explain to those with whom he converses how their actions do not provide them with
what they actually want. This would explain why instead of claiming to oppose hedonism,
Socrates chooses to elevate it to what he calls “the measuring art,” which decides what is good
by what will be most pleasant over the course of our lives(356e). It does not take much
consideration on this proposal to recognize that such an art actually just constitutes philosophy,
at least as it is understood to be the deliberative search for the best way of life. Thus, even if he
continues to use the language of what is “pleasant,” Socrates actually opposes hedonism - and
all the immoralism imbued therein - and pits philosophy against it, as the power capable of
knowing or providing what is good. If moral vice is indeed ignorance, then moral virtue now
appears squarely in the camp of Socratic philosophy.

**Identifying Morality: Acknowledging and Defending The Conventional Moral Virtues**

So through this exhibition, those who listened to Socrates have learned what is immoral, why
it is dangerous and ill-advised, and, through definition by negation, a little about what comes to
define morality and its potential. But at least according to Plato and many of his interpreters, the
spirit of Socratic philosophy is not piecemeal and unsatisfactory; it demands thoroughness and diligence. In the case of morality, philosophy cannot and does not merely define morality by what it is not. If Socratic philosophy is to be believed as a proper moral educator, and effective moral educators make their students more concerned with moral virtue, then such students would need to learn what positively defines the true and full nature of morality. Put another way, students of morality, those whose souls must be turned, need to understand what the moral virtues really are, or, as the case may be, what moral virtue really is.

Here analysts must approach a large philosophic and scholarly debate in the question of virtue, which has to do with the question of human types. It is the contention of this thesis that both Plato and Socrates categorized the world into human types, and that the most fundamental of these categories comes to light in the divide between philosophers and non-philosophers. Virtue is and must be very different for those very different human types. In other words, there is both a conventional and philosophic form of virtue, including moral virtue.

Recognizing this becomes incredibly important to the way this dialogue is read, for the word “virtue” (ἁρετή) is used often and in different ways. In following the previously established premises, this analysis will understand “virtue” as it is used more generally (352d), to mean “excellence.” The individual moral virtues each have specific definitions, and all of those definitions have distinct conventional and philosophic forms. When a particular virtue is first mentioned, the reader may assume that the conventional definition applies, not least because Socrates seems to confirm and validate the existence of those conventional forms. Only after he does so does he illuminate the way in which each virtue differs for philosophers - ultimately, the way in which it becomes one.
It might then be most prudent to begin with these conventional forms of moral virtue. They are, in the order they will be addressed: piety, justice, moderation, and courage(sometimes referred to as “strength”). These virtues closely relate to the cardinal virtues of classical society, and form a bedrock beneath political morality. As will come to be seen, Socrates views these virtues, especially the relationship between them, in a distinctly different way than does Protagoras and his sophist compatriots. In - and only in - their conventional, political form, Socrates acknowledges that each virtue is a “certain thing,”(330c) a distinct creature to be considered separately, all of which offer something uniquely indispensable to the political world.

He begins by acknowledging the existence and importance of piety. Piety, the nature of which is further explored elsewhere in the dialogues(e.g. Euthyphro), was a fundamental virtue of classical society, being a political requirement as much as it was a spiritual state. In this dialogue, Protagoras is the first to mention piety, using it interchangeably with “shame.” In Greek, the word Protagoras uses is aidos, meaning “awe” or “reverence.” The use of this word expands the understanding of piety beyond his previous mentions of believing in the gods and building statues in their honor(322a), and aligns him with the common academic account of the virtue, which more thoroughly involves respecting the gulf between the human and the divine, and following the many and diverse commandments from all those above us. Protagoras claims that Zeus sent down “shame and justice” because he “feared” that without them, “our cities might perish altogether.” In other words, piety, a virtue closely connected with justice, establishes order and helps to stave off injustice. Indeed, it does so effectively that it becomes crucial to the very survival of political society.
Socrates does not challenge this definition of piety, nor the view that it forms the foundation underneath a well-ordered political society(329c). In fact, he offers further support for this view and contention, for in his later investigation, Socrates claims that if anyone else claimed that piety itself was impious, he would “indignant[ly]” command them to “hush,” a word which Robert Bartlett explains is captured by the “verb euphemeo,” which “is used when another has said something improper or impious.” In doing so, Socrates, whether it be ironic, merely for public benefit, or genuinely, implies that something in his soul sees piety as something righteous or even legitimate, something his thumos, or spirit, devotes itself to protecting. Put differently, Socrates affirms the conventional norm of piety, and at least publicly defends it as something important to political society.

Closely connected to this virtue is that of justice. In a similar manner to the way he addresses piety, Socrates acknowledges the existence of the conventional, political definition of justice that Protagoras establishes, and slightly expands it before he investigates its relationship to the other virtues. Justice, according to Protagoras, is, at least in part, defined by lawfulness(326d, 327 c-d, 322b, also consider 325d). Laws are set by political societies, with the aim of keeping everyone in their proper role and of maintaining the city, and “one who doesn’t pay heed while being punished and taught must be cast out from the city on the grounds that they are incurable”(325a-b), or so Protagoras posits. Yet this punishment does not seem to be carried out for its own sake, for as Protagoras claims, “one who attempts to punish in accord with reason seeks retribution not for the sake of the past act of injustice - that would not undo what has already been done - but for the sake of the future one, so that neither the criminal himself nor anyone else who sees him punished may commit injustice against him”(324-a-b). This position itself raises an interesting question on the nature and intent of justice, for while
individual retribution seems central to the desire for justice (324b-c), justice actually is much more concerned with the future health and well-being of the city. In that capacity, Protagoras claims that “justice and virtue are profitable” (327b) for the city. Indeed, that concern seems indispensable to the city’s prosperity, for injustice is considered “an illness to the city” (322d), one so virulent that every citizen must be inoculated against it, “or else there won’t be cities” (323a). By those lights, it appears as if Protagoras agrees with the Socratic account that “justice corrects” (326e), with the idea of punishment as education, and education as the solution to evil.

For his part, Socrates seems comfortable with the definition Protagoras establishes. Socrates chooses not to challenge his definition of justice, and acknowledges that justice, ostensibly justice according to Protagoras, “is itself just” (330c). Furthermore, for the rest of the dialogue, as will be discovered, Socrates continues to treat the conventional concept of justice with respect, and emphasize its importance to political society. In acknowledging the existence and importance of the political virtue of justice and piety, Socrates begins to reveal the crucial and impressive ability of Socratic philosophy to identify, remember, and highly value various kinds of conventional political virtue, indispensable to human types different from his own.

Socrates continues this revelation with regard to the virtue of moderation. Here, though, while Protagoras does make mention of moderation in his opening remarks, it is Socrates that illuminates the conventional understanding of virtue. According to Socrates, people act moderately “by means of moderation” (332b,d). As Bartlett recounts in his transliterative footnote, the word Socrates uses for moderation is sôphrosunê, meaning “level-headedness,” a virtue that, by Aristotle’s lights, is to lie between self-indulgence (akolasia) and unfeeling insensibility (anaisthêsia). In simple terms, sôphrosunê describes moderation as a golden mean.
between excess and dearth. The utilization of this word is significant because of its cultural weight, and how, in classical society, it was accompanied by well-known practical requirements, typically including the restrictions of one’s bodily pleasures (e.g. limiting the intake of wine and food, taming one’s sexual passions and athletic endeavours). Put simply, Socrates calls forth recognizable and comprehensible images associated with the political virtue of moderation, and confirms that some conventional form of moderation is right to be represented by such images. And, as he, in the aforementioned passage, agrees with Protagoras, and lumps moderation together with shame and justice as a virtue necessary for political survival, he similarly indicates its importance.

The validity of such a conclusion is easily seen. Consider: does not political society need piety, justice, and moderation? Do most members of political society not need to believe in something larger than themselves? If not, and if the hubristic phrase is true, that “man is the measure of all things” - a phrase, by the way, famously attributed to Protagoras - are not our individual interests the only ones that matter? But if they are, then what incentive have we to follow any moral rules, or indeed, any laws at all? And what are laws without fairness, or justice? What is politics without the care for justice? For virtue? What bleak, brutish, teeming and hostile city does politics create in the absence of such care? Conversely, does not justice, as the bedrock of political society, genuinely depend on laws, moral and otherwise? Certainly so. But how are any of those laws or any political society, to survive, let alone thrive, if all passions are untamed? If bodies or ill wills are our unchecked sovereigns? No, all conventional society is also based on the moral moderation of our most primal and violent bodily instincts. In that light, Socrates appears right to devote time, however fleeting, to acknowledging the existence and validity of the conventional forms of justice, piety, and moderation.
It could be said that in this dialogue, “knowledge” acts as a political form of the virtue of wisdom, understood as learned know-how or expertise. There may be ample reason to conclude as much, but, because conventional morality has a murky and unfamiliar relationship with this kind of knowledge, the investigation into the justification of such a conclusion does not fall within the purview of this analysis. The purpose here is rather to show how Socrates acknowledges the forms of moral virtue known to all, and illuminates those elevated forms yet to be understood. With that said, there is only one conventional moral virtue left to address - that of courage. In many ways, as Roger Duncan concurs, \textsuperscript{12} courage is the most important moral virtue discussed in this dialogue, primarily because of its attachment to Protagoras and his teaching. A more full extent of this relationship will be addressed later in the chapter, but for now, let us just revisit the representation of courage in the dialogue, to see if it too has a conventional form, and if Socrates acknowledges it.

At first thought, courage seems different from other moral virtues. It seems bolder. It galvanizes action and foments reaction. Its greatest deeds offer fame and immortality. It can transform an unreligious man into a savior. It validates spiritedness, begs us to be violent(for good reason?), and grants us glory for doing so. It gives the name of good to the pursuit of greatness. When we think of courage in the traditional sense, we see heroic deeds and hear roaring crowds. But when our minds drift to the other moral virtues, such images do not appear. When we think of moderation, for example, we do not get excited, at least not in the same way. We do not feel our hearts race or shake our heads at the unimaginably impressive excellence of one great man. We do not quickly find ourselves daydreaming about how it would feel to be a hero. Indeed, by comparison, the other conventional virtues seem to dampen moral dreams.

What is more, courage seems essentially unconventional in nature; as the dialogue \textit{Laches}
recounts, courage requires going into the unknown, as opposed to comfortably relying on the known. While it might be countered, and perhaps rightfully, that despite this, there is a common or conventional conception of courage that can be known, we rarely think of such qualifications when we imagine true courage. No, “courage,” as we truly imagine it, is reliably glorious.

It is perhaps precisely for these reasons that Protagoras believes courage is not a conventional, political virtue, as are justice, piety, and moderation (322e-323a, 323e-324a). Instead, Protagoras posits that “courage differs very much from the other parts of virtue,” (359b, 349d) and that courage and wisdom alone are the virtues that only concentrate in a few elite men (330a, 359b) - presumably, him and those like him. Socrates devotes great time and effort to publicly upending this view to which Protagoras and his fellow sophists are so attached. He achieves this task, at least as I interpret, by illuminating the true nature of courage and its relationship to the rest of virtue. As it turns out, courage is, like all other moral virtues, distinct in a conventional, political sense, and unified with wisdom in its elite or philosophic form.

With regard to its conventional form, Socrates addresses courage in more detail than any other virtue. He delves into the societal images associated with courage as a moral virtue, and tests the degree to which Protagoras believes in them. After their discussion of hedonism, Socrates asks Protagoras: “do the cowards advance towards things they feel bold about, the courageous towards terrible things?” (359c) Protagoras establishes that that is indeed the common view of “people.” Shortly after, Protagoras admits that he shares this view (359d). In a manner so characteristic to the famous “midwife,” Socrates here repeatedly uses very vague terms such as “terrible things,” knowing that Protagoras has a proclivity to precision. In doing so, he beckons Protagoras to reveal what actually constitutes his - and the common - view of courage. Ultimately, Protagoras does just that, and posits that the difference between courage
and cowardice is that the while courageous “are willing to go to war,” cowards “are not willing” (359e). Socrates confirms that this position sees going to war as something both “noble and good” (360a). This conversation illuminates the images so commonly attached to courage - bravery in the face of death, the pomp and grandeur of war, sacrifice and devotion and all the like. These are the heroic deeds and fantasies that come to center the conventional vision of courage, which might be defined as a kind of moral bravery, or, as Protagoras calls it, “strength” (350e-351a). If indeed political society depends on the “art of war” (322b) and if indeed, as many now claim, true democracy requires the courage to speak one’s mind, then political society relies on courage as well. By conjuring these images and questioning their value, Socrates illuminates this definition, and acknowledges the existence of this conventional form of courage. More importantly to this dialogue, however, a careful reader will anticipate how Socrates will use this to emphasize how Protagoras, the great sophist, the man who measures all things by himself, who purportedly has transcended all convention and claims to care nothing for the opinions of others, is himself attached to this incredibly conventional, ultimately moral virtue. But more on that later.

While Socrates does indeed spend much more time outlining the conventional moral virtues in other dialogues, he nevertheless takes time to acknowledge each of them in Protagoras. Indeed, he and Protagoras agree to such an approach, to “begin….with a view to the argument of the many” (333c). This may very well be because this dialogue focuses on the relationship between the virtues, and conventional virtue remains a distinctly important piece to that puzzle. The dialogue’s crucial and unique lesson on this subject would then be this: morality involves both philosophic and conventional forms of moral virtue, and the conventional form depends on a host of different moral excellences, including, to the dismay of
sophists, courage. The survival and prosperity of political society relies on recognizable and accessible forms of piety, justice, moderation, and courage, towards which each citizen should be expected to strive. As such, there exists a certain overlap between moral and political virtue, for they both intimately care for the life and health of other people, known or unknown. This would explain why Socrates repeatedly calls all of these virtues “the noble things,” for “the noble,” beyond meaning the beautiful, or the fine, is also, we must remember, most relevantly associated with moral beauty, especially self-sacrificial altruism. One might say that in altruism well-understood, morality and politics collide, and moral virtues are commandeered by and become tools of political convention. These pedestrian forms of moral virtue result from such appropriation. But whatever philosophical scruples we have about how political convention reduces the true nature of moral virtue, they might be eased by the knowledge that not all are philosophers.

With that in mind, Socrates’s acknowledgement of conventional virtue should serve multiple functions. It should remind us as moral thinkers that the answer to the question of virtue is not simple, nor is it the same for all people. More importantly, though, it should help us understand the capacities and nature of Socratic philosophy. Socratic philosophy, far from the failures of sophistry, has the power to identify true morality, even as it appears in different forms. As a form of education, it also - at least if we are to take seriously Socrates’s lipservice to conventional virtue - acknowledges the necessity of customary morality, and takes upon itself the rhetorical burden of protecting it, in however limited and ironic a manner. In that light, Socratic education appears to be even more devoted a moral actor.
Identifying Morality: The Unified, Philosopher Standard

Even so, Socratic philosophy is devoted to the pursuit of truth in its own right. Such a pursuit, at least according to Plato, must be undertaken by those who do not feel they owe their loyalty to convention, for convention did not shape their view of the world. Yet those who seem to grow spontaneously, those who love their own less than they love the truth, are small in number. These few are Socratic philosophers, and virtue cannot be the same for them as it is for the many. The question of moral virtue must then be answered in a very different manner for philosophers. The philosophic standard of virtue must fundamentally differ from the conventional moral virtues we have discussed. It is this starkly different answer Socrates illuminates in *Protagoras*, and that illumination upon which most scholarly analysis focuses.

For the purposes of this dialogue, Socrates provides such a service with special emphasis on only moderation and courage. To begin with moderation, careful readers will note how Protagoras, in some sense or another, folds in moral virtue with political virtue, and collapses political virtue into one category, which includes piety, justice, and moderation. But analysts should also remember that in many ways, Protagoras’s immoralism, which is itself a kind of ignorance, relies on his interpretation of moderation as what amounts to one’s own advantage. That moderation may itself use “unjust” means, so long as it achieves the ends it set out to achieve(333d). What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? For on the one hand, moderation and justice and piety appear to be one, as political virtues, and on the other, moderation seems to appear a virtue that conflicts with justice, and has nothing to do with the health of the political society, but only the power of the individual. Perhaps, to Protagoras, there is an elite form of political virtue, which might otherwise be called the art of reputation or power playing, an art no doubt essential to the pursuit of power which Protagoras claims to
teach. Or perhaps Protagoras merely, annoyed as he was(333d2), consented to include the language of moderation a reputable necessity, but does not himself invest any meaning into the virtue.

Whatever the answer, Socrates sheds light on a very different account of moderation. Using Protagoras’s belief that moderation is to one’s own advantage, Socrates first asks Protagoras to equate moderation with being “sensible,” which he does. He then asks Protagoras to define sensibility as “deliberating well,” which he does. He finally asks Protagoras to confirm that this well-informed and performed deliberation ends in “faring well.” Yet, underneath all of this, questions lurk, namely: what does it mean to fare well? What does “well” mean? For this reason, Socrates interrogates Protagoras, asking: “do you assert, then, that some things are good?” This question allows Socrates to ask what defines the good things, a question to which, as previously discussed, Protagoras has no satisfying answer. Socrates therefore associates Protagoras’s view of moderation with knowledge of the good things, and posits that without the latter, the former ceases to exist. In other words, Socrates illuminates how, when viewed properly by those capable of clear sight, moderation collapses into wisdom. But since the everyday morality of political society relies on the conventional definition of moderation, which conjures images of limited drinking, sensible food intake, and limited frivolity, and since most of political society has great difficulty holding great amounts of complexity in their minds at once, this view cannot be held by all. Indeed, it can only be held by those who are deeply concerned with truth, who are devoted to the definition and embodiment of wisdom, those who have the capability and desire to understand complexity and illuminate contradiction, and those who maintain a healthy distance between themselves and the government of political society.
Thus, this view that moderation collapses into wisdom is revealed to be the definition of moderation held by Socratic philosophers.

Yet as careful readers of the dialogue will also notice, Socrates does not spend ample time analyzing the other two of Protagoras’s “political” virtues, those being justice and piety. Both justice and piety are often discussed, and Socrates does build the argument that “justice is pious and piety just” (331b-e) - a politically important contrast from Protagoras’s belief - but Socrates does not, at least for any noteworthy period of time, dwell on how piety and justice collapse into wisdom in this dialogue. Indeed, he only remarks that “justice and piety, in turn, became manifest to us previously as pretty much the same thing” (333b).\textsuperscript{15} Put another way, Socrates only comments about how piety and justice collapse into wisdom briefly and by indicating their connection with moderation, which itself amounts to wisdom. A more complete explanation of how, properly understood, justice, and piety, as its contended equivalent, become wisdom, can be seen in the beginning of Plato’s \textit{Republic} IV, where Socrates explains, through his famous image of the skilled sailor, that a city cannot be governed justly by any other than those who know what justice is - a knowledge which concentrates and can only fully be developed within a philosopher (487e-489a, 486a, see also 484c, for references to philosophic piety). Because of the weight and focus this matter is elsewhere given - indeed, the definition of justice in the \textit{Republic} seems to hinge on this explanation - its abbreviation in \textit{Protagoras} seems less to do with the importance of piety and justice than the person with whom Socrates converses. Scholars often note how Socrates alters his argument and presentation to best edify his particular interlocutor - does this explain the emphasis on the importance of presentation earlier in the dialogue? - and this alteration deserves focus in \textit{Protagoras}. Socrates chooses to explain the reality of those virtues Protagoras so dangerously misunderstands, which includes both moderation as a
representation of the political virtues, which Protagoras believes to equate with his own advantage, and courage, which Protagoras even more hypocritically misunderstands.

In examining the pedestrian moral virtues, we found that despite presenting himself as the man most liberated from convention, Protagoras was himself irrationally attached to the conventional version of moral courage; while he thinks he has discovered a new “amoral” form of courage, defined as a kind of boldness, or toughness of character, he indeed sees courage as nobility, of a traditional, even physical sort. But how does Socrates prove that this attachment is irrational? This seems a much more relevant and important question, if we are to uncover a philosophic form of courage. In the same area of the text where Socrates lures Protagoras into admitting his admiration of war-going heroes, Socrates resurrects his earlier attempt to relate courage and wisdom.

Before one examines this attempt, it is important to revisit the conversation directly preceding this one, with Hippias and Prodicus. As previously investigated, Protagoras - rather wrongly - posits hedonism, and as previously discovered, Socrates edifies those to adhere to hedonism by agreeing to a kind of “measuring art,” which measures what is good by what will be most pleasant in the long run, even if that means pains will have to be endured in the meantime. In the course of this conversation, Socrates jointly established a number of significant premises: first, no one willingly advances towards bad things; instead, they only advance towards things they think are their best option; second, the good deed is most advantageous and most pleasant; third, the good deed is advantageous, and the advantageous deed is most pleasant; fourth, that anyone who chooses to do otherwise is being “overcome by oneself,” and one can be overcome by fear; and finally, the noble deed is
good(358b). The validity of these premises is interesting in its own right, but for now, let us just take them to be true.

Upon that calculatedly constructed basis, Socrates asks Protagoras to defend his view that the courageous advance “towards terrible things”(359c). For if it is true that no one willingly advances towards things that they see to be terrible, then the “cowards and the courageous advance towards the same things”(359e); both cowards and the courageous advance towards what they believe to be good. It is this statement that forces Protagoras to raise the association of war, lest he risk implying that anyone sees war as anything other than terrible - an implication, given the lure of glory and fame, that perhaps should be made. Once he does, however, Socrates is able to ask him if he believes such moral courage to be noble, and of course he has to answer that it is(359e). On giving that answer, Socrates has Protagoras trapped, at least on the basis of what the two men had before agreed. For if, on the basis of what was agreed before, the noble is good, and the good is best and most pleasant, then war must be the best and most pleasant thing. But if the courageous only advance towards terrible things, then there are no courageous men! In light of this, one of two things can happen to moral courage: it either ceases to exist, or, as Socrates goes on to explain, its deeds should be viewed as ignorance about what is best.

This explanation is not without reason. Consider: Are we always rewarded for acts of moral bravery? Cannot we die in war? If we do, how can we enjoy the glory, fame, or immortality we imagine when we dream of being ‘moral’ heroes? The fact that the traditional account of moral courage is unable to answer this question suggests that, at least according to Socrates, it too is ignorant. It fails to understand that all good things depend on life. From that perspective, courage and cowardice conflate, and appear equally ignorant about what is good(360d). Yet also
from that perspective, acts of moral courage need not disappear. A person can still view that it is
ultimately best to sacrifice something they desire - even their own lives - for the sake of
something more important, be that the city or be that philosophy. Yet the only way of doing so
is by “overpowering oneself” and one’s fear of death, a feat achieved, as the crowd in
Protagoras agrees, by “nothing other than wisdom”(358c). Thus, the only source of true moral
bravery becomes knowledge about what is best, or wisdom.

In providing this explanation, Socrates strikes a deep and most shameful note with the
sophist. Indeed, on behalf of sophistic educators everywhere, Protagoras can only blush and
remain silent(360d). Socrates has not only revealed the immorality of sophistry, which would
repulse those moralists in the crowd, but also managed to deliver a devastating message to
sophists everywhere: you aren’t the rebels you think you are. He proves that sophists aspire to
moral courage, but they have no idea what courage really is; more than that, they have no idea
what is best or why. It is this proof that more fully supports the Socratic mantra that vice is
ignorance, and it is this proof that most powerfully repudiates sophistry. Through it, the young
men drawn to Protagoras for his claims of wisdom and promises of unruly power are shown that
sophists are little more than confused performers with an affection for tradition. Since confusion
and moral convention necessarily fail to provide Hippocrates and those like him the power they
seek, this devastating exhibition would detach these young students from an immoral and
untruthful form of education.

As such, the focus on the unity of virtue serves multiple purposes. First and most directly,
Socrates uses this explanation to add to the central moral action of the dialogue - namely, the
care and moral education of those who listen to him, especially young Hippocrates. In reducing
sophistry to powerless, immoral ignorance, Socrates most effectively prevents Hippocrates and
all those listening from becoming too attached to it. This preventative measure is a show of care for their souls, and as such, attest to his role as a moral educator of all around him. By enacting it, Socrates establishes philosophy as the firm opponent of sophistry, on many grounds. In many ways, it is the illumination of the failure of sophistry that most contrasts it with Socratic philosophy: sophistry fails to understand how hard it is to be good, what it actually means to ‘turn’ a soul to goodness, and why that it is a worthwhile endeavour. Through this edifying illumination, Socrates emphasizes the extent to which Socratic philosophy both exemplifies morality and defends morality against those forces that would oppose it or seek to uproot it within the polis.

Furthermore, in illuminating how courage, and piety, justice and moderation before it, collapse into wisdom, Socrates outlines the philosophic definition of virtue, moral and otherwise. In doing so, Socrates first shows philosophers how they can be moral. Consider: by this standard, conventional moral virtues, ununified as they are, are ultimately unwise; without understanding, without wisdom of some kind, morality will always be self-contradictory. In that light, it would seem that those capable of pursuing wisdom above all else might be the only ones capable of being completely moral. Yet to do so, they need to understand moral virtue. This explanation of the unity of virtue - at least for those capable of grasping and embodying it - provides such understanding, and only through grasping it can philosophers be truly moral, or at least be defended as moral. Therefore, in providing this explanation, Socrates makes true morality possible for the philosopher, or at least offers them a way to defend themselves against the city as those who best embody it. This provision edifies either the morality or the political savvy of the philosopher who cares to listen. Socrates is at least partially an act of generosity,
and because generosity, or altruism, is the heart of morality, Socrates reveals himself, and Socratic philosophy, to be a moral actor in this dialogue.

In sum, Socratic philosophy might be said to be moral not only because it helps to instill moral virtue, conventional or philosophical, but also merely because it is the most thorough educator of both philosophers and nonphilosophers, and education itself is a moral act. It might further be said that while Socrates intends to protect and edify those political men who see moral virtue conventionally, and depend upon morality to survive, young philosophers may be the students with whom Socrates is most concerned.

Yet in that light, we have to note: we have no confirmation that the young men in attendance were young philosophers, nor that the “wise” men present were Socratic philosophers, and Socrates is known for changing his speech to suit his audience. Could it be that this act of generosity comes from Plato, rather than Socrates? Could it be Plato that imbued Socrates’s words with a political lesson for young philosophers? Could it be that Plato used this dialogue, and Socrates as a character, to illuminate the proper nature of Socratic philosophy? Or perhaps even a more limited version of morality, one that dictates that philosophers should be moral in the truest sense of wisdom, transform those souls capable of true morality, and help to establish moral rules for those who are not? A question for later on.

At the very least, let us contend that in this dialogue, Socrates reveals the true nature of morality for the philosopher. In doing so, he reveals that Socratic philosophy has the capability of identifying morality, in all its forms. Indeed, it seems the only power capable of recognizing that morality must mean different things for different human types, the only force able to illuminate that for philosophers, all moral virtues collapse into wisdom, but for the political man, morality depends on different moral excellences, all of which rely on knowledge to remain
morally excellent. In whatever form, Socrates uses this dialogue to intimately associate morality with Socratic philosophy, and suggests that the former is dependent on the latter. In many ways, then, the unity of virtue should be considered the dialogue’s greatest contribution and testament to the moral power of the Socratic philosopher.

The Sincerity of Socratic Morality

Yet some might call into question the extent to which Socrates’s revelations in this dialogue are really moral, especially to the non-philosopher. This objection might begin in the ostensible similarities between Socrates and Protagoras, philosophers and sophists. For if sophistry harbors lurking immoralisms, and Socratic philosophy bears a similarity to sophistry, philosophy too might be called immoral. As we discussed before, there might be many similar practices that could come to bear on this discussion, but the two most relevant in this case are their tendencies to divide virtue into pedestrian and elite forms, and the concealment of certain beliefs that have transcended, oppose, or threaten to undermine convention.

We will begin with the former. As we before discussed, the sophists and Socratic philosophers see virtue as divided between common and elite forms. Put another way, to both sophists and Socratic philosophers there are virtues available to the many, to the common, every-day man, and then to the rare exceptional few. This view is worth challenging in its own right, on the democratic grounds that the assumption of equal capacities is the only morally laudable position, but that challenge cannot be properly undertaken or even summarized here. Here, we will merely discuss how the Socratic and sophistic views compare.

To that end, we might note how Protagoras seems to believe they compare exactly. In the debate over poets, Protagoras allegorically compares Simonides and Pittacus to he and Socrates (notably, names starting with the same letters, and characters holding the same views).
He uses this allegory to, in a not-so-veiled manner, accuse Socrates of hypocrisy; he believes that Socrates is criticizing him for his unconventional tendencies, as well as his division of virtue between elite and pedestrian, despite the fact that he does the same (Bartlett, *On Protagoras*).

Yet as we discovered, this accusation may not hold up. Consider our previous interpretation: Socrates, unlike Protagoras, sees elite virtue, including moral virtue properly conceived, as unified into one, wisdom. And Protagoras is, unlike Socrates, personally attached to courage, more or less conventionally conceived, but believes himself to be attached to “amoral” courage, or a kind of toughness or successful boldness. This contradictory conception of courage, as we discussed before, is often irrationally, imprudently, or even immorally bold. For this reason, it might be thought that Protagoras’s troublesome attachment to “courage” could be the root of his ostensible misanthropy, of his ostensible love of pursuing power, or of his opposition to or even hatred of political conventions. So here we see the distinction more clearly: while elite virtue is unified to Socrates, and includes a kind of moral virtue, elite virtue to Protagoras can be divided into two, and can often oppose moral virtue. This is a meaningful distinction, for the ideal form of virtue to Socratic philosophers seems more hospitable or open to the inclusion of or reconciliation with moral virtue. So while the two men, as representatives of philosophy and sophistry, both divide virtue into pedestrian and elite forms, and while that division may have, at least to some, moral issues in its own right, Socratic philosophy maintains a kind of intimacy or affection for morality that sophistry lacks, at least in the same amount or kind.

And now to the latter. One might, drawing on Kant’s moral works, argue that cloaking or altering one’s beliefs is essentially immoral, an act on human rationality. But on further reflection, this assertion seems questionable. Imagine: when a romantic partner asks you if he
looks good in an outfit, is he really asking for the hard cold truth? Does he really want you to say that “no, honey, you have not yet lost those ten pounds that haunt you at night, and it shows”? Probably not. The kind thing, the thing your partner actually wants, is for you to bolster his pride and confidence, to give him comfort, and to reassure him that you think he is always beautiful, often even if he insists that he wants honesty. These little dishonesties, or kindnesses are what Plato elsewhere calls the “noble lie.” They are so named because they are more or less noble: such lies are fundamentally concerned with protecting, or serving, the soul of those to whom the lies are directed, even when that service requires the teller of the lies to sacrifice the satisfaction of speaking the truth.

Drawing on this example and on the concept of the noble lie, we might remind ourselves that men are not entirely rational creatures, and thus, pure rationality, conceived as steely-eyed reason and cold, brutal honesty, is not all human beings need, especially when they interact with each other. Our interactions still require a kind of interpersonal civility or politeness and a kind of respect for the norms that underpin our society. If someone, be she a Socratic philosopher or a sophist, disagrees with those norms, or has transcended them, then far from immoral, concealment of that disagreement or transcension seems the only morally appropriate thing to do. And this holds true, one might note, even though it protects the safety of the unconventional individual in question. This conclusion seems to validate the cloak of conventionality that Socrates dons as a morally acceptable or praiseworthy one. So too does it make Socrates seem all the more moral for pushing Protagoras to conceal himself more than he does, or, rather, to present himself with more moral care. In that light, we might absolve Socratic philosophy of attacks against its moral virtue on the basis of its cloaking tendency, and view it instead, at least partially, as a moral action, one Socratic philosophy seems to take more seriously than
sophistry, at least in the case of the sophist Protagoras. And in that light, we might then conclude that Socratic philosophy stands up, at least partially, against these two objections, more so than sophistry does.

Another part of this objection might spring from how Socrates addresses the relationship between the noble and the good, a topic that will be taken up in earnest in the next chapter. Remember: if Protagoras had merely admitted that not all noble things are good, he would not have been forced into admitting that moral courage becomes ignorance. It is this conflation that spells Protagoras’s defeat, this attachment to moral beauty that humbles him before philosophy. One might ask: if the noble centers morality, how wise is it to shed light on the tension between the noble and the good? A defender of Socrates might respond in several ways. First, one must note that not all readers (or listeners, as the case may be) of Socrates will take note of that tension. Instead, they may just learn that Protagoras is attached to moral courage, and that Socrates bested him in this debate.

It is that knowledge that is the most crucial to learn for those in attendance of this conversation, and even who hear its retelling, namely, those in the crowd of the unnamed comrade. All of those audience members, attracted as they are to Protagoras, are already drawn to the pursuit of power. Hippocrates, for example, comes to Socrates begging to see Protagoras, believing he is “wise” because he offers him a way to be “held in high regard in the city” (310e6-7, 316b10-c1). He is willing, as are all the others, to traipse into secret and publicly shameful gatherings because they are interested in what Protagoras teaches. And why? To gain the power they think Protagoras holds. An at least partial detachment from conventional morality necessarily accompanies that pursuit, selfish as it is. Thus for the most part, those in attendance already know of the tension between what is noble and what is good; instead, what
they need to learn and upon what lesson they will focus will consist of what is good, or what is most truly advantageous. Socrates provides them an invaluable lesson in that regard: whether you seek power or moral virtue or wisdom, you will not find it with the sophists. This lesson dulls the luster of sophistry, and in doing so, prevents them from devoting themselves to a practice that dangerously misunderstands morality, and makes proper moral virtue impossible. If Socrates had avoided assessing the “goodness” of nobility, Protagoras would not have been defeated in the same way; Protagoras would still seem shiny, new, and attractive, and the moral virtue of those in attendance would be left open to this corruption. With that in mind, illuminating the tension between the noble and the good seems a necessary danger in order to accomplish a more necessary moral goal.

On a completely different note, an analyst might further defend Socrates by contending that there might actually be ways in which illuminating that tension helps to edify members of political society in its own right. This might even - and perhaps especially - apply to the run of the mill, common political moralist, who is not drawn to political power in the same way Hippocrates or his compatriots are. Those who are in the crowd of the unnamed comrade, or those of which we know not in the home of Callias, could be such men, and they too would need to be protected from a disillusionment that - if they picked up on it - could harm their moral character. To and for those men, a Socratic might say: is it not necessary, not healthy for the polis that we see how what appears beautiful is not always so? Does not the moderation of our gluttonous, or libidinous impulses require - in some deep, unconscious sense - recognizing how the food that appears so tasty might actually make us sick in large quantities, or that consummating your lust with the man who appears so attractive can destroy your life as you know it? Does not our justice, our lawfulness require the ability to see that avenging our
beloved, beautiful and noble as the act may seem to us, is not justice at all, but lawless retribution? Would not justice be corrupted if we merely believed that what was attractive in speech was just in deed? Does not our piety depend on us understanding that we must revere the divine, and that the divine is somehow beyond appearances, beyond our reach? And does not our city depend on justice, piety, and moderation? Certainly so. With regard to these questions, a Socratic could posit that by illuminating this tension, those who are capable of considering it are edified, though in different ways, for different reasons, and with varying degrees of depth.

For those objectors who reject any of the responses above, one last defense might prove useful to them - namely, the secrecy of the gathering. Note, as we did before, that a porter greets Hippocrates and Socrates at the door, guarding the entrance. Note how the unnamed comrade and Hippocrates are unaware of the day of his arrival. Note the atmosphere of the room in which Socrates and Protagoras converse, filled with intellectuals, political power players, and wealthy elites - all those who have some kind of spiritual, mental, or physical separation from the necessities of the city. Remember how Socrates asks Protagoras if he wants to converse in front of everyone(316b). Remember too how even the mention of being known as a sophist makes Hippocrates blush with shame(312a), how Protagoras claims sophists always need a cloak(317a). See how while Protagoras seems to be blunt and open about his sophistry, his openness is itself a precaution(317b). Recall how the conversation on poetry harbored veiled attacks between Socrates and Protagoras(Bartlett 77). Remember how we only hear this conversation in its form edited by Socrates, no doubt to suit his audience. Consider how Socrates might have not, even in so secretive and veiled a manner, broached the goodness of the noble in other, more public settings. In considering these aspects of the text and its characters, a reader will be able to recognize how the conversation we hear is itself secretive and guarded,
and how very few are or were able to see the true nature of that conversation. If such an objector were worried about the clear and morally dangerous enunciation of the tension between the noble and the good, this secrecy should certainly help them feel as if political society is more protected.

With that said, Socrates’s use of the tension between the good and the noble might actually be vindicated as knowledge that “save[s] our life” (356e-357a) in several ways. In a physical manner, this knowledge could stop those from going to war who do not sufficiently believe that is it best, or paying a fee they could use for more useful things. In a political sense, this knowledge may actually improve - or at least be defended as improving - the moderation, justice, and piety of the non-philosopher. For Protagoras, it might lead him to accept a life more in line with what he actually believes. For those who might have the potential to become Socratic philosophers, this knowledge can help them understand wisdom and morality. And, perhaps most importantly, for those who are drawn to ruling or to power more generally, this knowledge can detach them from a practice of sophistry that would prevent them from being moral or wise statesmen. Socrates thus might be said to further improve the moral prospects of his diverse audience by hinting at a truth that might in other circles be considered morally perilous to illuminate, and if that is true, Socrates would appear even more deeply devoted to the defense and education of moral character. In that light, the life, health, and morality of the individual and the city that hosts them seems even more dependent on Socratic philosophy as an educator.

Another objector might happen along, and she too would raise a valid concern, perhaps an even more relevant one: how are we to be sure that such apparent devotion to moral education is genuinely altruistic? Could it not be merely self-interested? Could not Socrates be seeking to
improve the reputation of Socratic philosophy? Is not Socrates himself interested in speaking with Protagoras? For all this talk of moral virtue, could not that curiosity have been Socrates’s true motivation in going to converse with the sophist? Certainly, there is reason to believe just that. Plato tells his readers that Socrates tracked the movements of the sophist in some detail, and was aware of his arrival before Hippocrates was(310b). As the two converse, Socrates pursues many matters the sophist finds “annoying,” and that do not “weary” Socrates in the same manner(333c), which suggests his interest in such matters - put differently, his philosophic eros - motivates him or influences him through the course of the conversation. Indeed, he confirms as much, at least in speech, when he recounts that he was “pleased” to attend(317d), and, perhaps most clearly, begs Protagoras not to “suppose I am conversing with you because I want anything other than to investigate thoroughly things that I am myself am continually perplexed by”(348c).

In some ways, that seems like a damning admission of self-interested motivation. But if we, as audience members, consider the dramatic context involved, the picture becomes slightly more complicated. Plato also tells us that right before Socrates spouted the aforementioned admission, he noted that Protagoras felt “ashamed,” and could only continue the conversation “with difficulty”(348c). It could easily be interpreted, therefore, that Socrates emphasized his own interest in the matter to ease the shame Protagoras feels, so that he may more ably continue with the conversation. While such a continuation might genuinely be interesting and pleasurable to Socrates, it also ends in the crucial moral functions we discovered before. Along the same lines, we might further note that Socrates also repeatedly claims that the reason for his attendance has to do not with his own interest, but because “Hippocrates here happens to be in the grip of a desire for your company,” and it is necessary for him to “learn what will result for
him if he is together with you.” This would imply a genuine moral motivation, or at least a desire to maintain the reputation for morality. Such an implication would be supported by how Socrates prompts Protagoras to invite those - especially those most attached to the sophist - near so that they may benefit from the conversation, asking “why then don’t we call over Prodicus and Hippias, and those with them, so they may hear us?”(317d). This request proves that he is not only interested in satisfying his own curiosity, but has a care and concern for the edification of his audience. And once they arrive, he repeats the claim he made in private, that he came to Protagoras to help Hippocrates learn the true nature of sophistry. His attentiveness towards the emotions of the sophist and his sensitivity for their effect on him may also suggest that he has a care and concern for the well-being for Protagoras himself, as seems only characteristic for Socrates.

What are we to make of these mixed signals? For on the one hand, it appears that Socrates goes to Protagoras out of selfish curiosity, but on the other, it appears that he attends and converses with him in such a manner out of moral motivations. Is one desire genuine, the other a cloak? This analysis denies that suggestion, and offers a new interpretation: both desires motivate Socrates in Protagoras. He is both genuinely interested in the sophist, as seems obvious to anyone who understands philosophers as curious beings, and genuinely acting as a moral educator. For if he was not truly curious, then we might imagine he would either stay home, which seems very unlike Socrates indeed, or he would grow “weary” from the self-restraint and duty that morality imposes on those who do not offset it with passion. And if he was not genuinely acting with morality in mind, then why would he ask these specific questions - those that outline and defend moral virtue, and those that most devastate, partially on moral grounds, the reputation of the sophist? Why would he invest so much time and energy in the
manner and form of this conversation? And why would he want the others, both at the home of Callias and in the crowd of the unnamed comrade, to hear of it? Why would he bring it up and make it more public than it needed to be, if indeed cavorting with sophists was a dangerous enterprise for a man who already carries a dangerously controversial reputation for his philosophy? Even if it is just a way to increase the moral reputation of philosophy, is Socrates still not placing value on morality, and associating it with philosophy, suggesting that philosophers need to - for both perhaps themselves and others - recognize that morality is a human necessity? After all, is not Socratic philosophy in part defined by its ability to recognize and reconcile themselves with the necessary conditions of human life? What is more, if what we have discovered is correct, and morality either is wisdom or relies on a kind of wisdom, is it not a morally laudable action to praise philosophy?

There seems to be no satisfying way of defending against these questions. As such, let us remind ourselves that the interest of wisdom and the interest of morality are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, this dialogue intends to teach us that they are, at least in their best sense, one. It is perhaps for this reason that the self-interest and moral concern of Socrates seem to collide in this dialogue, and why both desires exist in harmony. With that in mind, it might be said that this matter reveals a way in which Plato follows one of his patterns in Protagoras. Plato so commonly demonstrates how the conflicts of the political life are resolved in the philosophic way of life, even if that life is only accessible to the few. Perhaps, in this one instance, Plato intends to reveal how Socrates believed that the tension - indeed, opposition - between morality and self-interest, or the good, or what is truly advantageous, align in philosophy. Moral virtue would then appear, by Socrates’s lights, anyway, to be a part of the proper ordering of one’s soul, an ordering which constitutes wisdom. This would explain why Socrates embraces it as a
motivating force, and helps to elucidate why he defends it so fiercely, when there may be other ways to protect his reputation. In other words, Socrates could recognize morality as both a necessary human goal and a worthy part of Socratic philosophy, and in light of that recognition, frequently attempt to incorporate morality into both his role as educator and seeker of wisdom. Yet for tragic, realistic reasons we will go on to discover, this may not always be the opinion of Plato. For now, though, let us take from this consideration an assurance of the sincerity of Socrates’s moral motivations, and the presence of a genuine respect for morality in Socratic philosophy.

The Moral Results of Socratic Philosophy

So far, we have managed to contend that there is a sincere and intimate relationship between morality and philosophy, at least in this dialogue. But we have yet to ask: what are the results of this relationship? What happens to Protagoras’s moral character as a result of his association with Socrates? What happens to the crowd? Does Socrates’s audience actually become better, more moral as a result of his lessons? For the purposes of answering these questions, perhaps the best place to begin a textual analysis is where the sophist and the philosopher have already had meaningful conversation, and the members of the audience are most active. There, we might best determine how they are affected by the behavior of Socrates and his teaching.

In more specific terms, the young men in the crowd most visibly intervene in the dialogue after Socrates threatens to leave the gathering. It is this threat maneuver that distracts the crowd from applauding Protagoras for his ignorant and relativistic speech about the good(334c), and this threat that prompts Callias, the host, to “beg [Socrates] to stay with us,” and admit that “there’s no one to whom I would listen with greater pleasure than you”(335d). When Socrates
makes it clear that to stay, he would need modified rules, the other members of the crowd soon decide to jointly revise these rules. When they do, we know that in some sense, they must be attempting to reflect what Socrates loves or teaches, for only in doing so will they dissuade Socrates from what they seem to believe is a genuine plan of departure. Thus, we are able to establish a link between any virtue the young men might show in this discussion, and not reasonably conclude that they either pretend to possess, care for, maintain, or have learned such virtue because of Socrates. And as it turns out, the members of the audience have indeed greatly benefited from Socrates, for in helping to create and revise the rules of conversation for Socrates and Protagoras, they reveal ample amounts of concern for the moral virtues we elsewhere defined - namely, moderation, justice, and all things noble.

To begin with moderation, the men of the audience cannot show these virtues in the way one might expect. They are not concerned with the over-zealous consumption of wine, food, or the overindulgence in sexual pleasures. That disconcern itself is precisely the kind of conventional moderation Socrates describes and for which he advocates, and so Hippocrates and his compatriots already reveal themselves to be fundamentally moderate in a conventional sense. But if these men are to further allow moderation to inform the content of their decisions - if, in other words, they are to make clear that Socrates reminded them of the importance and meaning of moderation - it must appear differently, and somewhat more politically, for the decisions they make surround the proper nature of the discussion, the etiquette of intercourse, and the rightful appearance of truth-seeking.

Yet appear it does, and repeatedly so. The first hint of this comes from the future tyrant Critias, who insists that Protagoras respond “briefly” to the questions asked of him. Answering briefly is surely moderate, for it is between being “excessively brief” and
excessively “lengthy speechmaking.” Instead, both of them are to “keep to a middle course,” a more moderate one. Prodicus, in a similar spirit, insists that “it is right” for Protagoras and Socrates “to come to agreement and to dispute about the arguments but not to ‘quarrel’”(337b), an insistence that too seems moderate, for it allows for disagreement in pursuit of wisdom, but disallows anger from overcoming those in its pursuit. Prodius further insists that in response to the two men, the audience members should feel “delight,” but not be “pleased,” for “feeling delight belongs to one who learns something and shares in prudence by means of the intellect itself, whereas being pleased belongs to one who eats something or who experiences another pleasure by means of the body itself”(337c). Socrates later comes to dissolve the distinction between these two words, but the idea behind the distinction, in combination with the other sentiments, reveal a care for the kind of moderation before described, that virtue between to excesses. Such a virtue, in this case, seems to maintain a particular intimacy with wisdom, for the moderate or refined pleasure is by Prodicus’s lights the intellectual pleasure, and moderation is here used in the interest of he who pursues wisdom. That intimacy comes to bear fruit, for Protagoras does indeed respond in shorter lengths. In doing so, he allows Socrates to “make manifest his own judgement,” and, perhaps most importantly uncover and undermine what it is that Protagoras really teaches. It also opens the gate to discussing “the measuring art,” which, rather in the spirit of moderation, diffuses the immoral hedonism of Protagoras, and instead defines what is good by what will ultimately be best or most pleasurable for the soul in the long-term - an art upon which, the men jointly agree, “the saving of our life depend[s]”(356e).

In short, the men who listen to Socrates in this dialogue show themselves to embody, care for, and know the political value of the moderation he describes. This moderation comes
in its physical, conventional form, and is used in the service of wisdom to better the public discussions that take place in this microcosmic society. Therefore, whether or not these men can be Socratic philosophers, they surely took something from how Socrates described and emphasized the value of moderation; ostensibly because of the nature of this conversation, the men in attendance devoted themselves more thoroughly to moderation and used it to make their political environment more pleasing, more moral, and more wise.

Thus, like elsewhere (see chapter two), it might be said that Plato’s characters create a microcosmic political society. This political society seems to take upon itself the norms of democracy with which the men are so accustomed, for they make decisions and oversee the “get-together” “in common,” as “fellow citizens” (337d), and ask Socrates to “elect an overseer” (338b). It should come as no surprise, then, when the members of this pseudo-society also start to care for and exhibit justice as well as moderation. In fact, it is in some ways justice with which the men in attendance are most concerned. In the aforementioned discussion of the length of speechmaking, Alcibiades insists that Protagoras and Socrates “converse by means of question and answer,” and that both “must make manifest his own judgement,” as each are “capable.” This rule Alcibiades proposes emphasizes the care for “speak[ing] justly” Callias already exhibited (336b), and bears a specific resemblance to the political definition of justice as Plato often describes it,\(^{17}\) for it both establishes mandatory behaviors for the good of all present, and has care for the proper place of each individual.

This rule, agreed to by all, further supports an atmosphere lawfulness in which Hippias has particular interest. By his definition, law is both a necessity of justice and that which “compels many things through force, contrary to nature” (337d). Critias, though suspicious of Alcibiades, helps to elevate this law with the help of Socrates, and it governs over the men
for the rest of the dialogue, in the interest of finding out who has “the just claim” (347b). And by that definition, justice is surely established in this dialogue, for Protagoras “was compelled to agree,” despite his being “very unwilling” (338e). Only under this duress does Protagoras allow Socrates to speak, and only because Alcibiades and Callias compel him through shame (348b), or because “Prodicus and Hippias strongly bade him to do so” (342a). This compulsion is arguably what actually allows Socrates to meaningfully engage with the ideas of the sophist, and immoral and unwise as they are, detach the audience from them. Thus, through the rule of law, the reflection of democratic norms, and the attempt to maintain proper relationships between the individual and society, the young men in the audience show special care for the kind of political justice Socrates outlined, and that care comes to educate them and improve their environment.

It might here be briefly mentioned that the men might display other moral virtues in a political sense, and that they do so as a result of their relationship with Socrates. Some might argue perhaps that their emphasis on shame and what would be shameful (337d, 338b, 348c), demonstrates a devotion to piety as previously discussed. Some others might say that because Callias’s love of wisdom (335e) drives him to beg Socrates to stay, and because Prodicus asks the men to listen to reason, and not beauty, some men in question even start to follow the doctrine of the unity of virtue, or equate morality with wisdom. Yet others might note how Alcibiades has particular care for what is courageous (348b-c). Having done so, such analysts might claim that the environment the men create is also devoted to the moral virtue of courage. All of these contentions may be true, but all of them, for lack of proper evidence, cannot be sufficiently developed here.
It might also be asked how Socrates cares for the morality of Protagoras himself, if indeed it is true that he cares for the well-being of all his interlocutors, even when they appear to be his enemies. One might be inspired to ask such a question by noticing how Socrates claims there is “a two-fold obligation” between the two men (310a), and how Protagoras himself seems to have intense emotional reactions to the lessons Socrates attempts to teach. Could it be that because Protagoras is compelled to follow the laws the men establish, and pretend to possess justice, that he actually becomes more just, at least in appearance? Could it be that because he is shamed by the audience and defeated by Socrates, he is made more humble, and more pious in the face of what he does not know? Could it be because he is disallowed from letting “all sails unfurl,” he actually becomes more moderate in his presentation? Could it be that because he is forced to “make manifest his judgement,” and shed the cloak to which he clings, he is actually forced to become more courageous? Could it be that because Socrates exposes the extent to which he is already committed to a conventional form of moral nobility, Protagoras might actually find himself more willing to accept moralism? It may very well be so, but here too, this dialogue leaves us with only inferences and hopes.

Nevertheless, what can definitely and reasonably be contended is that the men in attendance, as representatives of Hippocrates who so need educating and as a result of their association with Socrates, emphasize or realize the importance of “the noble things.” This emphasis or realization shows them to be not only civically virtuous, but beneath that, morally virtuous. The men of the audience devote themselves to determining what is just, what is moderate, and ultimately, what is or “isn’t noble” (336b-c), and place themselves on the side of nobility, a position that, as it happens, cannot coexist with Protagoras’s many
immoral teachings. In doing so, they not only reaffirm their alliance with the particularly moral motivations that Socrates claims are his(348d-349a), but create a more intimate relationship between the wisdom of Socrates and the political sphere they have created. So, let us ask again: what is the result of this intimate relationship? We might now answer that a more intimate connection between Socratic philosophy, whose wisdom defends morality in its conventional and elite forms, educates and elevates the public sphere. In that sphere, men can properly become moral. If indeed civic health and well-being depends on its citizens maintaining a kind of moral virtue, then Socratic philosophy seems affirmed as an indispensably unique moral tool of political society, perhaps the only one able to make political men truly moral, whether they engage with others in the home of Callias, or the caucuses of today.

Conclusion

Morality requires education. Statesmen, artisans, and scholars can agree on that much. Yet to conjure more than piecemeal answers about the nature of moral education, it seems we must look to philosophers. Plato is one such philosopher. In his dialogue Protagoras, Plato provides some of those answers by contrasting the very different natures of two kinds of education: sophistic and philosophic. Through dissociating philosophic education from the immoral dangers of sophistry, we can and hopefully have learned, beyond anything else, that Socratic philosophy has particular moral powers. At least according to Plato, it is Socratic philosophy that has the power to most reasonably identify morality, both in its conventional and philosophic forms, expose and discourage immorality, and prove that morality is a good thing. When those powers are enacted, as they were by Socrates in this dialogue, philosophy is able to turn the soul of its students towards morality, and elevate the public sphere as a
result. This dialogue emphasizes the extent to which the Socratic philosopher must also act as educator, and the extent to which that educator must care about morality, for care they must, and care they should.

For the purposes of this investigation into the tension between morality and philosophy, this dialogue was first analyzed to understand the fundamentally moral aspects of Socratic philosophy. Philosophy is in many ways a deeply moral activity, and this is not just because teachers are touted as the real heroes of young, innocent children. While it is true that education itself is moral, Socratic education in particular may be the only form of education that is both capable of defining and instilling morality properly, and still cares to do so. Why? Let us summarize musically: the symphony of morality requires three instruments that none can play so beautifully as philosophy. Because of the chords they strike, it may be true that in philosophy, the greatest potential for morality resides. This is true if, as many claim, morality is as much about intention and forethought as it is about action, for philosophy, unlike sophistry, is the most free of self-interested ambition. It cares only for wisdom. It is also true if, as many claim, morality is as much about a state of the soul as it is about following moral rules, for, unlike the secretly sentimental sophists, philosophers are those most liberated from conventional rules. It is finally true if, as all should contend, that morality is only morality if it remains true to its intention, for philosophy is that way of life most able to identify the truth of morality. Whether that truth appeals to the Plato, that remains to be seen.
Notes

1. Republic VII describes education as this kind of rotation. An educator, Socrates explains, relies on the capacity of his students, and turns their eyes to see what has always been there. Eyes have long been understood as a window to the soul, and considered symbolically connected to it. As such, this description might be one of the most concise explanations of the kind of “soul-turning” necessary for proper, true, and lasting education. On this basis, and because of similar explanations made in other dialogues, this “turning” would then be understood, and elsewhere in the dialogues, as fundamental to Socratic education, especially moral education. And rightly so; consider: conventional moral virtue, like virtue properly understood, requires a kind of openness; it must be ready to face its own flaws and shortcomings. On this score, then, the Socratic lens we have adopted may seem verified.

2. Such devotion requires and illuminates a conflict between the good, or wisdom, and one’s own. We know the city’s rules; they are familiar and made to protect and serve our own individual interests, or those of our own family or city. But the devotion to wisdom requires transcending those rules by way of challenging them. There is no easy answer to this tension between what we think to be good and what is truly good for ourselves, at least in political life. The philosophic life accepts that tension, but seeks to transcend it. See Allan Bloom, Ladder of Love, e.g. p. 137.


4. For the sake of this thesis, I have opted to refer to the text with Stephanus numbers, with line numbers when necessary, as is the tradition.


6. Consider 317a for an example or defense of the sophistic cloaking tendency.

7. Protagoras contends that the many “perceive as it were nothing,” while certain others are able to hold the elite virtues of wisdom, and, as will be investigated, courage. The Socratic explanation of the divide between elite and pedestrian moral virtue will be one of the central questions of this chapter.

8. This accusation does not hold up. See “Sincerity of Socratic Morality.”

9. Blushing is commonly used in Platonic dialogues as a sign of shame in the ignorant, those with whom Socrates discusses and whom he tries to educate. This later occurs with Protagoras, as he realizes that he is defeated and the dialogue comes to a close.

10. One might consider, as an example, the overlap of money and power at 326c, which potentially explains why Callias is “on Protagoras’s side”(336c).

11. “Strength” is the sophistic term, the term that Protagoras uses for the concept. Socrates does refer to it as such. This might have interesting implications for the sophistic understanding of courage: the sophists might think of themselves as attached to strength conceived as boldness or traditionally conceived “manliness” and power, and proud of that attachment, but that attachment is unphilosophic both because boldness can be unwise(e.g. The “well diving” episode, and because it attaches ultimate to something other than wisdom or truth - indeed, something dogmatic that can blind you to the truth.

13. One might argue that Protagoras is sentimentally and conventionally attached to justice as well as courage. This might be thought to be evidenced in the ostensible need that he has or feel to justify his way of life, to justify his lessons, as well as his anger, his shame, and his accusation of Socrates of hypocrisy.

14. Recognizing self-contradiction, and the eternal presence of human contradictions, is fundamentally important to the Socratic philosopher. Plato confirms this in Republic VI.

15. This collision or conflation of justice and piety, even if it is one made only in speech, repudiates the notion that impiety can be justified. Since that notion can be dangerous for the city, diffusing and defeating this conflation of the two can be conceived as an intrinsically moral action.

16. See Robert Bartlett’s interpretive on the “amoral” version of courage(13).

17. Republic VI, illuminated in chapter three.
Works Cited


Suggestions for Further Reading


Leo Strauss. 1965. Lectures on Plato's Protagoras. (Available online at leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu)


A lyrical reading of *Protagoras* can and hopefully has revealed to the careful interpreter that philosophy has the capacity to maintain a deep, sincere, and intimate relationship with morality, conceived as moral heroism. Yet a careful interpreter of the human things will always bear in mind that capacity by no means necessitates eventuality; it may well be, for example, that we are able to help the old lady across the street, but whether we will take the time, that remains another question entirely. So too does this question remain: is the relationship between morality and philosophy natural? Is it bound together by mutual affection? Put another way: does the Socratic philosopher love morality? Consumed as she must be by the pursuit of wisdom, is she also equally consumed by effusive and spontaneous morality? Can she be?

To say, in the spirit of *Protagoras*, that virtue is one, and thus, wisdom incorporates moral virtue, seems an unsatisfactory response. This is because, one might say, our analysis has neglected to treat morality as an ends-in-itself and whether philosophy has a spiritual devotion or longing to that end. This failure is significant, for spiritual longing and natural desire has great power in creating virtue, moral or otherwise. As such, it might be said whether or not the philosopher longs to be moral becomes a crux of the relationship between philosophy and morality. In the interest of remediying that failure, we might be best served by now looking to another dialogue entirely: Plato’s *Symposium*. 
As dialogues always seem to do, Plato’s *Symposium* centers around a single question or issue, in this case being what the Greeks call “eros,” or passionate love.\(^1\) Modern readers might best understand eros in a broad sense, so as to include not only the passion between human beings, but also, and more importantly, the love of something larger than ourselves, something that might be called a divine calling or higher aspiration, something that, for the love of it, guides, directs, and inspires our lives. Plato asks his readers, modern and classic, about that which Socrates asks his interlocutors: the relationship between eros and virtue. This involves both a correlative relationship (i.e. the degree to which eros and virtue overlap and conflict) and a causative one: the ability of eros to create virtue in its many forms, and vice versa.

And as dialogues also always seem to do, Plato’s *Symposium*, more erotically than most, investigates this question and illuminates its answer - to whatever degree one exists - in a veiled, dramatic, and literary way. Its narrative follows Socrates, and a close follower, Aristodemus,\(^2\) as they travel to, arrive at, and participate in a dinner and intended drinking party, all of which takes place in the home of Agathon, the renowned tragic poet. Yet following dinner, the men, hung over from the night before (176e), decide instead to extemporize about the subject of eros, competing over who can best speak on the topic.

Socrates, as we will come to see and he so often does, uses the occasion for many purposes: to philosophize about eros, to advocate for philosophy, and to ally with, defend, and exemplify moral virtue. But as I will come to argue, that alliance is neither as natural nor as erotic as he would long them to be. Instead, the philosophic eros is shown to be an authoritatively pleasurable commander, one that demands complete devotion to the pursuit of truth, and cares for little else. Yet since the philosophic soul is not just an erotic soul but
also a just one,² Plato also shows Socrates, and ultimately, the philosopher, as he who is able to channel his eros into other worthy goals, not least among them moral virtue. In short, this chapter will contend that Plato’s Symposium simultaneously illustrates how the philosophic eros leads the philosopher away from holistic devotion to moral deeds, reveals how a philosopher is able to channel their eros to accomplish them, and, perhaps most importantly, asks if she should.

The Socratic Defense of Morality in Symposium: Custom

As many scholars have observed, The Symposium is the only Platonic dialogue whose title describes an occasion. The title forces a critical reader to consider and evaluate the assumptions that accompany such an occasion. In the case of symposiums, everyone assumes that they are scandalous and even dangerous to attend, especially for a philosopher. That is because by all accounts, not least in Plato’s Laws, symposiums are a source of drunkenness and debauchery.

And yet, like all endeavours that are intended to be utterly unconventional, symposiums all too often reproduce the custom they claim to oppose. Custom all too often ends up being a stain too stubborn to remove. Plato repeatedly explores this claim, personifying it in Protagoras from Protagoras, Thrasymachus from The Republic, and Callicles in Gorgias. Only Socrates seems to be the opposite: he is unlawful, but acts lawfully, because while he has liberated himself from custom, he recognizes the necessity of custom for human life, even for the philosophic life that he believes depends on human prosperity.

This wisdom of Socrates is far too often overlooked. By only emphasizing how he criticizes custom, Socrates is mistakenly reduced to the paradigm of unconventionality. The
depth of the dialogue is restricted along with him. Taken at its surface, a competition over which scandalous character can make the best eulogy to Eros, it too is mistakenly reduced to a space allergic to laws and custom, what the Greeks would call *nomos*. This interpretation that even in this *Symposium*, the dialogue and the occasion that purports to be most erotically unconventional, Socrates brilliantly recognizes the ability to revamp the reputation of philosophy by making it appear more lawful than it actually is. And in doing so, the brilliance of Socrates once again proves to be a moral power upon which the prosperity of the city depends:

To evaluate this claim, analysts would be well-advised to inquire as to what it is that makes symposiums so unconventional. Leo Strauss perhaps best answers this when he writes that “wine[and the symposiums that distribute it] gives rise to the ability to or willingness to say everything- openness, frankness. Connected with this is what the Greeks called hubris, wantonness, doing things you would never do when sober, presumptuousness to take risks”(Strauss 12). In other words, according to these guidelines, symposiums endanger the rule of convention because they induce two primary transgressions in their participants: uncontrolled speech, and hubris.

To be sure, these transgressions emerge throughout the dialogue. But this by no means necessitates that *The Symposium* is devoid of custom; custom can survive, invade, and replicate itself amidst them. It also does not mean that Socrates is himself guilty of these transgressions, or at fault for the lawlessness of others. In fact, read closely, Plato reveals very much the opposite. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates first appears to be a moral educator as he upholds and even instills custom by displaying respect for conventional structures upon which the city depends.
Defending the Family

Socrates does not choose just any custom to make his ally. Indeed, he only seems to ally himself with fundamentally important political conventions, those integral to the maintenance of the city. Arguably, the conventional family is chief among these. To understand the significance of this convention to this dialogue in particular, one must recall the accusation to which the dialogue responds. *The Symposium* is, in many ways, a virtual comeback to Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. In that text, Aristophanes paints a picture of a young son, Strepsiades, who is sent to study with Socrates. Upon his return home, Strepsiades rejects paternal authority as illegitimate. According to many interpreters, this is one of Aristophanes’ most important warnings of the comedy: Socratic philosophy will undermine convention, including the conventional family, to a dangerous degree.

To assuage his listeners and their society that this warning is unnecessary, Socrates responds, as he so often does, by turning the accusation on its head. Readers of the *Symposium* will eventually learn that when Socrates eventually makes his speech, he will do so in a secretive manner; he crafts his philosophical contribution as a pseudo-dialogue with a wise woman from Mantinea, Diotima. Though Diotima will go on to deliver complicated, unique, and elusive lessons, she also will go on to praise heterosexual, physical eros, for the end of procreation(206b-207a). She even makes repeated mention of “giving birth” to wisdom or virtue(206e). In doing so, Diotima maintains the expectation to have children, and upholds respect for the traditional family structure, and the feminine gender role within it.³

Socrates also defends the conventional family against those transgressions that would destroy it. As he discusses the nature of eros with Agathon, attempting to attract his
erotic wisdom to the surface, Socrates makes a point to declare that “the question whether Eros is love of mother or father would be laughable”(199d). In the clearest possible terms, he ridicules incest. As readers of the tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* will remember, incest is chief among the crimes against the conventional family. By ridiculing it, Socrates makes himself appear as the defender of the conventional family against the most egregious crimes that would undermine it. This appearance lingers even if he, in reality, finds the bounds of the traditional family philosophically illegitimate, a reality perhaps suggested by the neglect of his own family. In spite of that, he now publicly appears as the master of comedy, making anything that violates custom “laughable.” In doing so, he overcomes and reverses the reputation Aristophanes gave him for subverting filial piety.

What might be the moral implications of such a defense? To answer that question, one must ask several more, namely: what does the family mean to the city? Does not the family, according to classical and modern scholars alike⁴, help shape the civic character of the city’s citizens? The moral character of said citizens? Does not the family instill in children norms of behavior, ideological values, even some kinds of virtue⁵? What other institution is so obviously, physically, and broadly responsible for the edification of young souls? And on an individual, psychological level, what other institution, even in the modern age, even somewhat reasonably claims to give something upon which you can always rely? People you can always trust, to whom you can always come home? To the human soul, family organizes, concentrates, and makes recognizable what Socrates calls the love of “one’s own”(206a), a love most share in great capacities and can do great harm to the city if it is not organized.⁶ To the city, the family acts as a foundation beneath and informant of the laws, as well as an educator into virtue - as long it remains healthy and lawful, that is.
Upholding Democratic Norms

Custom often extends further than moral and spiritual values. It is a creature of the collective, a common god that demands of each individual the same kind of moral rightness. Only naturally, custom begins to define a national or collective political identity. To participate in and to defend custom marks and elevates the individual as nationalistic, as respectful of the state, as civically virtuous. To an extent, this is true of the state of the Athenian democracy. As Plato frequently implies, Athenians feel they should be proud to be Athenians; Athens holds the reputation for wisdom, statesmanship, and artistry. Indeed, the choice to invent and maintain their democracy marks them out for recognition.

Though the Symposium is a supposedly lawless space, the symposiasts, at least in some respects, prove to be products of customs of the Athenian democracy. While the dinner preceding the symposium is an invited affair, the symposium itself does not truly begin until all speakers discuss the terms for the evening’s activities. Since these men were, to put it bluntly, so drunk and suffering from the night before, they “all agreed not to make the present party a drinking bout, but for each to drink as much as he pleased” (176e). For while the symposiasts did not explicitly consider themselves a political association, they did consent to the rules or founding laws of the temporary society or community that will exist for the length of the competition. And in the process of doing so, it might also be noted, the symposiasts, like city legislators, weighed both public safety and the virtue of liberty. Ultimately, that discussion comes down on the side of liberty, and calls attention to the natural predispositions of human beings. Democracy favors these concepts. As this overlap suggests, the symposiasts, in their more or less political community, will come to mirror the ideals of Athenian democracy in a fundamental way.
During the symposium, the symposiasts rely on the customs of democratic governance. As many scholars have noted, not least among them Allan Bloom, there seems to be a semblance of democratic equality amongst the speakers. Their joint aim - namely, to produce the best defense of eros - boils down to a competition, not a collaboration. And this “free marketplace of ideas,” contemplated thoroughly, builds to and seems to inspire the speech that Socrates makes.

Considered more closely, this assertion seems to be proven. Phaedrus, the first speaker, centers his eulogy around the courageous deeds eros produces, and the immortal glory one receives for them. After him, however, Diotima comments on the same legendary deeds Phaedrus did when she asks a fictional young Socrates whether he supposed if “Alcestis would have died for Admetus’ sake, or Achilles would have died after Patroclus, or your own Codrus would have died before his sons for the sake of their kingship if they had not believed there would be an immortal remembering of their virtue, which we now retain? Far from it,’ she said, ‘but I believe all do things for the sake of immortal virtue”(208d). Diotima, as a character of Socrates’s making, here attributes those courageous deeds to eros - eros conceived as longing both for others and for immortality - just as Phaedrus did. Beyond this passage, she directly states the supposition upon which his argument depends, that being that love of immortality always accompanies eros(206e). When combined, it becomes clear that Diotima’s presentation of eros agrees with that of Phaedrus: Diotima, too, teaches that eros involves the longing for immortality, and that that longing encourages courageous deeds. To do so is to legitimize his powers of speech and observation, and perhaps even his desires.
When Pausanius follows Phaedrus, he is intent on improving the defense of eros. He attempts to sift out the corrupt forms of eros he sees in the world around him. He criticizes those who misapply eros (183e-184a), purifying its definition by claiming that these men are not really lovers at all. When it is time for Socrates to speak, Diotima declares in a strikingly similar fashion that “those who turn towards it in many other ways, in terms of money-making, love of gymnastics, or philosophy, are neither said to love nor called lovers, whereas those who earnestly apply themselves to a certain single kind, get the name of the whole, love, and are said to love and called lovers” (205d). Here, Diotima not only mirrors Pausanius’ reasoning, but also uses the same wording. Pausanius criticized the misuse of eros in money-making, gymnastics, and “philosophy,” a derogatory term not to be confused with the pure philosophy Socrates practices. Diotima does too, even employing the same words, connotations, and tone that accompany them, as if to signal to Pausanius that he has been heard, and certainly has some wisdom the others overlooked. So, in just fashion, he too is accommodated in her philosophy of eros.

For the next symposiast in line, Eryximachus, moderation seems to ground his eulogy. He claims that his art, that of medicine, presides over “the whole,” “of bodies and human things as well as divine things” (186a), in order to create a “noble eros,” understood as a moderate balance between opposing elements. This includes a balance “between gods and human beings” (188d). And just as Socrates did with the others, he incorporates Eryximachus’s ideas into Diotima’s definition of eros: Socrates has Diotima note that erotic desire is a sign of “moderation and justice” (209a). In her meditation on procreation - procreation conceived as the result of erotic desire, supervised by medicine - Socrates further emphasizes this overlap with Eryximachus. Diotima comments that “in this way
every mortal thing is preserved; not by being absolutely the same forever, as the divine is, but by the fact that that which is departing and growing old leaves behind another young thing that is as it was. By this device, Socrates,’ she said, ‘the mortal shares in immortality, both body and all the rest”(208a-b). In other words, on Diotima’s presentation and that of Eryximachus, art or science(techne), is an intermediary between human things and divine immortality; it elevates human lives by protecting and purifying eros itself. This presentation, both of eros and perhaps more importantly of medicine, allows Eryximachus to believe that he shares in Diotima’s wisdom. It also validates his art. Both of these actions would make him more friendly to Socrates’ persuasion. Or so one would think, at least.

Aristophanes, who follows Eryximachus, is, as previously discussed, the poet to whom Plato is responding in this dialogue. Aristophanes accused Socrates of being unerotic and dangerous, but in this dialogue, it is Aristophanes who appears lawless. For this raunchy comic poet, the key aspect of eros seems to be that erotic desire is love of one’s own. Eros is the name for the desire and the pursuit of the whole, and the lover is a person “desiring its own half”(191a). Reductionist or base as this view might appear to some, however, it would be a mistake to interpret that Socrates rejects it entirely, at least outwardly or as it applies to everyone. For as one might note, Diotima’s speech directly incorporates this core idea of Aristophanes’s speech: as she eventually comes to reveal the true nature of eros, Diotima declares that “Eros is of the good being one’s own always”(206a). She also presents eros as a “desire” for the good. This is significant because, as one might observe, Aristophanes. is the only speaker who identifies eros as just that: a desire. Thus, Socrates includes two of the comic poet’s most distinctive and important ideas. By doing so, it might be said, Socrates forces Aristophanes to be a
collaborator. Socrates rearranges the playing field as Aristophanes understands it, and transforms the Socratic view from a dangerous enemy of poetry into a familiar intimate. This tactic, successfully received - as the end of the dialogue, where Aristophanes and Socrates are intimately engrossed in conversation, suggests that it is - would reconcile the poet with the philosopher on the common ground of love.

Agathon, who had just won a grand prize for his tragic poetry, and in whose house the symposium takes place, follows Aristophanes. He sits closest to Socrates, and this proximity, by many scholarly accounts, could very well allegorically indicate that thoughts of Agathon on eros most closely resemble the philosophy of Socrates. Perhaps for this reason, Socrates soon attempts to foster a dialogue with Agathon. But, as Phaedrus immediately reminds, these men, the customary rules of the competition only allow each competitor to speak in their turn, and as such, disallow this kind of dialogue, interesting as it may be. Socrates abides by this admonition, and the two men cease their discussion.

Instead, as the rules dictate, Agathon gives his own breathtaking speech on eros. This speech follows the form upon which he and Socrates agreed: to first describe eros, and then speak of “his deeds.” As this grand, formal, elocution comes to reveal, Agathon’s conception of eroticism is most centrally rooted in overwhelming beauty, and the praise that beauty deserves. Diotima, directly after him, mimics this conception: she emphasizes beauty and implies its praiseworthiness. Indeed, as she describes what will we later deem “the ladder of love,” - or the ascension of the erotic soul - relies on beauty. This mimicry may very well be a rhetorical strategy on the part of Socrates. As G.R. F. Ferrari comments, Socrates only reveals “a selective truth, reflecting only those facts of love that a philosopher would find most beautiful” (Ferrari 261). Because, as we will later discover, the
Socratic relationship to beauty is incredibly complicated, Diotima’s emphasis upon what is beautiful appears to be, at least primarily, a rhetorical tactic, one meant as a direct concession and attempt to engage with Agathon.

Beyond that, Agathon stresses that “eros(if sacred law allow it and it be without nemesis to say so) is happiest of them, as he is most beautiful and best”(195a). In other words, for Agathon, those that embody eros most are happiest. This notion, one that suggests that happiness comes with eros - eros being to Agathon a recommendable and desirable trait - will come to be known as a Socratic one, even if Socrates will conceive of eros differently in some ways. Socrates, as perhaps is only wise, makes a point to emphasize his consensus with Agathon on this score. Diotima explains that “eros is the whole desire of good things and being happy”(205d). This statement deserves challenging in its own right, and we will do so later. So too will we take up and investigate how “the good things” relate to what is understood as beautiful. But for now, it is only relevant to note how Socrates, in a veritable “shout out” to Agathon, includes their shared view that happiness relates to eros, and how he incorporates beauty, both in style and in content, into his dialogue with Diotima. By doing so, Socrates feeds Agathon’s ego and poetic ideals.

In sum, it might then be said that Socrates uses Diotima’s definition of eros to include what he sees to be most wise or important about the speaker’s eroticism. Doing so allows each speaker to feel as if he “engendered the beautiful” with Socrates, perpetuating a feeling of inclusion and intellectual intimacy with a very wise man. Socrates also takes great precaution to validate the work and virtue of these men who see themselves to be wise: Diotima directly asks “what is appropriate for the soul?” and she answers her own question, responding “prudence and the rest of virtue; it is of these things that poets and all
the craftsmen who are said to be inventive are procreators”(209a). Here, Diotima praises an inclusive category of poets and craftsmen as being edifying for the soul of humankind, thus implying that each of these symposiasts, or “procreators,” are in some way divine, above, or responsible for humanity. Not only that, Diotima seems to say, poets are also responsible for fostering the conventional virtues of humankind.

This praise is not insignificant for these men. As the emphasis on Agathon’s prize quickly reveals, the poets and craftsmen are ultimately enslaved to public opinion. The poets crave praise, as well as the intimacy that fosters their beloved eros. Socrates takes advantage of this and speaks strategically, the better to provide these men with both of the things they dearly desire. Taken as Socrates intends, this carefully tailored, self-disciplined speech would foster reciprocal affection in the symposiasts for philosophy. This kind of speech can thus be interpreted as a kind of rhetorical and democratic civility, one that requires acknowledging each participant with sensitivity to his ego and the ideas he cherishes. Civility so understood is an ally or bedrock of democratic equality, for it supports the notion that in the public sphere, all participants deserve respect and attention. Socrates might then be said to foster or elevate democratic equality in the drinking party. Of course, in asserting so, what we would mean by “equality” would not and cannot compare to the kind of modern egalitarianism with which we, as modern democrats, tend to associate equality. These speakers, after all, are privileged men, and their predispositions and perspectives seem to be accordingly aristocratic, rather than thoroughly or completely democratic. That said, though, this different, more limited understanding of democratic equality did exist, and prevalently so; it was considered necessary for the proper functioning of classical society. Thus, insofar as the men exhibit democratic equality, and
insofar as Socrates encourages the symposiasts to do so, the symposium, as a microcosmic society, can be said to reproduce this democratic norm.

Cherished as these norms of liberty, equality, and competition engender may be, however, they also engender chaos. If the symposium upholds these norms, therefore, it would also need strong laws to regulate the competitors. Sure enough, the symposiasts provide laws, as well as leaders to assure that the laws are enforced: Eryximachus, who proposed the competition in the first place, is appointed to regulate and facilitate the speeches. His duties include not only introducing speakers, but admonishing those who threaten to break this new cohort’s rules. This role is confirmed and properly executed when Aristophanes jokes and hiccups following the speech of Pausanius. Exryimachus dictates “my good Aristophanes, look at what you are doing. You made [us] laugh just as you were about to speak; and you compel me to be a guardian of your speech, lest you ever say anything laughable—though you did have the chance to speak in peace”(189a-b). This passage, properly read, clarifies that at least in this context, the duty of a “guardian”- a term that should be familiar to readers of The Republic - is to keep order and peace by enforcing the laws collectively discussed and agreed upon. Eryximachus thus acts as the ruler, or at the very least the democratic peacekeeper, of this new pseudo-society.

With him appointed, and Phaedrus to help him, the symposium now has established a government leader and a system of laws, all based on norms of democratic consent, equality, and liberty. All of those concepts and ideals are those of a political society, and especially a democratic one like the city of Athens in which these symposiasts live. Since the primary speakers invoke and rely upon them, the symposium clearly reproduces the customs of the city, conceived as its moral and spiritual ideas as well as its political
conventions. If Socrates intends to avoid the reputation for subversion, then, he would have to respect and uphold the laws of this microcosmic Athenian democracy, a feat that might be far more difficult for the philosopher than for others.

Once again, he does just that. Though he pushes its boundaries, Socrates follows the laws upon which his fellows symposiasts insist. Indeed, he seems to elevate or strengthen them, as he did in *Protagoras*. He waits his turn to speak; he sits where he is supposed to; he praises those who have gone before him; and, even though his interpretation of eros is different, he still follows his instructions to praise eros. To the extent that those laws mimic the democratic values of the lawmakers, he upholds the democratic custom.

More than abiding by the conventions of others, or following rules, Socrates employs conventional techniques of his own. To stay active and afloat, we might remember, convention must acquire and utilize certain tools to enforce itself. Here we come upon a crux, one which requires visiting(or revisiting) the Greek concept of *nomos*. *Nomos*, in classical society, speaks to something more expansive than law. It includes custom, civic culture, or a community’s general way of life. Its tools are therefore far broader and arguably more powerful than some sort of police force. Though the Athenian democracy uses many of these tools, two, fear and shame, mark themselves out as especially noticeable and effective. Such tools, perhaps surprisingly, are just as noticeable in the supposedly lawless space of the *Symposium*, and in Socrates’ speech within it. In the aforementioned conversation with Agathon, Socrates soon after responds “I should surely be in disgrace, Agathon, were I to presume any lack of urbanity in you”(194c). In saying this, Socrates assures the certainty and validity of disgrace. Brilliantly, he does so in a way
that uses shame as a way to enforce rationality, but the key observation here is that he maintains the customary tool of shame.

More than that, he indicates that he himself is subject to shame! Before he speaks, Socrates recounts: “I for my part, on reflecting that I myself should be unable to say anything nearly as beautiful, almost ran off and was gone with shame, if I had any place to go”(198b). Beyond the obvious irony of this comment, a critical reader should note that Socrates extends ostensible shame onto himself, a philosopher though he may be. Regardless of his real feelings, Socrates thus portrays shame as a kind of moral duty, as a virtue of men who exist in a community of other men. It is perhaps for this very reason that Socrates implies that his shame stems from his inability to contribute to this quasi-political community, this joint existence that the symposiasts have established. In short, Socrates indicates that in such a community, shame should follow from lack or failure of public spirit. Considered simultaneously, these indications reveal that Socrates mirrors a moral custom of Athens, and does so perhaps not only to save himself, but also perhaps to legitimate and uphold it for those of his listeners who depend on such customs.

In that sense, Socrates, as he does elsewhere, brings to light and upholds what might otherwise be called a political form of morality. In modern terms, that might be conceived as civility, or as a respect for democracy - a reverence of which America has had a dire dearth in recent years, and has suffered the consequences. In a classical or broad sense, however, this political form of morality merges moral virtue with civic virtue into a customary set of behaviors and values upon which the citizens of the city rely. It does not take thorough reflection to evaluate these behaviors from a moral perspective. If morality depends on rules, and political institutions on lawfulness, and society depends on both
morality and politics, then defending and attempting to instill respect for and obedience to a political form of morality seems to be immediately and directly important for the citizens of the city. For a less conventional soul, the Socratic defense of these behaviors can at least serve as a reminder of the importance of those norms, both for the city in which she must more or less abide, and the mass of democratic men who inhabit it, more or less with them.

**Objections to the Presence of Custom in Symposium**

Even with all these facts having come to light, some cautious analysts may still be unwilling to accept the indispensable presence of custom in *The Symposium*. If it were absent, and Socrates either does not defend custom or instill moral virtue, then his status as a moral educator would come into question, as would the contention that Socrates restricts or tames his philosophic eros for the good of others. In many cases, their caution may even be warranted. After all, Socrates attained the reputation for unconventionality for a reason. And after all, the philosophic eros seems to be something so sublime and so alluring that those who feel it would have a hard time refusing it for the sake of something as orderly as morality can be.

Those who have these concerns may very well point to the fact that during this competition, there are moments where Socrates directly challenges custom, without a rhetorical veil of any kind. For example, when the symposiasts propose the rules for the evening, offering that each man should speak in the order of the couches, Socrates remarks “it is not quite fair for those of us who lie on the last couches”(177e). There is no ambiguity in this comment: the rule that is established is unfair and therefore at least partially illegitimate; Socrates is challenging the order of this microcosmic democracy. So, at least
in that sense, Socrates must be deemed unconventional in *The Symposium*. Step back only slightly, however, and it becomes fairly easy to minimize the importance of this qualification. Consider: the “custom” Socrates here challenges is a minor one. It is not a fundamental system of virtue or a requirement of piety. Even when he is slow to respond to Agathon’s invitation to dinner, brings an uninvited guest, and pushes the boundaries of ordered conversation, he does not threaten the *nomoi* that necessarily underpin conventional society. When he does challenge those - and make no mistake, he does - he makes sure to leave ambiguity in his presentation, to veil it with customary rhetoric. And in that light, his status as a civically responsible moral educator still seems entact.

Challengers would still have a right to be skeptical, naturally asking: if the order of the dialogue depends on custom, and Socrates protects custom, why is it that only after Socrates speaks does the dialogue descend into chaos? And if custom has such a strong presence, why does it descend into chaos at all? One disclaimer would first be prudent: the presence of custom does not necessitate the success of custom. To analyze the validity of the rest of these questions, a reader must revisit the circumstances in which the dialogue decomposes. The comprehensible discussion of eros ends when a mob rushes in, but the beginning of the end seems to be Alcibiades. Alcibiades seems the harbinger of chaos. He barges in, uninvited, and, to say the least, wreaks havoc. He does not remotely censor his speech, nor does he have any reservations about being hubristic. In short, he personifies the transgressions that stereotypically make symposiums lawless and dangerous. His vice becomes relevant to our inquiry, in something like the following way: given that his speech obsesses over Socrates, some may interpret that Socrates is somehow to blame for his corruption. Only one response seems to satisfactorily refute that interpretation: correlation
does not equal causation. Just because Alcibiades interacts with Socrates and is obsessed with Socrates, one might say, and just because he only bursts in after Socrates, does not mean his behavior can be attributed to Socrates.

In fact, the dialogue provides ample reason to believe that his behavior has nothing to do with Socrates, nor anything that was said in the symposium. “The atmosphere of *The Symposium*, until the incursion of Alcibiades(and with the exception made for Aristophanes’ sound effects), is formal, elegant, rule-bound, and restrained”(Ferrari 262). Alcibiades was not part of the initial agreement, nor was he invited to the dinner; he had no access to the beliefs spoken in the competition, and thus cannot benefit from or be corrupted by them. Moreover, Alcibiades is the very opposite of rule-bound and restrained; his intellect and composure and appearance and reputation greatly differ from the other symposiasts. On all accounts, therefore, he seems to be a breed apart from the other participants in the symposium.

His interactions with Socrates, though frequent, also fail to indicate intimacy. By contrast, these interactions reveal a stark disconnect between Alcibiades and Socrates. Though Alcibiades claims to be a student of Socrates, Alcibiades admits that “I got no advantage from it at all”(217c). Unsatisfied with that, he goes on to recount his odyssey of an attempt to seduce Socrates. At the climax of this story, Alcibiades describes the night he spent with Socrates, a night intended to be much more erotic than it turned out. He recalls for his audience that “though I slept the night through with Socrates I got up without anything more untoward having happened than would have been the case if I had slept with my father or elder brother”(219c). In more risque terms, no matter how hard he tried, nothing he did aroused or could arouse Socrates. The two just laid there silence all night, a
silence filled, at least for Alcibiades, with awkwardness and sexual frustration. That night, it seems, came to no advantage for anyone. Though of course humorous and provocative, what this passage most importantly indicates is that Alcibiades is unable to enter the world of Socratic eros. He is incapable of sharing in or understanding what it is that excites Socrates, and thus will never be able to take advantage of him or his wisdom. If Alcibiades cannot and will not enter into, understand, or connect with the Socratic teachings about eros, one can reasonably defend Socrates, arguing that he cannot be at fault for corrupting Alcibiades. His corruption, his hubris must stem from either his own vice, or his misunderstanding of Socrates’ teachings.

That being said, it often seems that Plato never does anything unintentionally. In this case, then, the key for those who follow the Straussian tradition is to provide an alternate interpretation as to the significance of Alcibiades’ entrance. There may be many alternatives, but the one that seems most relevant and important to this discussion has to do with how dangerous he is. When Alcibiades beckons in chaos, Socrates is accused of hubris and corruption, the very crimes for which the Athenian democracy eventually brings him to trial. When he makes these accusations, he does so as if the symposiasts are in a courtroom. He addresses them as “men of the jury,” and declares that they are “judges of Socrates’ arrogance”(219c). Not long after, the mob rushes in, and readers become unable to learn from Socrates. In effect, he dies; his lessons are cut short by the ignorance and fear of the inferior demos who lack the capacity to understand him properly. In light of this, it seems entirely possible that Plato uses Alcibiades as a red flag, warning the philosophic reader of what happens when she defends philosophy to the public and devotes herself to edifying the demos. It would appear by this interpretation that the philosophic defense will
be inevitably misused and misread by their extremely limited audience. In other words, Alcibiades would be a human archetype, and his strategically timed entrance could serve as an attempt to curb the idealism of philosophic readers, so that such readers never have to pay the ultimate price for their morality the way that Socrates did. This we will discover later on when we investigate the Apology.

The Socratic Defense of Morality in Symposium: Instilling the Conventional Moral Virtues

So far, we have seen Socrates manage to illuminate yet another moral power or requirement for philosophy: recognizing the necessity of the customs upon which men depend, and defending such customs as dutifully as he would defend himself. Certainly, this is a moral action, but, as we know from reading Republic and Protagoras, morality is a more particular custom; it, founded in the notion of moral heroism, comes in the form of specific moral virtues, all of which must be exemplified and defended individually for the life and health of the city, not to mention the philosopher who cares for the city, or, at the very least, must co-inhabit it. Thus, to appear a moral educator in Symposium as he did in Protagoras, Socrates must defend or visibly attempt to instill each conventional moral virtue, in this case named: piety, justice, courage, and moderation.

Piety

As readers of Strauss will recall, symposiums transgress custom by inducing a related but distinctive transgression known as hubris, a specific form of which is impiety. Therefore, for Socrates to affirm and protect the presence of custom, and specifically moral customs, as I argue he does, he would have to do the opposite, and make some show and defense of piety. So too would he need to instill piety should he wish to maintain his role as a moral educator. And so he does, on several levels.
Piety (εὐσέβεια, in this case) formed an indispensable foundation beneath classical society. Though broad and diverse in manifestation, the traditional heart of piety was often considered one’s treatment of the divine, or, more specifically, the pagan gods of the city.

In another dialogue, the Euthyphro, piety is described as observances owed to the gods. But as defined (or clarified) elsewhere in the dialogues (e.g. Republic Book II), piety towards the gods requires a specific kind of moral duty: respecting the difference between gods and human beings, and believing the former superior to the latter. Undoubtedly, this duty was classical society’s most important custom. Justice, the chief political virtue upon which all society depends, cannot be separated from it in its conventional form. To make any claim to customary lawfulness, then, Socrates must first establish a base of at least apparent piety with respect to the divine.

From the very beginning of this highly structured and formalized dialogue, Socrates is granted the opportunity to make this appearance. Almost immediately after Socrates enters the house of Agathon, the renowned tragic poet, host, and fifth speaker in the symposium, he and his guests, great rebels that they are, are partaking in dining rituals. Those who see Socrates as the paradigm of liberated impiety might expect him to reject or merely observe them, but instead, Plato tells us that “Socrates had reclined and dined with the rest, they made libations, sang a song to the god and did all the rest of the customary rites” (176a). The phrasing implies that these customary rites are well-established and widely known rituals that conventional society employs before a meal in order to honor and please the gods of the city. When faced with this custom of the many, Socrates genuflects to it, as if the toll he must pay to enter this symposium is not only beautifying his appearance (174a), but also bowing his head in ceremonial prayer. Superficial as it may
seem or in fact be, this concession sets the tone for the rest of the dialogue, indicating that where the gods are concerned, Socrates intends to fulfill or at least pay homage to his pious duty.

Unsurprisingly, this intention manifests itself in his speech. From the start, Socrates has limited choices as to the manner of his speech. Per the laws to which the symposium formerly agreed. Socrates is only allowed to speak sixth, after Agathon, when his turn arrives, in the form of a speech, only to the end of praising Eros, the ostensible god worthy of the greatest praise. His speech must also be necessarily limited by his audience: they are lovers, primarily poets who identify as messengers of love, communers with the divine, and, as Plato and Aristophanes elsewhere imply, those enemies to philosophers, whom poets characterize as dangerous and unerotic. To reconcile those limiting customs with the goal of defending philosophy, Socrates presents philosophy as the purest expression of eros. His speech must, among other rules, characterize philosophy as a kind of divine poetry only elevated by the erotic desire for truth. It must, for his audience’s sake, complete the aforementioned mission: reconcile the poets and the philosophers on the common ground of love.

Throughout the course of his speech, Socrates recounts how Diotima educated him. Though some of her fictional lessons may very well be his in actuality, the fictional Socrates claims to be unable to comprehend her erotic wisdom. When she speaks to him, he responds by saying “whatever it is you mean,” I said, ‘is in need of divination, and I do not begin to understand’(206c). On the surface, Socrates merely seems to claim that he does not understand what he has heard. But this response deserves further reflection as a rhetorical device, for a few important reasons. First, Socrates here characteristically claims
that he, as a human being, does not have the capacity to understand the wisdom of the Mantinean prophetess. Second, he suggests that the only solution to that incapacity is help from the superior divine. Last, note that Socrates does not say “I cannot” begin to understand, but rather that “I do not.” In other words, Socrates seems to imply, sincerely or not, that even if he is able to transcend the human capacity for knowledge and wisdom, he refuses to, at least in speech; he, at least in speech, makes the conscious choice to respect the gulf between the human and the divine. That, by very definition, is a claim to piety, by choice if not by nature. This acknowledgement of his limited capacity with respect to divine wisdom speaks to his participation in customary piety.

Socrates’s homage to piety even infects the philosophy he espouses. When Diotima speaks of the pursuit of eros, she describes it as a philosophic ascent to the beautiful. Allan Bloom famously calls this description the “ladder of love.” Of he who climbs the ladder, Diotima explains that if he is guided correctly, “he must love one body and there generate beautiful speeches”(210a). At every stage of the ladder, this process continues, with the young philosopher generating beautiful speeches, until he comes to the “vast open sea of the beautiful, behold[s] it and give[s] birth-in ungrudging philosophy-to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts; until, there, strengthened and increased, he may discern a certain single philosophical science, which has as its object the following sort of beauty”(210d). In simpler terms, each step in the philosophic process is like falling in love, making it a noble(to be discussed) and worthy pursuit of eros.

She also preaches that once a young philosopher has seen the beautiful and subsequently has “given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become “dear to god and, if it possible for any human being, to become immortal as well”(212a).
Diotima here implies that the reason a person should want to ascend to the beautiful is the reward of the admiration of the gods. At the same time, she reminds her listeners that any immortality that humans share should not be confused with divine immortality. It can therefore be said that through Diotima, Socrates demonstrates piety by attempting to prevent impiety and reinforcing the desire his listeners have to please the gods.

Moreover, he manages to make it appear as if philosophy in itself is an act of piety. This appears in concordance with the *Apology*, where Socrates claims that Apollo commands him to philosophize. To be pious, a person must follow the commands of the gods, assuming that the gods know best. Diotima seems to indicate that pursuing eros, correctly conceived, is one of those commands, because of the beauty it produces. She claims that “this thing, pregnancy and bringing to birth, is divine, and it is immortal in the animal that is mortal. It is impossible for this to happen in the unfitting; and the ugly is unfitting with everything divine, but the beautiful is fitting. So Kallone[Beauty] is the Moira[Fate] and Eileithyia for birth” (206 c-d). In this passage, Diotima invokes the names of goddesses, and to a pious purpose. She, or rather Socrates, makes it appear as if only a life led erotically is beautiful, and since only the beautiful is fitting with the divine, only those actions she claims to be erotic are divinely sanctioned. Notably, Diotima makes this claim in terms of physical eros, and not philosophic eros. But since her earlier descriptions characterized philosophy as essentially erotic, her language merely seems to make her claim more accessible to a wider audience, and little affects its content. It stands thus: a human life can only be just, or only be pious, if it erotically procreates, be that in beautiful ideas, or, more conventionally, in children.
Now, it may easily be argued that this comment itself is impious, because it claims human beings can be divine. It may also be noted that to claim to know what the gods will and will not reward is merely a higher and more egregious level of impiety. There is some truth to this, but Socrates makes sure to counteract these objections. Do not forget that Diotima, though indeed she is a character, is a gift of the god, a prophetess able to communicate with and know the divine in ways mere human beings, as Socrates claims he is, cannot. And even she, vessel of wisdom that she is, makes sure to reiterate that “mortal nature is capable of immortality only in this way, in the way of generation”(207d). To do so is to clarify any impious ambiguity in her previous comments, reminding her readers that human mortality is in fact inferior to divine immortality. In other words, it is to steer a listener back into the realm of piety should they stray into hubris mistakenly. At the very least, it is to make it appear as if she and Socrates wish to protect that piety. When these elements are combined, it becomes clear that Socrates contends that the ascent to the beautiful is an act of piety, motivated and almost commanded by the divine. Since the intent in this speech is primarily to reconcile the symposiasts with philosophy, the apparent motivation to philosophize is central to Socrates’ presentation. Having presented that motivation as piety, pious custom must be recognized as a tenet of Socrates’ philosophy, if only in speech.

Many analysts may still question whether Socrates consistently attempts to appear pious. After all, Socrates is the only speaker that directly denies that eros is a god(202b-e). Instead, Socrates has Diotima agree with the fourth speaker, Aristophanes, at least in part. His speech, or rather myth, defines eros as a desire for one’s own. Diotima too claims that eros is a “desire” for the good, as “Eros is of the good being one’s own always”(206a). For
Socrates, at least in speech, eros is this in-between creature, a desire that elevates human beings as high as they can be elevated. But since the previous speakers, from the inception of the symposium, conceive eros as a god, it appears as if Socrates commits sacrilege against a god, committing hubris in its worst form. It seems only prudent to ask: how then could Socrates possibly be trying to appear even superficially pious? The response to this question requires recognizing one critical fact: Socrates is right. Eros is not considered a god at the time that this is written. It is a desire. To repudiate Eros as a god is merely to deny the existence of a god that these speakers introduced. For Athenian nomos, at least at the time this is written, does not protect “Eros” the way it reveres Zeus. Eros can be known, investigated, explored and felt by human beings without them becoming immortal. By contrast, the belief in the gods of the city depends on myths and a separation from human beings, not intimacy with them. This denial, therefore, one notably urged on by Diotima, does not deny the existence of gods; it only denies the existence of a god introduced by students of sophists. This action is far from hubristic. In fact, it protects against the hubris of others, who are attempting to commit the crime of which Athens accuses Socrates in the Apology - introducing new gods. To the letter, then, this denial of Socrates is actually an action of piety.

Beyond the letter, it works in the spirit of piety. It protects the divide between the customary gods and human beings. As Strauss comments, “eros is not simply above men, in the way Zeus was thought to be above men, but in men. One could therefore say - and this has been suggested by a very philosophic interpreter, Gerhard Kruger, in Einsicht und Leidenschaft, which appeared originally in 1939 - that belief in the god Eros is the mythical expression of man’s sovereignty”(Strauss 39). By denying the divinity of eros, Socrates
denies the hubristic notion of the sovereignty of men. Instead, he offers that eros is a “great
daemon” “interpreting and ferrying to gods things from human beings.” When he does, he
reiterates that human beings operate below, and gods above, and the two do so separately,
communicating only through a messenger. He thus revises the symposiasts’ definition of
eros to make it more pious. If a reader had any remaining doubt about the pious spirit of this
revision, she would do well to reexamine what directly follows this definition: “A god does
not mingle with a human being, but through this[eros] occurs the whole intercourse of gods
and human beings”(203a). Could a declaration of piety be any more clear? If it can, it will
likely not be found in a Socratic dialogue. Regardless of whether or not this declaration is
apocryphal, Socrates is consistently careful to treat the divine and human beings as two
different species, and therefore consistently makes the effort to appear pious. Upon re-
examination, then, this denial that eros is a god may in fact only more strongly reveal the
way Socrates coexists with and in fact introduces piety as a moral virtue in *The Symposium.*

**Courage**

As we have agreed before, courage too is indispensable to the city and the
individual. In many of the Platonic dialogues, as many scholars have interpreted, Socrates
portrays poets as ultimately being slaves to public opinion. This inevitability is tragic,
because it limits and infects their potential for greatness. It also functions as a roadblock to
Socrates, because as philosophy is unpopular, the poets will be unlikely to openly reconcile
with philosophy. Therefore, while this slavery may be inevitable, it should be minimized as
much as possible. The virtue of philosophic courage, understood as being the lack of
unreasonable fear in the pursuit of the unknown, and the strength of character that allows
one to be unconventional, is the strongest antidote to that inevitability.
It should come as no surprise, then, when Socrates raises the topic of philosophic courage. Following the triumphant comedic success of Aristophanes’ speech, Agathon accuses Socrates of intimidating him with the high expectations of their audience. In response, Socrates replies “I should surely be forgetful, Agathon,” “if I did that. I saw your courage and greatness of mind in mounting the platform with the actors and in facing so large an audience when you were about to display your own speeches, and I saw that you were in no way disturbed” (194b). What Socrates here describes as “courage and greatness of mind” is surely philosophic courage, but it is perhaps more important to note how he describes that virtue. He speaks to Agathon in front of a crowd, and declares that Agathon already has the virtue he describes (a questionable declaration). In doing so, he assigns value to philosophic courage as a virtue, as well as instilling confidence in Agathon.

And it would take confidence for Agathon to refute this assertion of Socrates, because it risks the other symposiasts seeing him as a coward. Therein lies the brilliance of Socrates’ strategy. He chooses to reply this way in the knowledge that Agathon is more afraid of these men smart enough to judge him. But by responding that he is, Agathon still has to show philosophic courage: he must dare to publicly challenge the reputation that he is courageous against formidably wise opposition. Socrates therefore instills confidence into Agathon that he is courageous, and then corners him into proving it: if Agathon did not challenge Socrates and made his speech right away, he would have to be courageous in the face of expectation, and if he did what he chose to do, reply with hesitance against the argument of Socrates, he still had to show courage, both in front of Socrates and the rest of the symposiasts. This brilliant, multi-tiered strategy is clearly designed to develop the virtue of philosophic courage. Granted, this virtue is of a rather specific kind, but because
standing in the face of opposition can so easily become violent, as it ultimately does for Socrates, to support philosophic courage is in this case to support the moral virtue as well. For the philosopher, this further supports the contention that all virtue unifies in wisdom, but for the rest of his listeners, this would likely instill a respect and aspiration for moral courage, even if it appears in a more intellectual, political setting. Thus for a diversity of audiences, this edification of Agathon and defense of courage solidifies Socrates’s status as he who can instill and protect moral virtue.

**Justice, Moderation, and Conventional ‘Wisdom’**

Scrupulous analysis also illuminates that he seeks to instill the other cardinal moral virtues. Socrates fulfills pious sacrifices, and allies himself with custom. These actions exemplify the law-abiding spirit. He also upholds and encourages the norm of lawfulness by praising the veritable “laws” of discourse between the men, and defending them against those who would break them. Since justice does and will always depend on laws and lawfulness, Socrates encourages justice, politically and not philosophically conceived, of his interlocutors in this dialogue.

So too does he encourage moderation. Moderation here would be conceived not as the philosophic, unified form we investigated in chapter one, but rather the more limited, political, rather more physical form. Socrates steers the conversation away from physical eros onto the love of another’s soul, and then onto many topics, all of which will be investigated later: the love of the beautiful things, the love of the beautiful itself, and, if read correctly, the philosophic love or eros. This very action is a moderate one, politically conceived, for it seeks to repress and suppress physically erotic longings for a higher good - in this case, the good being understanding or knowledge. By stalling the physical
immoderation of his interlocutors, and their intellectual focus on it, Socrates in this way makes them more moderate, at least for a while.

It is for this reason that one could also say he instills wisdom. This is a more tricky, much more controversial argument, for some might say, and not without reason, that wisdom is never truly popular, or truly popular. But this is wisdom properly conceived, wisdom itself, wisdom inherent, wisdom internal, wisdom as one. Wisdom of the city is a very different kind: it is wisdom of many, wisdom consequential, and wisdom external. This might be conceived as moral doctrines or religious laws, but in a slightly more individual, popularized sense, wisdom might be conceived as base level, quantifiable “knowledge.” To be reputed to be wise, by this definition, would not mean much more than to store more historical dates than others in your mind, to know more calibrations for the architecture of a bridge, or to understand more computer programs. These kinds of knowledge might be called the “by-products” of philosophy, and are certainly, as knowledge of particulars, are less demanding conceptions than the Socratic one, but it is also a virtue from which popular society can benefit as a whole. As such, it might be considered or used as a “moral” virtue, and instilling it, or the critical thinking skills to achieve it, would be considered a moral action, as long as it is defined loosely. By challenging their ability to answer questions, forcing them to think on their feet, elevating their ability to engage in speechmaking, and beckoning them to think critically with him about the progression of erotic desire, Socrates makes the attempt to strengthen these skills in his interlocutors, skills that can be used to attain this popular, political, potentially moral understanding of “wisdom.” To the extent that he can and does, Socrates instills wisdom. In that light, it once again becomes clear that the Socratic respect for the moral virtues is not
all talk: he not only encourages the promotion of virtue, but also directly develops virtue in others.

Characterizing the Philosopher as Noble

Socrates claims as much when he explains and characterizes the philosophic eros. To see this, let us return to Diotima’s central speech. If read closely, as many scholars have done, Diotima essentially explains that eros promotes virtue. Of he who beholds beautiful, she says that “only here, in seeing the way the beautiful is seeable, will he get to engender not phantom images of virtue—because he does not lay hold of a phantom—but true, because he lays hold of the true” (212a). Read properly, this passage expresses that pursuing one’s eros properly engenders virtue.

When we remember the distinction we made in the previous chapter, between philosopher and nonphilosopher (revived in this dialogue from 198a-199b), we might still say that both of these human types can grasp and be edified by this lesson. The nonphilosopher, poet or otherwise, can easily hear that she will lay hold of genuine or real virtue when she sees true beauty in the world around them, and that longing for beauty is virtuous. The philosopher might more closely observe how Diotima says that he “sees the way the beautiful is seeable,” meaning that the man who knows how the beautiful can be seen, where, and to what extent, will lay hold of true virtue. In other words, she who understands the perfect essence of the beautiful develops virtue. This virtue of understanding, of knowledge, must be understood as wisdom, as philosophic virtue. Thus, assuming she believes Diotima, a philosopher would have to learn from her that when she pursues eros, she becomes more virtuous. So much so, it seems, that she surpasses or transcends the capacity of the city, either for wisdom or for eros. From that virtue and
transcendence, she might gain the ability to see the beautiful around them, in others, and develop the virtue of those others. And if she did, she also might see how the devotion to the role of moral educator can be said to be noble or beautiful in its own right, and perhaps even follow in the footsteps of Socrates. To the philosopher and non-philosopher alike, then, Socrates qua Diotima communicates that eros engenders virtue, and a certain kind of noble virtue at that. This conclusion serves to further enlighten Socrates’ mission at the symposium: since Socrates seeks and praises eros, he must also be attempting to engender and promote virtue, of whatever kind it may be. To an onlooker, this mission, undertaken by a philosopher, reinforces the appearance of philosophy as diversely and essentially moral, and insofar as it is, conventionally defensible and laudable.

The True Nature of the Philosophic Eros

Yet a closer examination of such a characterization will question the extent to which this is really true. For if the philosopher does not wish to see the appearances of beauty, but rather wishes to understand the way the beautiful appears, then the philosopher does not love what is noble or beautiful, but what might elsewhere be called the Platonic “form” of the noble (211b), or the “form” of the beautiful - understood as the perfect embodiment of these concepts or ideas. When, from now on, we discuss “the noble,” “the beautiful,” or even, later on, “the good,” we will understand these terms as references to the forms of such concepts.

But this clarification raises further questions. For if philosophers must transcend the beautiful so that they might appreciate it and understand its form from a higher vantage point, and some kind of desire still propels them forward, then it remains unclear: what is it
that the philosopher desires? What divine creature is above the form of the noble, and understands its form? And what does it think of the noble?

Diotima, and Socrates as her ostensible creator, give vague and elusive answers. Diotima claims that those who engage Eros the daimon and examine the beautiful “must come close to touching the perfect end” (211b), but then does not explain what that perfect end looks like. She also explains that knowledge of the “beautiful things” - and, read correctly but by a different (philosophic) audience, knowledge of the form of the beautiful - are “steps,” (211c) but then does not verbally illuminate the end toward which those steps lead. Her comment that the philosopher will surpass “phantom images” (212a) calls back to Plato’s divided line (Republic 509d–511e), and clarifies that the philosopher exists in the realm of the forms, but does not clarify what form leads and arbitrates this “single science.” Likewise, her declaration that such an erotically inspired philosopher will lay hold of the “true” (212a) might be interpreted to mean that this end is truth, but then there still remains ambiguity as to what kind of truth and about what it speaks. This seems an important ambiguity, for such truth would need to be more than that of the beautiful, if indeed the desire for it compels them to a point higher than the beautiful, and higher than Agathon’s beautiful account of eros (Bloom 129).

For the best meaningful clarification this dialogue offers, a reader must return to the beginning of the interchange between Socrates and his instructor, before the term “beautiful” was even used. Here, we might remember, Socrates and Diotima came to the definition that eros is of the good being one’s own always” (206a). It is that good that inspires and charges the young philosopher’s eros, and her deeds are undertaken and brought to birth “in” the
beautiful soul, not for the beautiful or the beautiful thing (206b). So here we have a partial answer: the philosophical eros is for the good, for what is essentially and completely and always the good, in short, for the form of the good.

Yet this response seems to raise as many questions as it answers. For how can “the good” be one’s own? How can the truth of what is good belong to us? Is it not a separate being, something divine and above us all, worthy of our scrupulous devotion? For how else could we defend philosophy Aristophanes’s selfish account of love and the sovereignty of men it implies? Surely, as Allan Bloom comments, “the love of the good” is “frequently and in many, many ways in conflict with the love of one’s own” (Bloom 111). What is more, since philosophers will always have a body, and that body will die, how can the philosopher always be in the presence of the good? The answer must give a tragic account of the philosophic way of life. Philosophic eros too, it seems, even if a more elevated way, is a longing for eternity that will never come, like that which one longs for when one holds their beloved and knows their time is limited. Yet philosophic eros also seems most unconcerned with themselves and their tragedies, for it is directed towards the good, and the good conflicts with one’s own: “If [men] really wanted to pursue the good simply, they would have to give up their cities, their homes, those whom by habit they call friends, and perhaps even themselves” (Bloom 137). And so Socrates, unlike so many who would be willing to go that far, seems to do; he is a man who has a family, but neglects them, a man who wanders around impoverished and without shoes, but still, in every conversation, seems to find the “happiness” that accompanies his particular eros. So here it becomes clear why the philosopher is the greatest “lover”: the philosopher’s love is not reciprocated, cannot be reciprocated, by the form of the good that most deserves loving. It must then be
essentially unselfish, even if it feels self-possessing, or is looked upon as selfish. We might therefore reconcile the mention of the good being “one’s own” by reinterpreting the phrase, and suggesting instead that for the philosopher, this actually means three things: first, the only thing to which the philosopher should devote themselves is love of the good, a love which will come to define them; second, that devotion will entail discovering - and communicating? - what is best, most advantageous, and good for “our own,” meaning humankind, or the human soul; and third, that dialectical process, divine as it may be, will come to be the most and only familiar thing to the philosopher. Philosophers then appear to be similar hybrid creatures, vessels to the divine and messengers from above.

With that in mind, we as interpreters can redefine the philosophic eros, at least by Plato’s lights. The philosophic eros is a desire, the highest and most pleasurable desire, directed towards the form of the good, however elusive it may be. To reach that good, it considers but transcends the form of the beautiful, and does not long for the beautiful or the noble itself. And because, as we learned in Protagoras, a key part of why human beings become attached to the noble is embodied in the love of one’s own, the philosophic eros will reject that which so many others will love as noble. Yet since “the noble things” make up the heart of moral virtue, and political society relies on moral virtue, and the philosopher must also devote herself to understanding and accepting what is good for humankind, the philosopher must at least appear to devote herself to engendering and defending the noble conceived as moral virtue, even laced as must be with a more limited, more reciprocal, more selfish kind of love.

Ultimately, this reality comes to bear on the dialogue itself. As careful readers, we must note that the dialogue begins in a more philosophic place: Socrates is consumed by
contemplation and intends to continue it with his Aristodemus. He makes himself beautiful for the occasion, but “as they were making their way Socrates somehow turned his attention to himself,” which we later learn is “something of a habit with him. Sometimes he moves off and stands stock still wherever he happens to be”(175b). It is this contemplation, this philosophic rumination, that leads Socrates to forget where is, where he should go, with whom he should visit, and what those men need, that seems to most bear the marker of eros, and what therefore comes to characterize the unabashed pursuit of the good. Yet this pursuit also appears ironically and perhaps even paradoxically selfish, for in engaging it, the philosopher is turned “to himself,” and not to the others that he eventually will bring himself to edify. Without any eyes on him, however, it is hard to deny that Socrates does not seem to care.

The Noble as a Sincere Sacrifice

With that in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that when the symposiasts beckoned him inside, against the warning of Aristodemus, who knows him best, they found that “he was unwilling to come in”(175a). Both the frequency and natural ease with which he turns to rumination and the unwillingness to leave it suggest that the most enjoyable and erotic activity for Socrates is philosophy and somehow, leaving his private thoughts and entering the party - where he will come to act as a moral defender - adulterates that philosophic contemplation. It seems that because of the conventional limitations of the city, philosophic contemplation always has to apologize for or prevaricate about its nature when around non-philosophic inhabitants. And because of the limits of independence, philosophers must, in one way or another, return to the cave to observe customary opinion, so that they may philosophize about them. These limitations can delay or even occlude the acquisition of
truth, the treasure that ultimately provides the most pleasure for lovers of wisdom. Therefore, though Socrates takes great inspiration and philosophic benefit from his interlocutions, his “midwifery,” will always be less pleasurable than the contemplation towards which he naturally strays.

A natural question then arises: why does he not remain in that contemplation? Even if he does get some fulfillment, recreation, or even knowledge from interaction with his interlocutors, is that not secondary to philosophy that does not have to hide its true nature, that does not have to negotiate with custom because of its setting? If discovering truth is the most enjoyable activity, shouldn’t contemplation done in solitude or sequestered with other philosophers be far preferable to “midwifery,” since philosophy done under those circumstances does not have to slow its pace out of caution? And if it is more enjoyable, why would he not limit his interlocutions? Why would he not merely extract or discover customary opinion, and then immediately leave? Why would he choose to intimately invest himself and his time in edifying these men?

All of these are warranted questions, ones which Plato seems intent on inspiring in philosophic readers, especially ones that do not prioritize morality. The answers are in some ways unsatisfactory, but fundamental to understanding the relationship Socrates has with moral order. I contend that while both necessity and moral virtue are in play, there is a limit to that necessity, and past the limit of necessity, it must be because of his nobility. Put another way, there is only so much Socrates has to say or do - or, rather, so much he can do - to be able to defend himself as a moral citizen, to keep himself safe from statesmen or conventional men. The intimacy of his interlocutions, the choice of their edifying subject matter, and the extensive time he spends devoting himself to them should then be
considered morally virtuous, or noble. One can view this nobility in the strictest sense, where he sacrifices time philosophizing on more interesting questions for the good of the many, or the more limited sense, where he sacrifices his present time philosophizing for the future reputation and cultivation of philosophy. Of course, in this latter view, Socrates, as a philosopher, serves himself as well as others, which, like in *Protagoras*, would make it appear as though moral virtue momentarily reconciles with the fate of selfish interests. By either view, though, Socrates deprives instantaneous or full satisfaction of his eros; he channels his eros towards another, more distant good. Given the strength and virtue of eros in this dialogue, especially philosophic eros, this is the most notable(and perhaps dangerous) show of moral virtue that Socrates makes. In reviewing this exhibition, we can be assured of the sincere morality imbued in Socrates’s actions.

For our purposes, however, the more important lesson to take from this inquiry is the characterization of the devotion to moral virtue as a sacrifice to philosophic eros. While in some ways, the noble always seems sacrificial, what we think of as noble or morally virtuous is, as we discovered in *Protagoras*, laced with fantasies of applause, of glory, and as we learned here in *Symposium*, of immortality(208c), all of which some visceral part of the human soul selfishly longs. Put summarily, the noble will always be interwoven with self-interest, for no one does what she believes is truly wrong willingly. Thus, if the philosopher is she who is liberated from self-interest, and the philosophic eros longs for the good above all, then it will, at times, also desire to reject the noble for the sake of the good. Appearing or in fact acting otherwise will always dull the luster of the philosopher’s life, and may in fact be either unwise, or dangerous. If indeed loving the noble is an important, even crucial, part of becoming and remaining attached to moral virtue⁹, then the
philosopher now appears as she who will never fully desire moral virtue as an end in itself, as she whose devotion to moral virtue may never be either natural or pleasurable. So while Socrates might act and appear in a sincerely noble manner, and intend to do so, it may be that the true Socratic should never sincerely love the noble.

Conclusion

The philosopher praises, encourages, and devotes themselves to virtue. That much has been made clear by Protagoras. So too has the sincere, intimate, and multifaceted relationship philosophy can hold with morality and its respective moral virtue, as its definer, protector, instiller, and ally. But to fully define the philosopher, to understand the philosopher as a human type, one must more fully investigate the philosophic eros - for what the philosopher has passion, for what the philosopher longs, in what the philosopher has hope and what gives her inspiration; in short, what the philosopher loves.

In reviewing Plato’s Symposium, interpreters can find that the Socratic philosophers love the single form of the good above all, the good over all, the good regardless of who or what may conflict with it. The philosophic eros longs to give up that to which others cling as their own so that they may become wise. This devotion leads philosophers to turn in to themselves and contemplate apart from the world around them, an action that seems self-involved, selfish, and morally fraught. So too does it lead them to transcend what particulars or feats others see as noble, and understand that beauty, moral or otherwise, is, as humans understand it, always laced with self-interest - and thus, contradiction - making it unworthy to be considered the highest end of human life.

Indeed, the deviant spirit of this dialogue asks rather daunting and foreboding questions. When Socrates channels his eros, and leaves this divine and natural
contemplation to better the participants in the Symposium, it almost seems as if Plato wants his young philosophic readers to object to this noble sacrifice, almost as if he wants them to recognize that he gives up his precious time and a pursuit so wonderful, and ask: for what? So that some limited plebeians can become more virtuous? So that we can learn what Socrates already learned for us about the tensions of the political world? So that our lives inevitably become tragedies too? These seem to be the challenges Plato wants philosophers to raise upon reading this dialogue, ones that in some ways embody the way eros - philosophic or otherwise - threatens to consume the whole soul. Yet despite this appearing as a threat on the surface, many scholars, not least Allan Bloom, have concluded that love of wisdom is the highest virtue of the soul for Plato.

What are the implications for the moral philosopher? For this conclusion seems dark and dangerous to a modern, politically active moralist. To look at our political discourse today, one might think that the highest end to which one can devote oneself is equality, justice, or, even more specifically, multiculturalism. Somehow, being a “good” person has been reduced to respecting and advocating for the rights of others. Clearly, whatever the form of the good actually looks like, this reduction does not sit well with the Socratic philosopher.

The answer, ultimately, has to be two-fold and necessarily complicated. From a moral perspective, we first must not forget that despite the natural direction towards which the Socratic eros strays, Socrates managed to, though given a little time to himself to luxuriate in empyrean cogitations, come in to the drinking party, ally himself with custom, and devote himself to the moral task of bettering the beautiful souls before him. We also must not forget that to the Socratic philosopher, returning to the cave of customary opinion
- at least in a physical sense, interacting with others and their ideas - is a necessary and recurring step in philosophic discovery. We thirdly must not forget the lesson we learned from Protagoras: that to Socrates, wisdom incorporates moral virtue; that in being wise, the philosopher understands the necessity and utility of moral virtue, and in that understanding, their soul becomes more open to moral deeds.

Yet from an erotic, rather more Platonic perspective, we also must not fail to recognize how moral deeds are inseparable from human conceptions of the noble. As individuals and as members of society, we often want to become moral because we see a kind of grandeur in it; whether it seems to us subconsciously linked to glory, fame, immortality, love, or prosperity, moral deeds are often attractive in an inconsistently moral way. Thus, true moral virtue actually requires rejecting what makes us want to be moral, but such a rejection makes it infinitely more difficult to devote ourselves to moral virtue as an end in itself. So difficult, in fact, that what we think of as morality - that combined system of rules and an abstract, universal goal that demands holistic devotion - seems unsatisfied with Socratic philosophy as a servant, for Socratic philosophers have little desire to follow conventional rules (even when they defend such rules for the sake of others), see their wholeness elsewhere, their happiness in other deeds, and devote themselves only to the good. Whenever the forms of the noble and the good conflict, which, as we have considered, may be often indeed, the Socratic philosopher will long to reject the noble in favor of the good. And wisely so, by the lights of Plato.

By those same lights, it would seem that our previous query, of whether the truth of morality appeals to Plato, can only partially be answered in the affirmative, and only when the good harmoniously and lyrically incorporates the noble. Even so, Socratic morality and
conventional morality understood as moral heroism have quite different hearts, quite different fundamental longings. Those of the Socratic philosopher have a grander, larger, more holistic vision, one so luminous that it cares little for the moral qualms of its political objectors, who hem and haw with disgust when they feel the lurking proposition that anything can be higher than moral truth. Yet to underestimate the power, insecurity, and intricate insightfulness of such objections, when they come in such numbers and with such force, seems imprudent. Whether or not Socrates does so, what happens to him, and how Plato believes philosophers are to act prudently, that is yet to come to light.
Notes

1. Readers of *Republic* will be familiar with the concept of eros as it is understood by Plato. There, he describes that eros is a key part of the perfect soul or best soul, and that it is, as a loving, longing part of the soul, is distinct from the other spirited or reasoning parts. Scholars, especially those in the last century, have devoted much study on this specific teaching, and often emphasized the absolutely critical and perhaps penultimate importance of the philosophic eros, as a force capable of organizing the soul towards the pursuit of wisdom.

2. As alluded to above, the *Republic* describes this “perfectly just” soul as one comprised of balanced between three parts: eros, or the passionate, loving part, thumos, or the spirited part, and logos, or the reasoning part.

3. There might be much said about gender roles in *Symposium*, and the Socratic relationship to them. On the surface, it must be said that Diotima’s speech, crafted by Socrates, seems to respect and reflect the societal importance of women as physically gendered; women are the child-bearers, as the pregnant, as the mother. These ideas have societal significance to the concept of beauty, and thus using them might be interpreted similarly as rhetorical lip service to customary authority of patriarchal norms of the time.

But it is much more interesting(and much more important) to question the relationship between eros properly conceived, gender, and its restrictive concepts. And to do that, one must consider what aspects of Eros, the creature described by the dialogue, are masculine, and which are feminine. On the masculine side, we find that Eros is masculine; he is consistently referred to as a man. He was also born of Poros, a male associated with Resource. Because he was born of Poros, Socrates tells us he tends to "plot and trap" the beautiful. He actively pursues something, a woman, a child, or even an idea he finds beautiful. This aligns with the male conception of men as the providers, the pursuers, the romantic initiators, and, at least professionally, the "philosophers"(misusing the term intentionally).

On the feminine side, we first have Diotima's gender. She being the one to speak of feminine virtue and "bringing to birth," intimately speaking of breasts and pregnancy, seems appropriate. She further implies that women are the ones who have the beautiful, and we are told that eros, being an "in-between" daimon, lacks it. Yet eros, one might remark, has a certain halfway beauty, does it not? Romance and love are traditionally thought of as "soft" and "feminine" topics. Society, rather restrictively and mysoginistically, thinks of women loving "chick flicks" because they portray soft lighting, roses, tender caresses, candlelight dinners, sweet treats, even though they leave out the pain childbirth, the tyranny of a toddler, the awkward first date silence, the marriage fights about incredibly stupid things, and, perhaps most intrusively, the sort of erotic aggression that accompanies sexual desire. These facts seem to align eros with the traditional female gender role.

But a careful reader will note that Penia(poverty) who bore Eros, herself plotted and trapped! She was the one who wanted a child, and tricked Poros, who was susceptible to wine, into getting one. Moreover, we are told that Eros serves, and to an extent represents, Aphrodite, a female goddess. She herself is the goddess of love, or eros, and we know that she is not just adorned and beautiful herself, but the one responsible for instilling and maintaining love. She herself is not shy of flirting, romantic strategy, and "plotting and trapping" the men, or gods, she wants. Though indeed they are divine females, and not human ones, those character types undermine the passive female roles that tradition demands when it comes to eros.
From this exegesis, one might draw an interesting conclusion. As many scholars note, Plato has the habit of presenting polar opposites and illuminating how they are resolved and done away with in the philosophic life. The masculine and feminine might now be considered one of those polar opposites. If Eros is this in-between creature, and physical, political eros rests on gendered attraction, then the political eros lacks something, and harbors flaws. The philosophic eros, by contrast, mimics the true nature of eros: it longs for what is beyond and infinite; philosophers can be pictured as serving as messengers between the divine and the human; the philosophic eros, as described here and in Apology, commands Socrates to wander the city in poverty, as “not even a slave would do.” Perhaps philosophers, like the famously androgynous Socrates, are between genders. Or, as I believe is more reasonable, they are ideally beyond gender. They have broken with convention and what they have known to be their own, and want desperately to luxuriate in rewarding contemplation. Everything else, including gender norms, seems to just get in the way.

This view would be supported by Plato’s general presentation of philosophers as beyond conventional particulars, and by his habit of resolving a conflict between polar opposites to serve a larger ideal - in this case, truth and wisdom. There might be societal implications for this interpretation - and very important ones at that, ones indicate that gender discrimination or reductivism have no place in the pursuit of the truth - or scholarly ones that protect Plato against charges of misogyny and instead show him claiming that philosophers are the most liberated from gender discrimination, but those implications require more study than this brief reflection can provide.


5. While this may be true, there are limits to this proposition, and Socrates makes a point to emphasize those limits. In Protagoras, it is discussed that the sons of Pericles are utterly unremarkable and failed to inherit their father’s virtue; this is the observation that emphasizes how virtue is teachable, and how the city has a role in that virtue being taught. In Symposium, Socrates famously speaks of how virtue does not transfer like water into a wine goblet. The result of discussions like these - one worth noting, especially in the light of the charges eventually made against Socrates - is that proximity does not always breed virtue, or lack thereof.

6. The love of one’s own is a central topic to Platonic political philosophy, and an antagonist to philosophy. The best explanations of how this topic becomes relevant on this matter can be found, in my opinion, in a deeper reading of Allan Bloom’s “Ladder of Love,” and Leo Strauss’s On Plato’s Symposium.

7. Eros was a historical god to the Greeks. Eros preceded Kronos, who was overthrown by Zeus, his son. Zeus led the gods to wage war against his father, and finally, after a decade, having succeeded, he cut his father Kronos up and threw him into the pit of Tartarus. Once that action was complete, the gods of new, and not the gods or Titans of old, reigned over Greece. It is they who are the existent “gods,” deserving of worship. Any act to introduce a new god, even one respected in far more ancient times, would be impious.

8. The theory of Platonic forms is vast, complicated, and deserves more study than can be provided in this chapter. For further reading, begin with Studies on Platonic Political Philosophy; Leo Strauss[University of Chicago Press, 1985].

9. Kierkegard on Fear and Trembling

10. Translated literally as “the best[aristoi] of men[demos].”
Works Cited


In investigating Plato’s *Protagoras* and *Symposium*, the philosophic human type has come to light in different ways. So different, in fact, that they might be said to be in tension with each other. It is clear that the Socratic philosopher, whatever else she does, acts as an educator of the polis and of the young souls that come into her charge. This role, the alliance it requires with custom, and the respect it demands for moral virtue as part of the perfectly ordered or wise soul, fosters what we have before deemed as a sincerely intimate relationship with morality, conceived as moral heroism. Yet it is also clear, at least by what has been argued, that the Socratic philosopher erotically loves the truth, wisdom, and the form of the good, whatever else conflicts with it.

This remains true even when the form of the noble, or what might be called the “heart” of morality, acts as that conflicting force. That philosophic eros, its singular fealty to its master, and the ostensibly self-centered or even selfish “inwardness” of the devotion that master demands, complicate both the philosopher’s reputation for moral virtue and her genuine attachment to morality: the Socratic philosopher does not long for morality as an end-in-itself, but instead only to the extent that it overlaps with the wisdom she so craves, a wisdom that reconciles itself with the necessities of and seeks to order itself well with the city with which she must always negotiate. The philosopher who acts otherwise is making a sacrifice - momentary or minute as it may be - of her happiness and the eros through which she achieves it.
Even with this in mind, important questions have yet to be answered with regard to the connection between the Socratic philosopher and morality, and the city on which she will always be dependent. Indeed, in many ways, we have yet to uncover why or indeed if the complications of this relationship even matter. We might ask: what are the stakes of this relationship? Does the Socratic philosopher who erotically devotes himself to wisdom do so safely? Does the philosopher as a moral educator stray into the public, political sphere - indeed, elevate it - to his own benefit? Or are there risks associated with doing so? Are there dangers imbued in returning to the cave and discovering customary opinion, even if that discovery is necessary for Socratic philosophy? Do perils necessarily follow when a Socratic philosopher, guarded as she tries to be, attempts to make others better or philosophize publicly?

To answer these questions, we might be best served by turning to another of Plato’s dialogues - to some, his most famous. Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* recounts the trial and execution of Socrates by the hands of the Athenian democracy, which took place in 399 BC. Speaking in his own defense, Socrates attempts to exculpate himself of the two charges that led to his arrest: corrupting the youth, and impiety.¹ It is that “defense”(*Apología*, or “apology”) that centers most interpretations of this dialogue. By the common academic account, this dialogue is to be read as the defense of Socratic philosophy to the city that refuses to listen to him; according to most scholars, Socrates is here attempting to outline and praise the true nature of philosophy², a nature which, according to him, deeply contrasts with the “slander” that smeared his name. In short, Socrates appears to be a martyr who loves his scaffold.
It does not take overzealous contemplation to see how ripe this dialogue is for intellectual plucking. In many ways, Plato gave his life back to his teacher: he wrote the richest dialogues known to man, almost all of which attempt to recount the adventures of Socrates, and reveal and encourage the wisdom that he gained over his life\(^3\); he founded the “Socratic” tradition of philosophy and the Academy\(^4\) that was to be the school that upheld and fostered it. If Plato was not a philosopher with a perfectly just soul, one might dare to say that Socrates was not only his teacher, but also his hero. Watching the death of one’s teacher, the epitome of the virtue you seek, let alone one’s hero, would leave an emotional scar on any human man, and necessarily articulate or form thoughts of what is or what should be. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Socrates’s death is often recounted as a “turning point in Plato’s life”(West 16).

But what comes out of this Platonic turn, if in fact one exists? I will argue that it bears fruit with relation to Plato’s understanding of the inevitable tension between political, conventional morality and Socratic philosophy. Plato judges this event quite differently from the Athenian democracy, or so we will come to see. To him, the Athenians and their limited understanding are at fault for the unjust execution of Socrates, and those limitations will always be a problem for those who follow in his footsteps. And as we will come to see, he does not make this conclusion without reason: Socrates was only misunderstood, and only killed, because he, however limitedly, strayed into the political world. However noble his intentions, or however necessary to philosophic understanding were his interlocutions with the political man, it was those public dialogues that laid the foundation for the accusations made against Socrates - accusations which prove that vice is ignorance, if anything does. So too do they reveal
philosophy, especially in its moral and public educational role, as a mortally dangerous activity. In sum, among other intentions that inform the writing of this dialogue, Plato’s *Apology* both illustrates the inevitable, imminent, and ultimate danger posed by the moral aspects of political philosophy deeds to the Socratic philosopher, and, more critically and controversially, suggests that the philosopher limit the extent to which they consider themself moral or political, at least if they wish to live.

**Plato’s Verdict: Athenian Guilt**

So how does Plato understand the trial and execution of Socrates, and the charges brought against him? Answering this question seems crucial, if we are to understand what it is Plato might have learned from this event, and how that experience might have come to affect his understanding of the relationship between political morality and Socratic philosophy. It is my understanding that Plato rejects the charges made against Socrates, at least as they should be properly understood. If he makes such a rejection, Plato would also have to view the execution as unjustified, a view that necessarily places blame on those who levied such unjust and disastrous allegations. Plato’s *Apology*, among its other purposes, serves to remedy this injustice by allowing Socrates the last word against those who convicted him. My interpretation will argue that as part of this remedy, Plato reverses the trial, and accuses the Athenian democracy of the same two crimes they claim Socrates committed. If such an interpretation proves to be correct, then, it may take us much further toward understanding the position - or opposition? - Plato takes on the legitimacy of moral devotion to the polis, and the dangers involved therein.

In order to judge whether Plato reverses the trial, it would first be necessary to define the charges brought against Socrates. In Plato’s *Apology*, Meletus, who acts on
behalf of Athenian laws, charges Socrates with crimes against the city. As was mentioned before, and as scholars on this work attest, Meletus made two related allegations against Socrates: failing to acknowledge the gods of the city, and corrupting the youth. While the two accusations may be related, classical Athenians would categorize these offenses into two criminal charges: impiety and corrupting the youth.

As to the first charge, while much ambiguity remains around the precise definition of the Greek term ἀσέβεια(Liddel & Scott), it is clear that its opposite is piety, or εὐσέβεια, which, as we discovered in chapter two, can refer to the duties that we owe to the gods, of the city, but especially refers to the specific moral duty of revering the gods. At its core, then, the crime of impiety manifests itself in the failure to revere the gods of the city, or, more dramatically(and perhaps more relevantly), even the failure to acknowledge their existence. Such failures might, at least by some, be called hubris, understood as the active disregard of human limits or the failure to recognize or respect the gulf between the human and the divine. This hubris or disregard would justify a charge of impiety.

To outline the second charge, corruption was a well-developed and frequently discussed offense in classical antiquity. This crime could similarly occur in various ways, but Socrates was primarily brought on trial because of how he threatened the moral tradition of Athens. We will challenge the legitimacy of that claim, and the reasons it was made, once we are prepared to do so. For now, however, those who wish to best understand the crime of corruption might follow the traditional, moralistic conception: corruption is a loss of moral virtue. By this definition, if someone was truly guilty of corrupting the youth, they would have to incur the loss of their virtue. Of course, as we
have considered before, moral virtue has many components, the four cardinal virtues chief among them, but the charges against Socrates seemed to circle around the image Aristophanes paints of him in *Clouds*: he turns Strepsiades against his father, and against the conventional order upon which all political society depends. The allegations seem to be most concerned with the lawfulness, reverence, and civic devotion of their youth. In that light, it would seem that the Athenian democrats are most concerned with accusing Socrates of eroding the two virtues of justice and piety.

As we have also discovered, justice is a difficult and multifaceted virtue in Plato’s works. As such, we might do well with a similar reminder about justice, as we did with piety. In this context, our definition must follow the conventional, political definition we set out in our interpretation of *Protagoras*. It must also follow that definition which is set out in *The Republic*, where Plato famously attempts to theorize the most just regime. There, justice appears to be a righteous or “blessed” thing, for it is both an intrinsically good trait, and, as it is described in *Protagoras*, a political virtue, one favored by the gods. Indeed, justice might even be said by some (though perhaps not by Plato) to be an order set down by the gods, as Zeus does in the myth of Prometheus. So here we see this overlap between justice and piety reiterated, as well as further support for the early thesis that virtue is one, at least in the philosophic way of life. Yet since this is political context, and not a philosophic context, we will consider justice as a separate virtue.

In Book VI of *Republic*, Socrates further and most centrally clarifies the meaning of justice as a virtue: justice is both an individual human virtue, that makes a man peaceful, balanced and best, and a social, political virtue, which both aims to give to each what is owed and care for the harmony of the city as a whole. Political justice might then be
conceived as demanding a kind of specialization, in which every social class embodies the way of life most suited to it. Because of the natural diversity of human beings, and because of limited resources, like food or money or honor or power, this conception is very different from the individual virtue, properly understood. It is that contrast that is the basis of the “city-soul” analogy, and reveals that perfect justice is possible only in the philosophic soul, and not in the city. While it may be this perfect, philosophic justice of the soul that most interests Plato - indeed, that seems to be the case, not least because the Platonic Socrates prefers to praise and discuss those who would “build a regime within himself(592b) - this perfect justice is a rare virtue, possible in only a very rare kind of soul, suited to a very rare kind of life. As such, most men, being political men and not philosophers, can only embody the virtue of justice in the far more limited, far less demanding political form, a form that resembles a kind of lawfulness or obedience.

From these investigations, a reader might then revisit understanding of justice as virtue, at least as Plato understands it. Justice has, as we learned before, a philosophic definition, understood as a perfect order or balance of the soul. It also has a political definition, applicable to the city and men of the city. That conception issues two commandments to the individual, political man: first, devote yourself to the role allotted to you by the gods; second, serve the city as a whole, and not yourself above the city. This second commandment necessarily conjures images of moral devotion, and explains why justice is one among many moral virtues for the political man. Its violation, then, or injustice, would have to be essentially immoral, essentially selfish. It would be marked by the violation of specialized roles, established by customary norms(be that those set down by the gods or by fathers), or other eminently base, brazenly self-interested pursuits. If the
youth had indeed lost their political virtues of justice and piety, that loss would be marked thus, and if Plato does indeed accuse the Athenian democrats of corrupting the youth, the democrats would have to exhibit the same markers. In exemplifying such vice, the democrats could lead their youth to the same corruption to which they themselves have fallen. If Plato believes that the Athenians unjustly executed Socrates, this reversed accusation would make sense, for it offers an alternative explanation for the corruption of the Athenian youth.

It is important to clarify, however, that these accusations made by Plato need not be levied against each individual democrat. As a reader of *Apology* will learn, Meletus asserts that “the laws”(24b) are responsible for making people good, or virtuous, and that justice is one of those virtues. Political justice must then depend on both laws and lawful obedience, and the virtue of those laws must depend on their proper creation, substance, and execution. For the purposes of this analysis, “creation” refers to the general mindset behind or founding ideology of the laws; “substance” refers to the actual content or decrees made by the law, and the notions that deem those decrees appropriate; and “execution” will refer to the enforcement or enactment of the laws. If any of those three components are fundamentally unjust or impious, then the general character of the Athenian democracy is as well, for it is the source of and responsible for the laws. And if they were, they would be capable of innumerable injustices: they could commit criminal injustice by harming a citizen unworthy of harm(perhaps one like Socrates); they could teach their youth wrongly, and corrupt them; and they could even descend into a much more visible, much more violent tyranny, as the *Republic* makes very clear and as they
historically did. In their vice, they would also further emphasize the irreconcilable
tensions or flaws of the political world and the impossibility of perfect justice in the polis.

In short, what I am calling Plato’s “reversal of the trial” - understood as his
defense of Socrates and Socratic philosophy by way of accusing the Athenian democracy -
can be interpreted to be made against the laws and fundamental political character of
Athens, as opposed to some individual statesman. Then returning to the duty at hand, we
might find the claim more easily evaluated: In the interest of defending the Socratic way
of life, Plato indicts Socrates’ accusers with the same two offenses with which he was
charged, instead claiming that the Athenian approach to, substantive aim, and execution of
their laws committed the crimes of impiety and corrupting the youth.

When Socrates indicts the Athenians with impiety, he returns, as is only just, to the
origin of their laws, or the mindset in which they were created. At the heart of this
consideration is how the Athenians choose who holds authority. As West and West
notes(p. 63, note 42) of the Apology dictates, the Athenian “jurymen” who judged alleged
criminals, including Socrates, were chosen by lot. Such a lot system would randomly
place any citizen in a position of power because it assumed that all Athenians are equally
qualified to judge what is just. Plato clearly also noticed the base of equality underneath
the Athenian approach to law. In fact, he takes note of it in his Republic, when he
theorizes the most just regime. There, he compares democracy to an individual who “lives
his life in accord with a certain equality of pleasures he has established. To whichever one
happens along, as though it were chosen by the lot he hands over rule within himself until
it is satisfied, and then again to another, dishonoring none but fostering all on the basis of
equality”(561b). Here, Plato asserts that this individual boldly claims the authority to
choose which of his desires rule him, because he believes that all desires are worthy to do so. If this individual represents democracy, then this would also assert that democracy just as boldly places into power whatever citizen it desires, because they assume all citizens have equal capacity to ensure justice is done. Plato seems to make this observation specific to Athenian democracy by choosing the Greek equivalent to the words “chosen by lot,” as they refer to the exact legal system used to appoint their judges.

In *Apology*, Plato goes on to confront this systemic approach to law when Socrates does all he can to hold accountable those councilmen who “falsely claim to be judges”(41a). By asserting that their claim to judgment is false, Socrates contends that the Athenians believe themselves more capable, more powerful, or wiser than they are. The same would be true of those who created the legal system that chose such false judges. These assertions, perhaps more interestingly, indicate that there are indeed true judges. Only they would have the legitimate authority to judge the matter at hand. If only the gods have the authority to assign or determine the nature of each human being, then such deities would also retain the sole authority to predestine each human being for their specific lot in life. If that were so, as the religious teachings of the city seem to claim that it is, then the Athenians commit hubris when they appoint their judges; they disregard the proper authority and superiority of the gods. The Athenian attitude or approach to law, then, is essentially hubristic. Upon this basis, Plato’s Socrates charges that in their approach to law, the Athenians commit impiety.

Much the same could be said about the content of their laws. Conjuring up another nameless Athenian, Plato writes that someone who would speak on behalf of the Athenian laws “might say “Then you are not ashamed, Socrates, of having followed the sort of
pursuit from which you now run the risk of dying?" (28b). Yet closer consideration might challenge the premises of this question. For if the Athenian speaks of “the sort of pursuit” Socrates follows without clarifying or perhaps even knowing what those pursuits entail, then he also has either no or a too limited understanding of who or what actually deserves shame. That understanding, if existent at all, would be based on reputation and convention: since Socrates is accused of breaking the law and reputed to have done so, and seems an unconventional figure, he deserves shame; shame is the appearance of opposing what is deemed appropriate by the city. But this conception is scant and unsatisfactory, for appearances are notoriously unreliable, and the city can be wrong. Indeed, this notion of what is shameful, upon which the Athenian character seems to rely, appears to have only one (potentially) reasonable element: the pursuits that put us in harm’s way are shameful, and they are shameful, presumably, because life is good. But if putting oneself in harm’s way is shameful, then so is courage, and, more generally, self-sacrificial, heroic moral virtue! If the Athenians genuinely believe this, therefore, then they could be called both ignorant and cowardly. Since ignorance and cowardice (which may, by the Socratic account in Protagoras, at least, be the same) are both vices deserving of shame, so is the Athenian democracy. For to believe oneself judge on basis of the laws (or to sanctimoniously defend the laws) without knowing what notions the laws represent, or whether those notions are good, is an action reserved for men of overzealous confidence, of hubris; in short, for men without shame. While men without shame can bemoan the lack of piety in others, and love to do so, men without shame cannot be pious men themselves, for they are unable to see how there are forces larger than themselves, to whom they owe obedience and reverence. No, men who fear no god, men without piety,
without reverence, and without shame, can, by definition, only be impious. Thus, read closely and contemplated thoroughly, Plato asserts in this dialogue that there is something essentially and fundamentally impious about the substance of the Athenian laws.

Plato similarly criticizes the notions underpinning the Athenian decrees of punishment. Death, or execution, was an acceptable punishment to the Athenian democrats. Modern debates about the merits of capital punishment aside, Plato reiterates that this notion, too, is flawed. Not because, as implied or stated elsewhere in the dialogues(e.g. Protagoras), no one really deserves harm, but because it makes a hasty judgment about the worth of human life. Socrates famously contends that “to fear death, men, is in fact nothing other than to seem to be wise, but not to be so. For it is to seem to know what one does not know: no one knows whether death does not even happen to be the greatest of all goods for the human being; but people fear it as though they knew well that it is the greatest of all evils”(29a). Here, Socrates insists that in fearing death, the Athenians assume that life is better than death. That assumption, he thinks, is a claim upon knowledge to which the Athenians have no right. And the Athenians have no right to this, Socrates clarifies, because they are human beings. Death comes to “the human being,” Socrates says, and the dead cannot reveal to the living whether death is better than life. That revelation is the private knowledge of those who live in a divine state - conventionally, the gods of the city. It is beyond human reason. To think otherwise, Socrates seems to say, is to think too much of human capability, to be hubristic. In this way, Plato similarly reveals that the Athenian laws are substantially based on notions of punishment, and, by extension, life and death, that are hubristic. And in doing so, he once
again appears to accuse the Athenian laws of impiety, both in their content and in their general approach to governance.

These allegations against Athenian laws - those laws fundamental to the political character of the city - seem to extend even to the enforcement of the laws. To the end of making these allegations, the Platonic character Socrates directly confronts the prosecutors who were responsible for enforcing the laws. In that address, Socrates makes an example of one Athenian prosecutor, declaring “this man seems to me, men of Athens, to seem very hubristic and unrestrained, and simply to have brought this indictment with a certain hubris and unrestraint and youthful rashfulness” (26e). In Socrates’s address, Plato makes a point to identify and emphasize that a lack of restraint characterizes the Athenian manner of enforcing their laws. This lack of restraint might be called intrinsically impious. Consider: to fail to exercise restraint, and to trust oneself overzealously, is essentially hubristic: it ignores that which makes humans need authority. To trust in man so much is not only to ignore one’s superiors, but also, in a classical context, to undermine the gods of the city. This seems confirmed by the effort they exert to replace them, an effort Plato calls attention to: traditionally, the gods are believed to decide who lives and who dies. Such an effort actively demonstrates impiety. In drawing it out, Plato again asserts that the Athenians committed impiety in the execution of their laws.

And in hearing this, we can, with confidence, say that Plato charges all fundamental elements of the Athenian laws with impiety. Because the way in which he supports such charges is so convincing, it lends itself to an interpretation that exculpates Socrates, and blames the Athenian democracy for its own impiety, an impiety that the Athenians would far prefer to scapegoat onto someone else. If this were true, then the
Athenian democracy would appear a hypocritical morally lazy body. But perhaps they should be called far worse: if Athens builds its city, governs, and kills Socrates hubristically and impiously, loves doing it, and shows no willingness or capacity to repent, then Athens is not only licentious, but it is also an irredeemable criminal and a reckless murderer. Socrates, by contrast, would then appear to be an innocent who should have left the city well-enough alone.

In the same way, Plato accuses the Athenian democracy of corrupting the youth, just as it did Socrates. This is most fundamentally rooted in how it assumes that all Athenians can rule, “equals and unequals alike” (*Republic* 558c). In the same analogy where Plato describes the origins of democratic law, he also predicts how a democracy based on equality will progress into vice. According to the Socrates of *Republic*, that same individual who handed over rule to various parts of himself will soon fall into internal chaos. As a subject to them, “often he engages in politics, and jumping up, says and does whatever comes to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it’s money-makers, in that one; and there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout” (561d). At this point, Plato can threaten to confuse a conventional reader, because, as the translation maintains, he continues sentences where it would be most clear to end them. On a linguistic level, this passage exemplifies the argument it makes, for just as the punctuation follows the whims of thought, and refuses to follow a grammatical or logical order, this individual supplicates his own desires, and violates the order which commands him to fulfill a specialized role in society. If one were to bring that proof to a broader textual level, she would find an implication that when the Athenian democracy bases itself on equality, it
breaks down the order of specialized roles. If Plato, at least in part, defines justice as a form of specialization, then following this order of thought, the way the Athenians approach law is certainly unjust, and as such, has the potential to corrupt anyone who is shaped by it.

Plato makes a point reveals further injustices of equality so understood. Justice is not only conceived as a kind of specialization, or giving to each what is owed, we might remember, but also defined by the general care for the community, even at the expense of the selves. If indeed democratic citizens who fancy themselves equals are like the democratic man of Republic VIII, then they “neglect everything,” including the community. Instead, they choose to focus only on themselves and gratifying “whatever comes to [them].” And what comes to them, it seems, is the emboldening of their self-centered and material desires, the kind of desires that would occupy “money-makers.” Through that portrayal, Plato shows how the very basis of Athenian democracy might instruct its citizens to be unjust: it can both violate the kind of specialization crucial to political justice, and lead to a base, corrupt kind of selfishness. Thus, this equal basis for democracy, thought in some ways thought to be a good thing, actually runs the risk of corrupting the youth, understood as making them fundamentally unjust. By someone sympathetic to Plato's critique, it might then be said that the Athenian democrats are also equal insofar as they are all ignorant human beings. For when the democrats shortsightedly found their laws on the basis of a licentious, immoderate kind of equality, someone might say, they all become responsible for the corruption of their sons.

Yet in coming to this conclusion, one would raise as many questions as she would answer. For if this is true, what does Plato think of democracy as a kind of regime? All
democracy is based on some form of basic equality; indeed, the “good” person in a democratic society seems to be one that merely respects and even advocates for the rights of others, and acknowledges some inherent form of human equality, often based on rights. So if fundamental equality of political rule is the basis of impiety and corruption, how could Plato ever condone democracy? There are several answers to this question, none of them fully satisfying to a democratic moralist, and none of them within the scope of our analysis here. For now, let us just say that it is possible Plato that allows for the recognition and cultivation of some form of political virtue, and still wishes to call attention to its fundamental crimes and eternal dangers that democracy poses to the virtues present in the philosophic way of life.

If we were to continue on, we would find that Plato also believes the Athenians have corrupted their own youth with the substance of their laws. To Plato, it would seem, the Athenians themselves are responsible for their youth becoming unjust. In ancient Athens, amidst “ever-present and blinding concern for physical security, comfort, and money or material goods” (Pangle & Burns 34), the presence and selective absence of certain laws seemed to prioritize the ability of the individual to accumulate property. Plato observed this too, and frequently referenced the Athenian economic elite that prospered under them, and therefore sought to protect and perpetrate that order for their own economic benefit.

In his Republic, Plato created another analogy for an oligarchic government ruled by such an economic elite, writing that “they are unwilling to control those among the youth who become licentious by a law forbidding them to spend and waste what belongs to them” (555c). Here, Plato seems to suggest a correlation between democratic liberty and
dangerous licentiousness, between the lack of an authority enforcing moderation and immoderation. This might be applied to the Athenian democracy in a very particular way: one might assert that the city depends on a law forbidding the excessive spending and accumulation of property, but has failed to and will refuse to enact one, because that kind of authority is reprehensible to the democratic regime. And that failure or refusal, one might note, is dangerous, for with limited economic resources, equal economic liberties, and unequal advantages (and desires) to obtain said resources, some will obtain more than others. And when they do, democracy will admit a contradiction, for what is considered equal, what is considered democratic, is actually quite unequal, and at least partially (yet fundamentally) oligarchic. Many have said as much about the developed capitalist nations of today.

While it is true that Athens was not an oligarchy, at least not through and through, Plato uses this analogy to describe how an oligarchy transitions into a democracy and maintains an influential force over it. This may very well be the case in Athens as Plato understands it, for the Athenian economic elite, to which Plato constantly refers in the *Apology*, still hoarded immense, pseudo-oligarchic power to influence the laws regarding property, and when they did, obfuscated the creation of laws which would teach the youth to restrict their spending and their greed (See Ryan Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*, 2001). Since they did so not out of physical incapacity, but out of spiritual “unwillingness,” - and they benefited economically from the absence of those laws, this was surely out of self-interest.

In the *Apology*, Plato addresses an audience who have long lived under and learned from those property-based laws. He has Socrates confront those Athenians who have
become greedy under them, saying “best of men, you are an Athenian, from the city that is
greatest and best reputed for wisdom and strength: are you not ashamed that you care for
having as much money as possible, and reputation, and honor, but that you neither care for
nor give thought to prudence, and truth, and how your soul will be the best
possible?” (29d-e). In this section, Plato juxtaposes what the Athenians do care for:
“having as much money as possible, and reputation, and honor,” and what they should and
could possibly care for: “prudence,” “truth,” and “how your soul will be the best
possible.” Contrasting them in this manner allows Plato to negatively evaluate all the
things for which the Athenians care, because they are far from prudent, true, and divine;
instead, Plato implies, the Athenians are excessive, false, and unrighteous. And if this
implication is correct, if the Athenians think only or primarily of pursuing and protecting
their wealth or power excessively, then the democrats care little for justice. One must
remember: justice demands that the citizen cares for the city above themself, and fills their
specialized role. The empowerment of greed violates both demands.

In short, through this series implied premises, Plato can be interpreted as levying
yet another accusation against the Athenians: in aiming the laws at accumulating private
property instead of regulating it, you, men of Athens, have let the sails of greed unfurl. In
doing so, you have made your men fundamentally unjust, for they care little for their role
in the city, and for themselves and their property most of all. The youth will surely follow
you and their laws, as they always do, and they will become as unjust as their fathers. On
this basis, Plato once again indicts and shames the Athenian audience for committing the
crime of corrupting the youth. That is, if this interpretation is correct.
And if it is, then Plato finally extends this same allegation against the enforcement of the Athenian laws. This especially applies to the Athenian methods of legal execution. He reveals to his audience that these Athenian methods were not only were these methods “unrestrained” and “youthful,” but they were also unjust, and would, by order and example, rob the youth of just, virtuous instincts they possess. In the *Apology*, Socrates raises many examples of these injustices, not least among them the trials of the generals from Arginusae and the terror of the thirty. But in order to prove this claim, Plato also, and much more relevantly, narrates what he considers to be the injustice at hand in the dialogue: the execution of his teacher Socrates. As Socrates considers his execution, he makes a point to directly comment on what his accusers are “doing: attempting to kill a man unjustly” (30d). Socrates does not make this assertion without reason: the Athenian mode of execution lacks the contemplative reason one would expect from judgment. In fact, the trial execution takes place in a hurried, thumotic manner, over the course of only one day (37a).

But in what way does Plato affirm this rash execution is unjust, and not just impious? Let us examine further. When Socrates contemplates what would happen after his execution, he proclaims “know well that if you kill me, since I am the sort of man you say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves” (30c). In writing this exclamation, Plato presents a few significant premises. First, he reminds the audience that Socrates has the foresight to see what will come after his death, and is therefore suited to the salutary role that he currently occupies. Second, he implies that in killing him, the Athenians would do him some sort of harm, harm, even if only physical, that he does not deserve. Third, he contends that the Athenians would be either equally or more deeply harmed by
his death, because they would be robbed of the kind of service only he can provide. In
even addressing the future well-being of the Athenians after his death, Plato fourth and
finally demonstrates that Socrates acts on his ability to consider the benefit of others.

When combined, all of these premises provide us with much more clarity about
how Plato viewed the execution of Socrates: killing Socrates committed injustice. It
prevents him from fulfilling his specialized role, and to better others, in the way that we
have become so accustomed to seeing him do. Indeed, the way many would argue he is
doing even in the moments before his death, as he offers them a way to see how they
could be better. In taking such a figure away from the youth, and not just those like
Hippocrates, but especially important to Plato, the young philosophers, the Athenian
democrats cause the virtue, and justice, of the youth, and of the city overall (at least if the
city is considered a sum of its parts), to either become stagnant or decline. The youth,
when grown, might be just as naturally unjust as they are now, or become like their
fathers, and commit similarly unjust atrocities. The enforcement of the laws of Athens,
and its councilmen, assemblymen, and judges (24e-25a), can likewise then be convicted of
corrupting the youth.

What might this imply for the meaning of “impiety” and “corruption”? Certainly, it
elevates the terms, or lends them more depth. Impiety now appears to be an irreverence or
rushed dismissal of that which is good, or who is better than you. Corruption now seems
to be the theft of that which would make us good, or who would make us better. In short,
corruption and impiety now appear to be the inherent, hasty, or natural opposition to
philosophy. And the Athenian democracy is guilty of it.
Plato’s Verdict: Socratic Innocence

By contrast, Plato defends Socrates against both of these charges, understood both ways, corruption and impiety conventional and proper. In the conventional sense, Plato definitely portrays Socrates as defending himself against impiety. Throughout the _Apology_, Socrates refers to the divine in various ways, ranging from the singular “god,” to “the gods,” specific gods, calling out to them “by Zeus” or “by Hera,” and even divine beings of a “novel kind:” the “daimonion” which the Athenians insist he himself introduces. By doing so, he actively demonstrates that he can conceive of gods in various ways, and implies that he does not know which conception of the gods is correct, an implication that he later confirms(29b). Such a defense, considered correctly, makes him appear more pious than his accusers, and refutes that he refuses to recognize the pagan gods of the city. Socrates lives and is aware that he lives in the human realm, not the divine, and consciously separates the two.

As for his philosophic conquests and their relationship to piety, or, in the democracy’s eyes, the lack thereof, Socrates recounts that he only knows of his natural potential wisdom because the Pythia told him of it(21a). Of Socratic philosophy, he claims that he has been “ordered to practice this by the god, as I affirm, by divinations, and from dreams, and in every way that any divine allotment ever ordered a human being to practice anything at all ”(33c). This statement is often cited, and not without reason: not only does he contrast the “divine” and the “human,” - a distinction at the heart of piety - but he claims that philosophy itself is an order of the god, as he does later(30a), here and in other dialogues.6 He received such an order, on Plato’s account, because of his natural virtue. It is often this recognition of his own virtue that strikes such a defensive note in the
democrats, but, in perhaps the most famous or influential passage of this dialogue recounts, the Platonic Socrates recounts that “I am likely to be a bit wiser than he is in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know”(21d). If taken seriously, this assertion could be very effective rhetorically. Consider: if Socrates is understood to only think himself wise in only one regard, there is room to believe that he thinks of other men as his equals, for they may be better or more virtuous than him in another way. In a rhetorical sense, this clarification could then be seen as an attempt to assuage his listeners by paying lipservice to equality. Democrats, after all, owe oaths of fealty to equality, even if they fealty may be corruptible or corrupted in Plato’s eyes. But in a very real sense, this assertion portrays the nearly universally recognized doctrine of Socratic humility: that wisdom starts with and roots itself in the knowledge of ignorance.

What a pious characterization of wisdom this is! To be virtuous, to be great, to be powerful, to be large, is actually to recognize the ways in which you are flawed, insignificant, weak, contradictory, and small. It is this reverence, this obedience to something superior, and recognition of your own inferiority that is the foundation to piety, political or otherwise. In light of this, the Socratic philosopher is a most pious creature, essentially opposed to the crime of which he is accused, by accusers who are essentially impious.

If any lingering doubt remained about Plato’s attempt to defend Socrates against the charge of impiety, it might be assuaged by revisiting Socrates’s last words: “but now it is time to go away, I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unknown to anyone except the god”(42a). Here, Socrates makes a final and therefore impactful declaration of his pious belief system. He asserts that the “god[s]” are singular in their
knowledge of the nature of the afterlife, and through that assertion declaratively regards the distinct superiority of the gods. Furthermore, he demonstrates the piety which he describes. He speaks in a matter-of-fact, strikingly simplistic, almost apathetic tone which demonstrates that he does not view death as the punishment the Athenians intend it to be, and is not scared of the afterlife. In doing so, he proves that he does not assume it is frightful. Plato’s presentation of Socrates therefore directly contrasts how he just characterized the Athenian laws: while the Athenians commit impiety by assuming they are right to fear the afterlife, and enforce death as the ultimate punishment, Socrates is pious because he regards that only gods can know if death is a punishment, and ultimately judge which human beings should be punished. Taken at its face, such a presentation clearly seems to be an attempt to refute the charge of impiety laid against Socrates. It is difficult to refute the success of that attempt in terms of human rationality and from an analytical approach.

But why would we take them at their face? We must address this question now, especially for the sake of those audience members who care for esotericism or political rhetoric. It would, at least to such thinkers, seem obvious that because there are contradictions present in the text, neither Socrates nor Plato believe everything written on the page, and that neither should we. But if that is the case, one might ask, why should we believe this interpretation, one easily visible on the surface of the text? Why should we believe that Plato is genuinely attempting to defend Socrates against the charges as the city understands them, especially when Plato might understand them in a completely different way? The answer seems surprising: we perhaps should not.
Plato seems to care more for his philosophic readers than for those who would see themselves in the Athenian democrats and reason in their charges. But Plato wrote *Apology* knowing it could be accessed, and knowing it would be read by various human types. This rhetorical presentation, which directly refutes the charges made against Socrates, gives those political men, men who found Socrates dangerous, a way to exculpate Socrates. Indeed, it might even be said to defend philosophy against(or hide philosophy from) such men in every age. More than that, however, it provides the philosophic readers of *Apology* with a handbook: “how to defend yourselves against the haters, for youngsters.” This provision may be more of what Plato is after, but both possible motivations make this inquiry relevant. We must understand how and why Plato engaged with the charges as Athens made them to understand how such charges are misunderstood, speak badly of Athens, and reveal a necessity that philosophers protect themselves from such archetypal cities. In this light, it starts to become clear why “a defense speech must be made” (19a).

So Plato engaged with “impiety,” not properly understood, but contextually and politically understood, and defended Socrates against it. Plato also makes similar and numerous defenses, rhetorical as they may be, on behalf of Socrates against the charge of corrupting the youth. It is this defense that perhaps more directly speaks to our purpose in our investigation at large, for it posits that Socrates instructs the youth to be virtuous, an essentially moral act. In sum, Plato here presents Socrates, at least in speech, as the exemplary teacher, the selfless instructor of virtue. This not only relates to piety, as he might be argued to have instilled by example, but also to the installation of justice. We
will address the reality of that instruction and its consequences in a moment, but for now,
we need only recognize the defense Plato recounts that Socrates offers on its behalf.

*Apology* tells us that after the gods deemed Socrates wisest, Socrates wanders
among what Plato would call his human types, of the politicians, the poets, the artisans,
and many others, to come to understand them (21c). It is that understanding that prompts
Socrates to undertake the task of education, a task that we have come to interpret as
irrevocably connected with the philosophic way of life. Socrates describes education thus:
“I have been careless of all my own things and that for so many years now I have endured
that the things of my family be uncared for; and on the other hand, that I always do your
business, going to each of you privately, as a father or older brother might do, persuading
you to care for virtue” (31b). In this passage, the Platonic Socrates, like in *Symposium*,
characterizes philosophy as the abandonment of one’s own for the sake of the good, but
what is “good” appears very differently, as the care for the virtue, perhaps even moral
virtue of others. On the surface, this appears a purely heroic, moralistic sacrifice: Socrates
abandoned his worldly goods - material goods for which he cares little (38b) - to take up
the cross of caring for the youth. And indeed he does by the account of the other
dialogues, not least young Hippocrates, Adiemantus or Glaucon, for whom and their civic
virtue he cares deeply. A different, more philosophic interpretation of “virtue” might
dilute these moral appearances, but the appearance remains, and the appearance itself
provides an example of the devotion to city above self, and virtue above power. Such an
example, edifying as it is, directly refutes the charges of corruption, and ultimately,
selfishness, made against Socrates, and characterizes philosophy as an active instructor in
moral and civic virtue. And an edifying example of justice at that, for his proper role in society is to do so. Or so is the case to be made in public.

Such a conclusion raises other, in some ways more important and fundamental questions: why, if Socrates cared so much for the city, did he not devote all of his time to civic development? Why did he not, in a modern sense, run for office, spend all of his time at charities, create a resume of his good works, and trumpet his aspiration to rid the world of inequality? We here see the roots of the questions that inspire this entire thesis, for to serve with our heads instead of our hands appears to be more distant or even lesser service. And partly, they are answered by Protagoras’s call that becoming moral requires deeper contemplation, and philosophy has great and fundamental capacity for morality, but only partly, because deeper contemplation or its perpetuation need not or should not occupy all the time of the person who only cares for moral virtue. So how does Plato answer it, on behalf of Socrates? Socrates says that he refuses to take on “generalships, and popular oratory, and other offices” (36b) for this reason: “I myself was really too decent to survive if I went into these things”; “I did not go into matters where, if I did go, I was going to be of no benefit to either you or myself; instead, I went to each of you privately to perform the greatest benefaction” (36c). Looking past the implication of inherent political indecency - one we will look into later - Plato tells us that Socrates did not enter political leadership because it would harm politics.

In part, this answer can be explained by recalling Plato’s Republic, where famously, in describing the “third wave” of justice, he indicates that it would be a great injustice for the philosopher to rule. There, Plato explains that the philosopher is most suited to philosophize, even if he is also more suited to rule than are political men. This
explanation will become deeply relevant to the next chapter and the more general findings of this research. For now, however, we might note how this message resonates with the defense Socrates offers for his political inactivity: they both invoke the philosophic decency or disinterest in political power, and both imply that in contemplation and slightly more private or guarded edification, the philosophers are filling a role deemed appropriate by both the gods (or piety) and justice. The appropriate nature of that role seems verified not only when we consider the lure of the philosophic eros, but also how “to try to base citizenship and statesmanship on skeptical philosophy would destroy the essential moral foundations of the city, and, in addition, would make people less thoughtful, less serious, less caring for the truth about their souls and their fulfillment” (Pangle & Burns 34). This might be because, as one might conclude, philosophy necessarily questions what people hold sacred and what gives their lives meaning.

Thus, the devotion to the philosophic role at the expense of the philosophic in *Apology* as elsewhere, selfish or dangerous as it may seem, can be defended or as an act of the greatest moral virtue, one that protects the city from harm, and also acts as a benefactor of wisdom for the youth of the city. It is presumably for this reason that Plato most centrally believed in a healthy separation between politics and philosophy, and that such a separation would protect both. Yet because political men are especially gifted at perceiving slights at their intellectual capacities and attacks on their honor, that protection may be insufficient for philosophers. We could then suppose that such a separation may in fact be more stark than Socrates undertook in his lifetime, a possibility we must undertake at another time. The significant conclusion to remember at this time, however, is that because Plato presents Socrates as the selfless teacher responsible for the virtue of the
youth, and not their corruptor, he has now provided at least a rhetorical defense against both charges as the city understands them, and a fundamental defense against the charges as a more elevated mind might understand them.

Upon review, we might then say that Plato speaks directly to the Athenian democracy when he writes: “for now you have done this deed supposing you will be released from giving an account[‘literally, ‘giving a refutation…..’ grammatically analogous to the Greek expression ‘paying the penalty’(West 94)] of your life, but it will turn out much the opposite for you, as I affirm”(39c). Plato tries and convicts the fundamental aspects of the Athenian laws, which are themselves the bedrock of its political character, of the two charges laid against Socrates. Plato sees Socrates as guilty of neither charge, properly conceived, and attempts to defend him against them as they are misunderstood. To Plato, the democracy itself is responsible for the corruption and impiety it describes. What is more, it extended that natural vice - or ignorance - so far as to mortally wound and rob us of the most just and most divine philosopher to ever live. Whether or not we can validate this account, that is very difficult to say, but we can, with all this in mind, say that this characterizes Plato’s understanding of Socrates’s execution, a characterization that seems to be written as a warning. In view of the charges as we now understand them in different ways, this warning would communicate that democracy will always - and wrongly - oppose philosophy.

Plato’s defense of Socrates could then be read as offering multiple shields against such a democracy. In this deeper warning, young philosophers can find a prudent skepticism about the capacities and hostility of the city. And in the defense Socrates offers for himself, they not only might find validation of their craft, but a way to, at least in
speech, defend themselves against the charges that the city will levy against them - if, that is, they are unable to avoid such charges. But more on that later.

**The Roots of Plato’s Judgment**

But why does Plato reverse the trial? Does he merely seek a retributive comeback to the murderers of his teacher? That would seem strangely sub-philosophic for Plato. Could this accusation be edifying and beneficial to those devoted to reason, and rooted in reason, beyond or beneath the ones offered above? It could be argued that Plato thinks it is. To answer the question of how, though, one must ask several more questions: what is it that led Socrates to be executed? What actions were his accusations most focused on? In short, what little room did Socrates give the Athenians to work with in order to trump up charges?

The answer has to be his interlocutions with the members of Athenian society. As private and cloaked as he tried to be - and he did indeed try, especially when we consider his public alliance with custom in *Symposium*, and his guarded language at almost all times - he also spoke in front of small groups, at gatherings that were sure to be recalled, not least by him, when he recounts them to unnamed comrades like those we see in *Protagoras*. The purposes of these interlocutions were, as we have discussed, at least in part to satisfy a philosophic necessity of extracting customary opinion, and hopefully in a pleasurable manner. The other purpose, however, the potential of which we discovered in *Protagoras*, of which Socrates and Plato make heavy weather in *Apology*, is the moral intent: that which most deeply and effectively makes the youth and the city better. Socrates “comes to the god’s aid” and, in front of groups of young men, confronts corrupt
men, like the sophists, and “show[s] that he is not wise”(23b). To a “beautiful soul” like Agathon or a thumotic one like Glaucon, he persuades them to care for virtue.

So it is in this straying into gatherings, into dinners, into drinking parties, meeting all human types, and asking normative questions about what politics ought to be(21b-23a), that we are able to find grounds to see Socrates as a higher form of moral man and a philosopher, and that the Athenians were able to find grounds to convict him. Indeed, it is the only place they could look for evidence.

In fairness to Athens, we also have to note how those same interlocutions might seem weak as a defense against the charges of impiety and corruption, as they understand them. If impiety and corrupting the youth mean that Socrates did not genuinely, alacritously, or strictly adhere to conventional rules, that he is “meddlesome”(19c), and that somehow, the youth picked up on that, then it becomes far easier to understand why, when riled up by the war of the thirty the Athenians would accuse him of making the youth less obedient, or more lax. Indeed, if Pangle and Burns are correct to say that political order is threatened by philosophy, even guarded, cloaked philosophy can upturn the attachment to moral or civic virtue in a soul to young or too limited to understand how Socratic philosophy requires the alliance with convention - and necessity more generally - and how “the good” understood philosophically includes its own kind of morality. Socrates makes much the same point in Republic VII. This harm, though, is not done willingly, and would explain why Socrates clarifies to Meletus that “if I corrupt involuntarily, the law is not that you bring me here for such involuntary wrongs, but that you will take me aside and private to teach and admonish me”(26a). A both interesting
and important point arises here: the practical solution to the hatred of philosophers is privacy, separation from the city. That point we will resurrect later.

It is now this disconnect that becomes the point of inquiry: between what Socrates means, and what people take away from interactions with him, between piety and education as it should be known, and how the *demos*, or many, understand it; in short, between what is taught, and what comes to be understood. Readers of the dialogues can see multiple examples of this kind that are difficult to refute and important to acknowledge, many of which he makes implicit or explicit mention in *Apology*. Socrates takes care to note Callias, a character we will remember from *Protagoras* - the host, no less - “who has paid more money to the sophists than all the others”(20a). And Callias, as readers of history will recall, ended up entangled in the tyranny of the thirty. Socrates also emphasizes his relationship with the poets, “those of tragedies and dithyrambs” - a speech associated with inflamed passion and Dionysus. We know of many of those poets from this investigation alone, not least Agathon and comedic poet Aristophanes. The former remained a slave to public and political opinion all his life, finishing his days in the court of Archelaus and the latter’s accusations helped to land Socrates in front of the hemlock. Socrates further speaks of the many “politicians,” of which he “need not speak” “by name”and his impression of them: “it seemed to me that this man seemed to be wise, both to other humans and most of all to himself, but that he was not. And then I tried to show him that he supposed he was wise, but was not”(21c). Protagoras is certainly one such man, and he was humiliated and irritated by Socrates, and, after rejecting Socratic philosophy and continuing to practice sophistry, drowned while evading prosecution. We might also remember how Socrates attempted to make many other men better, exactly
how he describes in *Apology* (28b-31c), not least Callicles and Alcibiades. Socrates failed to convert the former, for he continued to preach immoralism, and despite the best attempts by Socrates, the latter became frustrated with him, and became notorious as a corrupt tyrant.10

In sum, Socrates had many students who can be used as examples of how Socrates can be misunderstood, rejected, and how Socratic teachings have failed to turn the darkest of us away from immoralism. Because of the number, force, and variety of these examples, because of how he reminds us of them here, and because Socrates tells us that from them, “I became hateful” “to many of those present,” we might now see this “disconnect” as the source of the political hatred for Socrates and for philosophy. This would validate Plato’s blame of Athens for their ignorance, and also suggest, since societal ignorance is a difficult - perhaps impossible - disease to cure, that such misunderstandings, hatred, slander, and the danger that accompanies them will continue.

Socrates seems to concur with such a suggestion, for he claims that “this has convicted many other good men too, and I suppose it will also convict me. And there is no danger that it will stop with me” (28b). From this inquiry, then, we might conclude something like the following:

Socrates implies that he is doomed from the start because of this unbridgeable gulf between the philosopher and his community - between the one who knows the truth and the many who follow beautiful and persuasive falsehoods. This is the human predicament of which the trial is an exemplary instance: the truth-telling philosopher will inevitably be hated by the many, while the ignorant many will inevitably be misled by untrue imaginings (West 17).

So what is now to be considered the source of these disconnects, and the wrongful and unjust accusations they create? Ignorance, or vice, that perpetually, inherently, and inevitably pervades the political sphere, yet has no place in the philosophic soul. No other
reason would explain why Socrates creates an exemplary dialogue with Meletus, in which he asks him what he believes to be good, and why Meletus has no answer (25b-26a). No other reason would explain why Socrates realizes that he cannot, without perishing openly oppose the full extent of injustice in the city (31c). No other reason will explain why the Athenians fail to recognize a deeper and more important meaning of piety and goodness, impiety and corruption, and why their laws are based on those shallow and inconsistent definitions. The city does not and cannot know what is good for it, and never will.

The Sincerity of Socratic Nobility in Plato’s *Apology*

This understandably raises confusion as to the status of moral virtue in Socrates. For if the Platonic Socrates calls attention to the limits of political men, and how noble attempts to edify such men are the reason for his unjust death, has Socrates, upon realizing that he is going to die, abandoned morality? Or, as we asked at the start, can his execution be understood as the ultimate exemplar of martyrdom, as the essence of nobility, as Christ’s predecessor - albeit, a little wiser? Even in light of what we have now discovered, the answer as I interpret lies, somewhere in the middle, and, as it often does with Socrates, above it all.

On the one hand, those who would defend the morality of Socrates might say that if teaching in semi-public settings caused him to be slandered, and Socrates knew that slander to be dangerous, then his role as an educator is proven to be noble, for it disregards the risk to oneself for the sake of others. But that seems unsatisfying and inconsistent with Socrates’s previous statement that he did not enter political leadership to protect himself, and, ostensibly, his joy. They might then say that it still put Socrates at
risk, even if Socrates did not completely disregard the risk to himself, and it still was
done with the intention to make others better, so he remains a moral man, in an
unconventional sense.

Fine, critics might say. But that still does not answer whether during the trial and
execution of Socrates, morality motivated his speech and his deeds. On that question,
analysts would need to consider a historical fact: Socrates was offered the option to
escape, and he refused the offer. One could interpret this choice as a sacrificial one: “the
consideration that escape would entail (morally relevant) harm to the laws decided the
matter and so he refused to cooperate in the escape plan” (Ober 8). In other words,
Socrates could have obediently “abide[d] [his] penalty” (39b) out of moral consideration
for the Athenians, in one of two ways: the need for Athenian law and order, or the ability
to, in his last moments, show the democrats what virtue or virtuous people they would
need to live a better life. Perhaps more convincing is the interpretation earlier mentioned,
that Socrates used those last moments to demonstrate, to his philosophic audience, what
exactly the philosophic way of life is and how it will be received. This too would be
noble, for Socrates would be choosing to die so that he might greatly benefit the
philosophers that come after him.

Those same critics might still struggle with that conclusion, however. Realistically, they
might say, Socrates did not have many more years to live. He was
faced with a choice: live out your few years in exile, where you are unable to question
people about what they think, and thus, since he lived before the dialogues, to
philosophize about the human things, or go through a trial and execution. A trial in
which, we might note, Socrates manages to create what looks like a Socratic dialogue,
with Meletus and others, about the human things. It might then be said that Socrates used the trial to philosophize, even about questions as important and interesting as the Athenian understanding of the good(25c). This aligns with Socrates’s suggestion that he could not live without philosophy(29d), and would further support the kind of “inwardness” or even self-involvement, we saw appear in Symposium by calling attention to how this dialogue emphasizes it: Socrates says that he is motivated by “a sort of voice,” which he has had from childhood; “whenever it comes,” Socrates says, “it turns me away from whatever I am about to do, but never turns me forward”(31d). It would further explain why, even in the moments before he is to die, he speaks with levity and humor, seeming to enjoy himself. So too would it cast in another light Socrates’s last words, which imply that he does not mind dying. Socrates is happy because he is philosophizing - a choice that we now know is involuntary. Philosophy chose him, or so it appears, and whether or not it will kill his body, he has no choice but to follow it. If all this were true, Socrates’s execution would appear self-interested and necessary more than it is noble.

If indeed the apparent sacrifice of his life is not so sacrificial, or not so noble, then a few other factors would fall into place. The reality of Socrates’s guilt before sat in murky waters: Socrates was innocent of piety and corrupting the youth as the crimes should be understood, and Plato provides a rhetorical defense against the charges as the Athenians understood them, but that rhetorical defense was questionable, for fundamental reasons. If, as we said before, questioning the moral or civic order of the city can corrupt youth who do not have the right kind of soul, who are not of the right age, or who are not constantly supervised, then Socrates could have unwillingly corrupted them, but the fault
would lie squarely on the head of their own limitations. And if, as we said before, Socrates reveals that he does know about the lands of Hades, nor the gods in general, then it must also be said that such a man, the minister of the “examined life,” did not believe in the gods of the city, but was agnostic about them. If they sensed this essentially chaotic understanding of the cosmos, similarly limited men could be made uneasy and perhaps less virtuous. Indeed, it would be easy to sense such agnosticism and moral ambivalence in this dialogue, more so than in others; Socrates seems less guarded, more open, and more ruthless in this dialogue than in others: he praises himself in ways that he rarely does elsewhere(36e), and he criticizes not only the customs of others, but openly slights the virtue of other individuals in a way that we do not often see(e.g 25c). In that light, it seems at least possible that Socrates’s philosophy was too public, and posed some danger to the fundamental order beneath political light. Under such a glare, it is hard to conclude that Socrates was primarily motivated by nobility in this dialogue.

When the glare clears, however, we might recognize, from a moral perspective, that that does not quite capture the story of this dialogue. All of the observations above may be true, but so are other, perhaps equally important ones that we have already addressed, and must recall. Socrates still defends moral virtue, even in the moments before his death, especially in its forms of justice and moral education. So too does he still claim an alliance with piety as a service to the god. These seem to be moral contributions for the political man, for they defend and speak to the necessity of custom and moral and religious order, even when that order has sentenced him to death. For the philosopher, especially the one in need of edification, the definition of philosophy and the philosophic way of life remains a noble action, for it helps them to be good. It also, if one
considers how Socrates still - though admittedly, less than usual - guards his language, and how he warns them of the inevitability of slander, helps them to be safe. To some interpreters, these audiences might be united: Socrates might, in defending philosophy, be helping both philosophers and the men of the city who rely on its cloaked council. Indeed, he may even be, as West suggests, attempting to “refound” the city along more philosophic, wiser lines, while still protecting certain norms that will always be necessary.

Whichever interpretation one favors, it must be concluded that some element of nobility remains imbued in the manner of Socrates’s execution. For why else, as we have asked in other chapters, would he philosophize about these specific things, and why else, though less than before, would he guard his language? At the end of the day, whether or not it co-exists with self-interest, morality remains. And not only in intent, but in consequence: the death of Socrates was morally impactful. Athens, and western society to follow, remembered the hill on which Socrates chose to die, in no small part because of its manner: Socrates “offer[ed] great proofs of these things for you-not speeches, but what you honor, deeds” (32b). By dying, Socrates made immortal the question of the importance and morality of philosophy. This choice seems even more impactful when it appears voluntary. If, for example, one takes note of how the vote as to whether or not to convict Socrates was so close, and then interprets Socrates’s provocative speech as serving a double purpose - that being to “goad” the democrats, the great horse to his gadfly, into martyring him - one could then see Socrates’s death as characterized primarily by his desire to benefit those would come after him. From that view, the nobility that sincerely remains in Socrates’s death only expands.
In both life and death, Socrates provided these speeches and deeds to be honored, and he did so despite the risk. Yet since Socrates, at least as far as he is a philosopher, cares little for legacy or honor, we are left to wonder if he always knew of that risk. We are, more centrally, left with the appearance that like in Protagoras, Plato’s Apology shows, ironically, the reconciliation of self-interest and morality in the philosophic way of life, whereas they are in tension in the political longing for morality. Socrates appears to be motivated by his nobility to do the same as his self-interested philosophic eros would lead him to do. It is perhaps the beauty of that peaceful reconciliation that leaves us, perhaps most importantly, with the impression that political men will forever be limited, dangerous, and as such, perhaps unworthy of philosophic edification. If this were the case, then if the philosophic eros could be satisfied in another, less dangerous way, it would seem both wiser and more prudent.

Implications

Many possible interpretations and conclusions have been raised. As such, it seems only fitting that we examine which ones align with the findings of our investigation. We have found that Socrates saw education as an obligation connected to his way of life, and as such, when he entered semi-public settings, he intended both to philosophize and make others better. We have also found that following through with such an intention has consequences: because of political limitations, it leads to misunderstandings, which in turn lead to fear, anger, or slander, and those slanders might impede the ability to philosophize or live - abilities that, to the Socratic philosopher, mean the same. To stray into such settings, then, has both moral implications and reflects an indifference to the risk to oneself, and as such, is noble. So too have we found that defending philosophy can
 sol be noble, both for the city and the philosopher, not least because it is time-consuming and difficult. Upon these findings, we might conclude that even the philosophic version nobility, or the Socratic version of morality, is and always will be incredibly dangerous.

So what does that mean for the course of our more general inquiry? As we began to investigate this dialogue, we noted how Socratic morality genuinely existed, but differently from conventional, heroic morality. We also noted how the philosophic eros can lead away from the moral deeds such eros demands, and thus how it constituted a sacrifice. It was this observation that led us to ask about the meaning, magnitude, and nature of these sacrifices the philosopher makes, for only in answering that question would we know how we should act regarding them. We might answer that same question now by saying that the Apology reveals that the noble - conceived as moral heroism, and understood as it necessarily relates to the city that hosts philosophy - requires a great deal of the philosopher. Indeed, it inevitably puts them in unquantifiable even mortal danger. For Socrates, at least by Plato’s lights, it led him to be blamed for vices that should have been attributed to his accusers, and that misplaced blame harmed him, philosophy, and all those who might benefit from it.

And by those lights, we now, having been benefited by this dialogue, stand more ready to recount what “Platonic turn” Socrates’s execution might have conjured, and what that turn consists of. It might start to consist of something like this: since the philosopher longs for wisdom and not moral virtue, except insofar as it coincides with wisdom, these sacrifices have no worth as ends-in-themselves, at least, that is, for those philosophers who might benefit from the generosity of Plato’s dialogues. The kind of nobility available to philosophers, or maintaining the pretense thereof, is not only a great
sacrifice of the philosopher’s happiness, but of the philosopher’s life, both of which depend on or equate with philosophy properly understood. As to whether or not Plato believed in the worth of these sacrifices, or the worth of the men on whose behalf such sacrifices are made, we will reserve our judgment.

Notes
1. Impiety is translated as ἀσέβεια, and corruption διαφθορά (diaphthorá), the verbal form diaphtherein (to corrupt).

2. See West, Plato’s Apology; Pangle & Burns, The Key Texts of Political Philosophy, Chapter 1.

3. There are very few other dialogues from which Socrates is absent. In Plato’s Statesman, Socrates the older is absent from the discussion, but because of its close connection to Plato’s Theaetetus, because of the presence of young Socrates, who shares his name, and because of the similar style that resembles a Socratic dialogue, Socrates remains, in a sense, present. By those lights, Socrates is only completely absent from Plato’s Laws.

4. Plato’s Academy was founded in Athens reportedly in 387 B.C. Aristotle would come to study there, and its roots live on in the modern university. See “Plato: The Academy,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy; https://iep.utm.edu/academy/

5. The philosophical tradition of “human rights” has strong roots in the social contractarians, most especially Locke in his Second Treatise and Jean-Jacque Rousseau, but has gained increasingly practical strength in global politics over the last two centuries. For a more complete explanation from a modern perspective, one might look to writers like Amartya Sen and Lynn Hunt, or scholars such as Paul Gordon Lauren or Samuel Moyn.

6. One might read Plato’s Symposium as expressing a similar mantra: Aphrodite commands the philosophic eros, and so there too philosophy is a pious action.

7. Some might call further attention to Socrates’s exclamation: “I will offer for you as witness the god in Delphi” (20e). On the surface, it appears to be impious, for Socrates implies as a kind of control or direction over a divine creature. We must balance this appearance, however, with an admittedly weak defense: an oracle, and not a god, lives in Delphi. She, like Socrates describes himself in Symposium, is a messenger between the worldly and the divine, and thus offering her appears at least half as impious. Furthermore, we might interpret this offering as reiterating that “I” and “the god” are separate beings, and that the god is a better witness than the human. Perhaps more than that, though, this serves to articulate how impious the Athenians are, for they reject the testimony of the divine. As rhetorical or shallow as these defenses might seem or in fact be, the significant fact, at least that relevant to my interpretation, is that all sentiments in this dialogue provide the
opportunity for such a defense - in short, that they leave enough room to teach philosophers how they might defend against political slander.

8. The war of the thirty tyrants refers to a brief and corrupt oligarchy that lasted from 404 to 403 B.C. There was special emphasis, in this hotly contested tyranny, on purging Athens of political enemies and strengthening the enforcement of the laws.

9. Archelaus was the king of Macedon, in whose court Agathon served as a poet, and at his pleasure.

10. Alcibiades excursions are famously recounted in Thucydides’ *History*.

Works Cited


CHAPTER IV

THE ‘MYTH OF ER’ AND THE PRUDENCE OF NOBLE SACRIFICES

Through a selective examination of three Platonic dialogues, we have thus far aimed to clarify both the philosophic human type and its relationship to morality. While Plato’s *Protagoras* reveals the depth and sincerity of philosophy’s capacity for morality, Plato’s *Symposium* reveals that the philosophic eros longs for something that it views to be higher than morality. For a philosopher to devote themselves to morality as if it is their highest end is also to make a sacrifice, not only of their own passion, but, as Plato’s *Apology* has made clear, of their own safety, for the type of moral virtue that philosophers are primed to offer and instill is also incredibly controversial and easy to misunderstand.

Yet that phenomenon of misunderstanding remains sunless and mysterious. Our investigation of *Apology* led us to uncover that Plato may be using that dialogue to communicate the inevitable limits of the political world, and the irreconcilable and mortally dangerous tension between it and the philosophic way of life. That possibility, though, raises questions that are both philosophically interesting and ethically crucial: just where are those limits? Is the political common man forever and always resistant to reason? Just how much is he so? Will the attempts of the philosopher to edify the political world always fall short of what would make them appear to be a good investment? To be satisfying? In short, are those great sacrifices that moral virtue in the political world necessarily demands of philosophers worth it?
To investigate the answers to these questions, analysts need to get even further into the weeds than they have already. These queries, essentially esoteric as they are, demand exploration of symbol, of nuance, and of allegory. Such an exploration, to hear some scholars talk, is the same as seeking out fantastical myths that we can only hope exist. To those scholars, I say: I found one! Plato, as it happens, was rather fond of myth¹, and one of those that he wrote is particularly primed to satisfy our curiosity. It is, as it also happens, one of his most famous: the “Myth of Er.”

Hosted in Republic Book X, the Myth of Er tells the tale of a warrior, Er, the son of Armenius(Ἀρμένιος). He was slain in battle, and presumed dead, but his vacation into the great beyond was only a brief one. Twelve days later he awoke on a funeral pyre, ready and longing to tell his tale to the men who were all set to memorialize him. That tale recounts his journey to the afterlife, what he saw there, and, to the careful reader, offers some understanding of human nature.

In scholarly literature, the Myth of Er has received a great deal of attention. Indeed, its symbolic messages and its role in the dialogue as a whole remain a topic for reasonable debate(Jowett, Strauss, Vlastos, Ferrari). Certain themes, however, consistently appear in such discussions, not least among them the tension between free will and determinism. This tension will run beneath our analysis as we investigate one potentially deterministic human trait: the resistance to reason. We will explore how Plato might use the myth to present the resistance to reason, reasonable advice, and reasonable advisors as an enduring problem. In the course of this exploration, I will argue that Plato’s Myth of Er further articulates the eternal limits of the common political man, and,
indicating that the philosopher will never fully or always be able to turn the
unphilosophic nature away from injustice, calls into question the worth of that pursuit.

The Myth: An Overview

The word “myth” takes on a different meaning in a classical context than we
might think in a modern one. Transliterated as “muthos,” it can become synonymous with
several English words, including “word,” “speech,” “story,” and “account.” We will rely
on this last translation, and, as Socrates would advise, will seek to understand this
“account” before we make any judgements about it.

As Socrates would also advise, we will start at the beginning of this account. The
first thing that we learn about Er is that he is a “strong man” and “by race” comes from
Pamphylis(614b), or modern day Turkey. “Once upon a time,” Socrates tells us, Er died
in war, and the corpses, he among them, were allowed to lay on the battlefield for ten
days. While other corpses decayed, however, Er was picked up “in a good state of
preservation.” Odd as that was, Er was brought home anyway. It was not until two days
later when, lying on the pyre, Er “came back to life, and, come back to life, he told what
he saw in the other world”(Ibid).

Now the flashback begins. Er tells his compatriots that his soul departed his body
and made its way into a certain “demonic place.” In this place, there were four holes, two
in the earth, and two in the heaven. The holes were evenly placed opposite each other and
evenly spaced apart from each other(614c). Between them sat judges, who, as Er tells his
audience, decide who journeys through what aperture. Those deemed “just” in life -
“just,” as some scholars interpret, being a moral term⁴ - were sent “to the right and
upward,” through one of the holes to the heavens, and those deemed “unjust” were sent
“to the left and down,” through one of the two in the earth. The just and unjust, then, have diametrically opposed fates, as decided by the judges.

Er too came before the judges, but his fate was of rather a different kind. The judges inform Er that he is to become a “messenger” to the human beings on earth, and they task him accordingly with observing and remembering all that he can of the nature of things in this afterlife(614d). To that end, he saw the space before him as a kind of gathering place: souls came from the heavens, “pure” and happy, and souls came from the earth, “full of dirt and dust,” “crying and lamenting,” and they all conversed with each other about what they had seen and done. In listening to these conversations, Er was further enlightened about the nature of their punishments: each soul was punished for each injustice they committed on earth ten times over, and each punishment lasted one hundred years. For one injustice, then, be that “betraying cities” or “reducing men to slavery”(615b), each soul was made to take a journey below the earth for one thousand years. That journey, is, for lack of better words, “hellish,” until they return to face the judges again. Some souls, though, never returned; there are some that, having been so evil or tyrannical, were judged irredeemable and sent below the earth forever. We might note this as an important philosophical assertion on the nature of political men, but more on that later.

Each just soul is judged similarly. Their rewards are the “antistrophes” of the penalties given to the unjust: each just soul - though curiously, no mention is made of just “acts” - is rewarded ten times over, each time being worth one hundred years, and were thus granted one thousand years in great joy, pleasure, contentment, peace and purity. They too, however, must return to the gathering place when their reward has concluded.
When these two groups meet, they spend, as Er tells it, seven days in “the plain,” and on the eighth, they depart on a four day journey. At the end of that journey, they come to see what might be called the structure of the cosmos. At the center, there beamed “a straight light, like a column, stretched from above through all of heaven and earth, most of all resembling the rainbow but brighter and purer” (616b). Look past the center, however, and the cosmos becomes, though ordered, much more complicated. Around the pillar of light wraps what Er recounts as “the spindle of necessity.” This spindle forms a rather confusing “whorl,” which appears, from the top, to be eight concentric circles, but from the side and bottom, appears to be continuous. In sum, the spindle creates what appears to be a cone of coil around the light. The concentric circles of that coil have different colors, and the third is “whitest,” or most pure. They also move in different ways: seven of the eight move in the opposite direction from the outermost circle. Above each one of them sits a “Siren, accompanying its revolution, uttering a single sound, one note; from all eight is produced the accord of a single harmony.” This cone, then, appears what Plato might elsewhere refer to as “the music of the spheres,” and that music is both beautiful and orderly. It also could very well be representing an order Plato realistically observed, referencing the stars, sun, planets, and moon (Bloom 471). There are also three “Daughters of Necessity,” or “Fates” (Moirai), named Lachesis (dispenser of lots), Clotho (spinner), and Atropos (inevitable or unturnable)” (Bloom 472). Each fate is responsible for a place in time: “Lachesis for what has been, Clotho of what is, and Atropos of what is going to be.” The three fates also sit equidistantly from each other.
With them in mind, Er’s audience can craft a more comprehensible image of the cosmos. There are many visible representations made of such an image, but I propose that the structure of the cosmos as represented by this myth can be understood by something like the figure below, and, like the perfectly just soul as described in *Republic* (e.g. 580d), is grounded in the number three⁵: three fates sit equidistantly from the center, which allows an equilateral triangle to be drawn around them; a cone is made by the spindle around the center of light; the souls will interact with three symbolic time periods; three cosmological entities are potentially represented by Plato (planets, sun, and moon), and the third circle of the spindle is the whitest, brightest, and most pure.

Putting aside how exactly it is that this grand cosmological vision is ordered or how that order should be visualized, it is clear that according to the myth, “the whole is
organized rationally and is knowable;” indeed, so much so that “the particular fates of individuals gain significance by their connection with cosmic necessities”(Bloom 472).

It is that connection that next becomes the focus of Er’s tale. When the souls arrive at the throne of the first Fate, Lachesis, “a certain spokesman” informs them of their next task: choosing a life, to which they will be “bound by necessity, ” and by which they, their character, and their virtue, or lack thereof, will be shaped. He cast lots among the souls, and each, except Er, picked up that which fell next to him. He who - seemingly out of sheer luck - was standing next to the highest of those lots was offered the first pick of the lives available to him. Many were available to him, human and animal, from tyrannies to the lives of “private men” who “mind their own business”(620c-d). Each of these lives has their own “demon”(617e), and each has their own mix of beauty and pain.

The myth returns to its frame narrative for a moment, while Socrates tells young Glaucon about the importance of choosing a life for the kind of virtue it will create. This is especially important when dealing with justice, Socrates explains, for it affects the pleasure of the city and of the soul.6 Indeed, it is in this “looking off toward the nature of the soul - between the worse and better life” that a “human being becomes happiest”(618e-619a). This admonition may have particular relevance for the philosophic human being, but that relevance can be judged once we understand the nature of the myth that hosts it.

Socrates having offered this advice, he returns to the myth, where Er tells his audience that the man, the man whom luck favored, the man with choices of all lives available to him, who had been warned by the spokesman of the significance of this decision, the importance of not being “careless,” and the danger of choosing a bad way of
life(619b,c), chose “the greatest tyranny.” Er recounts that this choice was made “due to gluttony and folly,” and, upon making it, the man instantly regretted it, for he noticed that “eating his own children and other evils were fated to be a part of that life”(619c). Other souls follow suit and choose a mixture of different lives, often because of some shallow desire and rarely out of some kind of reasonable deliberation.

Er continues that after the choice of a life, each soul was sent to the next fate, Clotho, who “ratifies” the fate they choose, and sends with them a “guardian” appropriate for their way of life. Once they received such a guardian, Atropos, the last fate, makes that fate “irreversible”(620e-621a). Having gone before all three of the fates, the souls made their way to the plan of Lethe, where all souls but Er were instructed to drink from the river of “carelessness,” to whose water “those who were not saved by prudence” were drawn. Those same careless men “drank more than the measure”(621a), but all forgot everything that they had seen. After a night of self-forgetting, they were sent to their births.

With that, Er’s tale ends. He tells his audience he knows not how he came to the world beyond nor how he came back to his body, but remembered all that he saw and that the divine judges told him to recount it all. He passes no judgement on what he observed, nor does he offer any interpretation of it, but Socrates does. Socrates tells Glaucon that this tale, that which was saved and not lost,” “could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river Lethe and not defile our soul.” “If we are persuaded by me,” Socrates immediately tells Glaucon, “we shall always keep to the upper road and practice justice with prudence…. here and in the thousand year journey that we have described we shall fare well”(621d).
These are the last words of Plato’s *Republic*. Whatever else they offer, and that will soon be investigated, they certainly suggest that the myth overlaps with Socrates’s mission in the dialogue. Why else, one might ask, would the “upper road,” and “prudence” be rewarded, both according to the myth and to Socrates? And why else would both be, in such close proximity, attempting to “persuade” Glaucon and the entire audience to ostensibly similar practices of justice? Certainly, then, both are attempting to instruct an audience to live in a better, more prudent way. It remains unclear, however, if Plato is concerned with certain members of his audience more than others, and how those particular spokesmen are to act more prudently.

With that ambiguity in mind, we might then refocus our investigation. Having familiarized ourselves with the plot and nature of the Myth of Er, we can now say that we are ready to consider the philosophical content of that account, and how Plato, however esoterically and symbolically, uses it.

**The Resistance to Reason as an Enduring Problem**

With that in mind, we can resurrect the problem or dilemma on which we originally set our sights: how or indeed if Plato uses the myth to emphasize the resistance to reason as an enduring problem caused by the political world.

At first glance, there appear to be many textual elements that would validate such an argument. Given that this myth recounts, quite holistically, the nature of the universe, it may be most prudent to begin with the most fundamental of these elements. To that end, a careful reader might note how the structure of the cosmos, by Er’s account, approaches human nature. Human beings are judged as “just” or “unjust” in a categorical, dichotomous, and strict way, and the length of their sentence, not to mention the lack of
anything that resembles parole, implies that their nature will remain in such a favorable or unfavorable state, or at least deserve to be punished and rewarded as such, for at least a millenia. Those punishments and rewards, too, are governed by laws that appear to be universal, homogenous, cold, predictable, and indifferent. In short, how and why human beings are judged in Er’s afterlife suggest that this account judges nature - even and perhaps especially human nature - as something “fixed.” The myth could then be observed as verifying Plato’s understanding of fixed human “types,” as well as lending support to the interpretation that some of those types will always be more limited than others.

In response to that observation, though, an interpreter could and might even be wise to remain skeptical. For while human souls are judged universally, strictly, and along the same lines, they also, it could be recalled, are given a chance to be judged again and redeem themselves at the end of every sentence, long as it may be. Indeed, coming to such a conclusion on only the meager evidence above comes close to making a mountain out of a molehill. To assuage this skepticism, it might be more satisfying to turn instead to the predispositions and actions of the individuals involved in this myth. In their rationality (or lack thereof), there might lie more convincing proof of the interpretation I offer, which suggests Plato’s belief in the political man’s eternal resistance to reason.

In many ways, the quest to uncover evidence of that nature relies on the observations made above. The structure of the cosmos, as both pictured and interpreted, is ultimately and extremely rational and comprehensible; whether seen by triangles, understood by the number three, rationalized by the laws that govern it, or explained by the eternal tensions of humankind, Er’s afterlife is imbued with reason. The fundamental
question behind this query then becomes: how do those human souls in Er’s myth react to such a reasonable universe? Do they seek to elevate themselves to better prosper under its laws? Do they devote themselves fully to the pursuit of wisdom, to know how and why they might be most just and happiest in such a regime? Or do they resist such a pursuit, choosing instead to rely inherently and instinctively on their more shallow and immediate desires?

The first veritable “case study” that Plato offers in response might be considered the first man who chooses a life for himself. As we might remember, that man had many options before him, and chose not only a political life, but the most unjust of those lives - that of the greatest tyranny. Plato elsewhere sets the tyranny as a diametrically opposed enemy to philosophy and the philosophic way of life, and seems to repeat that theme here. He lists, among those lives the man could have chosen, the life of a “private man who minds their own business.” This description seems to mimic how Socrates describes himself as a private in *Apology*, and in light of such mimicry, conjures images of the philosopher and the philosophic way of life. It is that way of life, that way of being, that this man, with all the freedom and power in the world, rejects. If the philosophic way of life is understood as the most wise and most reasonable way of living, this choice directly demonstrates a resistance to reason as something inherent to humanity, or at least certain souls(or types of souls) within it.

This understanding is only strengthened with further review of the text. We might additionally note how the man who would be the greatest tyrant did not choose that life without guidance. He was not left unguarded against his visceral “folly and gluttony,” which Plato tells us motivated his choice. No, he was warned against such motivations,
and by a rather contemplative figure. The “spokesman” who presided over the ceremony - one not unlike what Plato describes as a philosophic “guardian” - offered this advice: “even for the man who comes forward last, if he chooses intelligently and lives earnestly, a life to content him is laid up, not a bad one. Let the one who begins not be careless about his choice” (619b). It is “immediately” after the spokesman offers this warning that this would-be tyrant chose “without having considered adequately.” Plato tells us that this is not because he was preoccupied with matters of cosmological importance, or unable to hear the spokesman, but rather, driven as he was by surging, unintelligent desires, because he “chose” “not [to] abid[e] by the spokesman’s forewarning” (619c). It was only after making this choice that he was able to consider it “at his leisure” and lament its ignorance and vice, and only for the reason that it ended badly for him.

So Plato reveals this man as someone who is driven by ignorant desires, and chooses a bad way of life, no matter the warnings he receives. What made him so? Plato describes him as “one of those” who may have lived in an “orderly regime in his former life,” and who may have “participat[ed] in virtue,” but did so only “by habit, without philosophy” (619d). In that light, it appears that the lack of philosophy makes this man as he is. Plato’s description as “one of those” suggests that there are many more of them, many more who might be considered a member of the same human “type.” And that type, it also seems, can only be just by accident or societal habit, not fully or truly, because they lack reason - or a proper appreciation for it - in some fundamental part of their soul, that part that governs their choices and balances their desires. Such a human type would then appear essentially resistant to reason, internally, inevitably, and inherently, and is also, driven as he is to tyranny, essentially political.
Such a political character would depend upon philosophic advisors to live a more just, happier life. Socrates might be considered the best or most worthy advisor of that kind, and he seems to act as one in Republic X as in many dialogues. As the frame narrative interrupts the myth, Socrates more directly to Glaucon his fundamental message throughout Republic:

Each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible… for in this way a human being becomes happiest.

This passage begs a clarifying interpretation, for it raises more questions than it answers. If, as we thought before, Socrates is, in speaking of “distinguish[ing] the good and the bad life,” referring to philosophy, then is he suggesting that anyone, or at least those hearing him in this dialogue, can live, fully and properly, a philosophic way of life? Is he treating Glaucon like a young philosopher, and emboldening his sense of his own virtue? Much scholarly debate has been devoted to this last question. While it deserves to be raised, its answer cannot be properly investigated within the purview of this analysis. We can more precisely remark on the previous question, for it can actually be clarified with more scrupulous attention to the passage above. Upon that review, we might find a clarification that resembles the following: Socrates does not tell Glaucon that everyone should distinguish between the bad and good life for themselves, but rather says that his listeners should attempt to find someone who will do so for them; Socrates does not tell Glaucon that all should be philosophers, but rather should “seek” that “study” which will help him to determine who are philosophers, and then listen to those philosophers. Here we see the distinction between philosophers and those that would be wise to love.
philosophy, and here again we see the distinction between the political man and the philosopher. Put summarily, Socrates, closely read, retains the idea elsewhere presented in *Republic*, that some political men are dependent on external wisdom, and should embrace that dependency. This is a sorry sort of virtue, for “virtue is without a master” (617e), but “pitiable” virtue (620a), if that, may be the only kind accessible to men like these.

But what does the myth tell us about such men? We find that while a philosophic spokesman, the voice of reason and foresight, offered his wisdom, the tyrannical man dismissed that wisdom; he refused to listen to it or abide by its restrictions. Far from embracing his dependence on external wisdom, he failed to acknowledge that dependence. The inherently limited political man thus ignores the presence of wisdom altogether, caring only for the imprudence within himself. He prefers himself and his power to the just soul and the happiness it promises, and acts on that preference. Indeed, since the tyrannical man was only able to consider the merits of such a decision after he made it, he seems incapable of acting any differently.

Plato offers yet further support to this dark vision of mankind and its limitations. As Er first traverses through the afterlife, and hears of the punishments given to unjust men, he also learns of “still greater wages for impiety… towards gods and parents and for murder.” As an example of such wages, he gives an example of one man, “Ardiaeus the Great,” who “had been a tyrant in a certain city of Pamphylia” - notably, Er’s home nation. He had “killed his old father and brother and done many other unholy deeds” (615c). He, as Er recounts, was not treated in the same way as all the other unjust souls. When his penalty had finished, the “mouth” that returns a soul to the place of
judgement did not admit him; rather, “fierce men, looking fiery through and through,” “bound Ardiaeus” by “hands, feet, and head,” to be thrown into Tartarus(616a), and never to return.

What warranted such a monstrous penalty? Plato indicates that it was warranted by the nature of Ardiaeus’s soul. This soul, as it happens, might also be considered a “type,” for it has compatriots; “just about all of them were tyrants, but there were also some private men, of those who had committed great faults”(615d). Yet it is not those faults that keep them from their chance at redemption. Instead, the myth recounts that “they supposed they were ready to go up, but the mouth did not admit them; it roared when one of those whose badness is incurable or who had not paid a sufficient penalty attempted to go up.” Some of those were “led away,” but “others” were, like Ardiaeus, bound, “thr[own] down,” and “stripped of their skin.” The fiery men “dragged them along the wayside, carding them like wool on thorns; and they indicated to those who came by for what reason this was done and that these men would be led away and thrown into Tartarus”(616a). By this account, it becomes clear that reason beckons and warrants this eternal penalty. Reason demands that those not yet punished enough are punished more thoroughly, and led away. More importantly for our purposes, however, we might recognize how reason also demands judges to recognize “those whose badness is incurable,” and that there is such a thing as “incurable badness.” That badness exists in a visible group or type of souls, and justifies the merciless abandonment of such souls to the abyss. Or so this myth recounts.

As terrifying as this revelation is, it is also crucial to understanding the meaning of the myth, and of Plato’s message to a philosophic audience. Though it is admittedly
melodramatic and hyperbolic in nature, it also, more directly than most other elements of Plato’s text, illuminates that there are absolute, fixed, eternal, and extreme limits to the souls of men: there are those that cannot be cured, cannot be turned, cannot be taught, and cannot be helped. Such is the way of the cosmos. Such are the human things. The world is or should be governed by reason, and reason cares little for silly human plights; it is indifferent to futile pleas and impossible dreams. It is neither a wish-granting factory nor a warm coat to temper the winds of fate. Philosophers, as those most devoted to reason, are required to recognize that, and Socratic philosophers, as those who reason through the human things, are required to recognize how that applies to man: political men, who long in some way for tyranny, and of whom the worst actually attain it, have eternally limited souls.

A broader look at certain other elements of this myth suggest that such badness exists, though perhaps in different ways and much smaller quantities, in many more souls than one might think. We might note, for example, how, after the fates of all souls have been sealed, the myth recounts that they all are instructed to drink from the “river of carelessness” (621a). In drinking from this river, and in sleeping by Lethe, they come to forget all that their soul has seen and experienced. This includes the cosmos about which they have learned, and the reason that governs it. They become, quite literally, “careless” and “forgetful,” as a condition of entering the human, political world.

And, if that were true, would it not explain a lot about the political world? Would it not explain how it is in large part, irrational? Would it not explain how politics is defined, in no small part, over dogmatic value judgements and unending conflict? Why Marx was wrong about the fate of religion in America, why coups against democracy
lurk, and why culture wars continue to rage? Put another way, would it not explain how the political man always seems to forget the benefit of reason and of justice properly understood, chooses instead to follow his own whims, and, when he pays the price, blames “chance, demons, and anything rather than himself” (619c)? This myth offers a cosmological explanation for that all-too-human, all-too political trait, but more than that, reminds us of its existence. Perhaps more importantly to this inquiry, it warns those who try to rid the world of that trait that “no vessel” - be that a canteen or a moral philosopher - “can contain” the waters of carelessness (621a). In that light, the myth might be read as offering something like this revelation: the resistance to reason is an essential limitation of the political world, and present, though in varying degrees, in all of its inhabitants. This enduring problem can be dangerous, evil, and violent, not least to philosophers, but its human limitations cannot be fully overcome, not even by philosophers.

With that all said, a few possible interpretations of Plato’s Myth or Er arise. We might first revisit the idea Socrates often presents, of the necessity of external wisdom, and conclude that society needs philosophy to be just, or, more broadly, moral. In some ways, this interpretation seems to make sense, for there remains certain sources of “external wisdom,” in political society, not least religious and historical doctrines, and Socratic philosophers, as we learned in Symposium, often ally themselves with such customs as they recognize their necessity. In other ways, however, it seems to be unsatisfactory. As we also learned in Protagoras, the philosopher attempts to elevate as well as maintain moral virtue, and those attempts are often seen as dangerous and controversial, not least because, as we found here, the political man resists reason. In
sum, because the wise, philosophic, or “guardian” figure will always be ignored or resisted, this interpretation seems to only tell part of the story.

The other part, which appears to be both more relevant and ruthless, is also controversial. It presents the alternative that Plato intends to communicate how the non-philosophic nature, including all political men, cannot be turned away from injustice. This could be interpreted in the more minute way of Plato’s general message in Republic - that perfect justice is only possible in the philosopher, and thus certain injustices of soul will always be present in the sub-philosopher - or a more expansive way, which would contend that political men will always commit injustices, little and great, and trying to turn their souls so that will never do so again is a futile quest. Putting aside how Plato might conflate those differences, this interpretation would most strongly be supported by our review the myth’s recognition of “incurable” souls, with Atropos, and her role of making the souls’ fates “unturnable,” with the remedial ignorance of Callicles in Gorgias (Strauss, 1957), and, potentially, with both Glaucon and Socrates’s future. But more on that later. For now, we need only conclude that Plato uses this myth to suggest that the resistance to reason is an enduring problem in political life, to contend that it is present in the souls in political men, and to illuminate that there are great and dangerous limits to how much those souls can be turned or those limits overcome.

The Role of the Myth in Plato’s Republic

But, as some would rightly ask, if this is so, why would Plato end his Republic with the Myth of Er? And how does that affect Plato’s mission in the text? To ask these questions is to tread into deep academic waters, waters which we are not prepared to fully explore. Our exploration, therefore, will not even pretend to do so. It will only kick at the
surface, and thus might seem sorry in comparison to the offerings of other scholars. When dealing with Plato, though, it is often better to be sorry than to be unwise. What seems wise in this specific context, then, is to consider only the themes we have already discovered in connection to the myth, and their relation to the section of the text that hosts it.

As Allan Bloom tells it, “the Republic is the true Apology of Socrates, for only in the Republic does he give an adequate treatment of the theme which was forced on him by Athens’ accusation against him. That theme is the relationship of the philosopher to the political community”(Bloom 307). Even those who resist Bloom’s approach or his other conclusions might be willing to accept this interpretation, for it is eminently reasonable: the Republic fundamentally claims to explore and define the most just regime; Socrates does so by comparing the regime in the city and the regime in the soul(e.g. 368d-369a), but ultimately discovers that perfect justice is possible only in the soul, and not in the political community; and since the perfectly just soul is the soul of the guardian, or, more specifically, the philosopher, Bloom seems verified in saying that the relationship between between the philosopher and the political community is what founds - indeed, centers - Plato’s Republic. Any proper and reasonable interpretation, then, would seek to relate elements and pieces of this daunting text to that theme, and draw conclusions from that comparison.

Attempting to do so with regard to the “Myth of Er” requires understanding, or at least acknowledging, the section of the text that hosts it. Book X of the Republic begins by resurrecting a discussion of poetry previously put to bed in Book III. Previously, Socrates and his interlocutors decided to ban the poets because they are “imitators;” they
“maim the thought of those who hear them and do not as a remedy have the knowledge of
how they really are”(595b). This decision was then made in reaction to what the Greeks
call mimēsis, or mimicry, which represents or imitates the real world in literature or art.

In her recent, deeply controversial, and original work, Poetic Justice, Jill Frank
calls into question this decision to ban poets from the “city in speech,” and contends that
poetry and philosophy may share more in their practices than such a decision might
suggest. By her reckoning, mimēsis can have another form, one that does not identify
appearances with truth, but rather “prompt[s] attention to gaps between truth and
representation”(Frank 65). This new practice, Frank argues, can be used to lead a person
to “self-governance” by way of questioning “the always fallible authority of one’s own
experiences, perceptions, opinions, imagination and conversations”(Frank 224). Whether
or not it does or can be used that way, such a practice seems to marry poetry and
philosophy.

Plato’s relationship with poets and poetry is tense, heavily researched, and
controversial: the Republic claims that there is “an old quarrel between poetry and
philosophy”(607b); Socrates claims to be better than the poets in Apology, his Symposium
suggests that that superiority rests on the fact that poets are ultimately slaves to public
opinion, and yet the same dialogue could be viewed as an attempt to make amends with
the poets on the grounds of love, even and perhaps especially Aristophanes, who opposed
Socrates. To make sense of this relationship, one needs to understand it on a smaller
scale. One must ask: what is that poets and philosophers share? They are both erotic
creatures; they both are more ready to break with certain conventional norms than others;
they both instruct the souls of others; they both must be inspired, and being so, open the
door to some higher form of truth. Thus in a certain sense the marriage of the poet and philosopher could be viewed as legitimate: successful philosophers must be poets as well as truth-seekers.

In light of all of this, Book X’s opening begins to make much more sense. After banning the poets, Socrates here admits “a certain friendship for Homer” (595c), meditates on the nature of imitation (595c-598d), and suggests that the poets might be allowed to re-enter the city, if their imitation, rather than “betray[ing] the truth,” helps to “lay hold of the truth” (607c-608a). If we are to follow the instructions of Republic IX, which refocuses attention on the regime within the soul, rather than the regime in the city, we might then see poetry as a way of improving the soul, even the philosophic soul devoted to truth. Poetry can, even in and perhaps especially because of its myth and mystery, help found the philosophic soul under “good laws,” and help instill within that soul knowledge of what truths they must accept and by which they must live well.¹¹

It is directly after this conversation that Socrates begins the myth in question, and should be understood as upon this basis that Socrates presents thematic messages within it. Of those messages, our remarks should be brief and contained, but are required to make mention of a few textual elements. First, there is an obvious overlap between Homer’s Odyssey and Er’s tale. Book XI of Odyssey, like Er’s tale, tells of a trip to the underworld, and the structure of that world is, in many ways, shockingly similar - at least in a physical sense - to the afterlife Er sees.¹² Even some of the same themes arise, not least among them free will and determinism, status, glory, self-interest, and honor. But perhaps more important to note are the differences: while the souls seem to wander aimlessly under Homer’s tutelage, Socrates’s myth directs them with purpose; while there
seem to be no universal laws in Hades; Er’s afterlife has ubiquitously known laws, complete with punishments and rewards for the unjust and just alike. These differences amount to a fundamental disparity between the intention behind and potential uses of these myths. While Homer’s account of the afterlife lacks comprehensibility or a moral goal, that of Socrates does. And, more generally phrased but perhaps more importantly put for our purposes, it also “makes this world intelligible and provides a ground for the contemplative life” (Bloom 427). Placed in the context of this poetic debate, Er’s myth could then be seen as directly contrasting poets of old, and providing an example of poetry that edifies the soul, and helps direct it toward truth through reason.

But how, then, does it edify the soul? This question seems the linchpin of proving such an interpretation, as well as understanding the myth and its role in the Republic. In light of everything considered, one might respond to it with something like this: it attempts to improve the soul of the political by instilling in it care for justice, and the more general conventional morality of which justice is a fundamental part. To the soul of the rather elevated and gifted political man or statesmen, it can communicate the necessity and benefit of philosophy, a pursuit that improves upon past searches for truth.

It also can edify the philosophic soul by elevating its conception of the philosopher’s relationship to the political community. If this is true, and if the myth’s meaning is something like what we before concluded, then we would have to accept an interpretation of this myth that contends that Plato both attempts to make the philosopher better and believes she will becomes so by recognizing the limits of the political man, and, at times, the futility of attempting to turn his soul. This interpretation of the myth would not only be supported by its contents, but by its placement. Consider Mark Munn’s
argument in *The School of History*: Glaucon, like Er, was slain in battle; Glaucon, like Er, cares for honor and courage. Socrates also treats Glaucon, like Er, as a messenger: he lifts the curtain and shows an order and reason to the political world, and, at the end of *Republic*, sends him back to “persuade” the community of such an order. If this overlap is genuine and intentional, then it would only emphasize this theme of incurable injustice in the political man, for as much Socrates tried to make Glaucon just and a defender of philosophy, Glaucon, not unlike the unruly man in the myth, chose war and tyranny over listening to reason, and chose injustice over a better life. The end of Plato’s *Republic* might then be read as a reminder of this choice, and would characterize the myth as a warning against political life more than it is an edification of it. If this were the case, some scholars would go so far as to say the same of the dialogue in its entirety.

It would then seem necessary to revisit another centrally important section of Plato’s *Republic* that describes the “third wave of justice.” This passage, as discussed in chapter three, reveals that compelling the philosopher to rule would do harm to the philosopher herself, because it would deprive her of a better life that they could be living. The myth of Er, more or less as we have come to understand it, could be interpreted as explaining why this is so. In revealing that the political man is eternally limited, unjust, and filled with vice, one might say, the myth also reveals that it would be unjust for the philosopher to spend time trying to save them, make them better, or even interacting with them at all, in any physical sense, anyway. This would be because of both the inevitable or irredeemable nature of political vice, and the intrinsic virtue of the philosophic quest, one so valuable and good that the sacrifice of it might never be justified or even worthwhile. In short, the myth could be interpreted as emphasizing the notion that it is
unjust for the philosopher to devote themselves to improving politics, because that
devotion will always be sunless, ugly, and futile, and will never be worth more than the
devotion to philosophy. Politics, it would seem, should and must be left, more or less, to
its miserable cave. Or so this interpretation of the myth, its relevance to the Republic, and
Plato’s understanding of prudence would recount.

Whether or not one accepts that daring, dark, and dangerous interpretation,
however, this much can be said about the role of the myth in the Republic: to the extent
that it speaks to the philosopher, it attempts to edify the philosophic soul by instilling it
with the care to - albeit, in a healthy manner - separate itself from the inherently limited
political community. This edification, one might suggest, is both prudent and heroic, for
if the philosopher’s life or quest is endangered by entering this community, as was made
clear in chapter three, then that life or quest might necessarily depend on recognizing the
limitations or potential futility of that quest.

Such a suggestion extends Bloom’s more general interpretation of the dialogue,
which suggests that the Republic, among other intentions (not least helping the political
man to understand justice), harbors another goal: moderating one’s expectation of
political justice. We might now say that this especially applies to his philosophic
audience, to whom he wants to articulate how unchangeably limited the non-philosophic
nature is, both as it characterizes society and the individual. If it is true that this dialogue
is the true Apology of Socrates, and the Apology audibly and openly enunciates the
philosophic way of life, then understanding, recognizing, and abiding by political
limitations would now be viewed as fundamental, essentially, and necessary to Platonic
political philosophy, and encouraging such obedience would appear equally fundamental to Plato’s *Republic*.

**Conclusion**

In that light, we might now say that Plato’s philosophic human type appears more clearly, both in terms of its soul and its relationship to the political world. The philosopher recognizes how that world will always depend on and sees the wisdom in moral virtue. She also, where she can reasonably, seeks to instill it in its conventional form in political men, and devotes herself to it in its wiser, unified, and admittedly less practical form. *Protagoras* contributes these lessons. To qualify them, *Symposium* clarifies that the soul of the philosopher does not long for morality as an ends-in-itself; in fact, she transcends that desire. The pretense of that desire is a sacrifice of time and energy, and, because of its inevitable failure to live up to conventional standards, and because of the slander it inevitably conjures, also potentially of life and safety. Thus three dialogues, each in their turn, contributed crucial lessons to understanding the tense relationship between morality and philosophy in the Platonic dialogues.

Now, having reviewed Plato’s Myth of Er, those lessons have become more satisfying. For in understanding it, how it might be allegorically interpreted, and its role in Plato’s *Republic*, we stand ready to answer the question that made our previous inquiries incomplete: just how worthwhile are these sacrifices of self that the philosopher makes for the political community? Now, upon review, we might answer, though with a heavy heart, with a response not unlike this: Plato recognized the resistance to reason, and saw it as an enduring problem in political life - not just in the city large, but in the hearts and minds of its citizens. The philosopher, as a human type, will never rule, nor
her wisdom accepted without dangerous resistance. Because of this problem, he also saw limits to the amount that the philosopher can accomplish in the political community and the political soul. The sub-philosophic soul, as Plato understood it, can never fully be turned away from injustice. The great and noble sacrifices philosophers of the past have made for the sake of devotion to such souls then seem unreasonable and imprudent.

To the end of edifying those souls devoted to reason and prudence, Plato, poet as well as philosopher, wrote the Myth of Er. With it, he attempted to improve the soul of the philosopher, and, at least by our reckoning, to protect it, by communicating this message and suggesting a separation between philosophers and the political community. More relevantly, though, he also suggested with it a separation between philosophers and nobility. To whatever extent - and that extent may very well be limited or aligned with self-interest - that heroic morality motivates the philosopher’s interaction with the political community, it appears, by the light of Plato’s myth, to be an opponent of philosophy, something of which they should be skeptical in the name of prudence, and something against which philosophers must guard out of care for their own safety. So now appears to be the instruction of Plato’s myth. Whether we, be we philosophers or political men, will resist, challenge, or obey it, that is up to us.
Notes

1. As well as dwelling on the distinction between mythos and logos, Plato also wrote his own myths. Beyond the myth of Er, Plato’s characters often recount and explore myths, including but not limited to the altered myth of Prometheus in Protagoras, Aristophanes’s myth of androgene in Symposium, the myth of Phaeton(Timaeus, Critias), the myth of Theuth featured in Phaedrus, and that of the Amazons in the Laws.

2. Translated, in the Greek, as “μύθος”. See Brisson, 1998.

3. Pamphylis, or Pamphylia, was an ancient maritime city. It was, roughly, a thin curve of land along the Mediterranean, and was considered part of “Anatolia.” Today, Anatolia might be called Asia Minor, or the peninsula that constitutes the Asian part of Turkey(Britannica, 2012).

4. The “music of the spheres” is a Pythagorean term, thought to represent the harmony between the sun, the moon, and the planets. Notably, they too made sense of the world by mathematics, and by the number three.

5. While in some ways this analysis appears to both be a deep dive and grasping at straws, review of other Platonic texts might suggest otherwise. Numerology in Plato’s works has a deep and reliable scholarly foundation, and some of his dialogues focus exclusively on the topic(e.g. Parmenides). Indeed, the Neo-Platonist tradition focuses, in some sects, primarily on numbers, especially “the one,” and relies on Protagoras’s teaching of unified virtue to help them in doing so. While this focus devotes itself to a different number and is, in my view, often misguided, it still upholds the validity and precedent of numerological interpretations.

6. The city-soul analogy(e.g. 368b, and moving on from there) is a hallmark topic for those who review the Republic. It is widely accepted to both compare justice in the city and justice in the soul and find that justice is more difficult in the latter and in the former. The city and the individual have different and often conflicting needs, or so the fundamental lesson of this analogy - indeed, of this dialogue - communicates.

7. Literally meaning “forgetfulness.”

8. As Pangle and Burns explain, “leisure,” according to Aristotle, is not about physical comfort or catharsis, but rather about proper and sagacious contemplation of the most important things. This is an essentially philosophic interpretation of “leisure,” and one that seems to be appropriate in this passage, where the tyrannical man is only at “leisure” when contemplating his decision thoroughly, and only capable of doing so after his visceral desires have been satisfied. See Pangle and Burns, Key Texts, Introduction.

9. There may be some correlation between this discussion of habit and book IX’s image of a man lighting a fire, but the full investigation of such a correlation would involve too many themes( and too many varying interpretations of those themes) to properly include in this analysis.

10. In this context, we might interpret “private men” as sophists or the like, rather than philosophers, and also recognize that the tyrannical leanings present in the habitually just man are equally present in the unjust man - a shared quality which might, by Plato’s intrinsic account of the soul, equate them.
11. Aristotle explains this point well in *Poetics*: poetry can remain poetry but still lead upward, inspire thoughts above itself. Such an insight might be shared between Aristotle and Plato, and might serve as further testament to their mutual influence.

12. The communing of the souls in Homer’s tale, as well as the plain on which the souls wander, appears to be the basis for Er’s tale. The River Ocean that surrounds Homer’s underworld, too, is defined by meaninglessness, and Er’s River of Carelessness resembles it in an apparently intentional way. Funeral pyres are also mentioned repeatedly in both tales, and that of Er makes a point to mention Hades. Odysseus and Er might also be said to play similar “messenger” roles, though that of the former would be less demanding as it would have less to do with the instruction of the soul.

13. Many scholars have also noted the absence of Achilles in Er’s myth. Achilles was, by Homer’s account, the best known hero, and thus his absence, and the lack of praise for him, might signal a change in understanding of the soul, and of the good life. This new understanding might care less for honor or conventional courage, and would be more philosophic, understood in the Socratic sense.
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In his *Process and Reality* (1979), Alfred North Whitehead remarked that the history of political thought merely “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” While Whitehead intended to describe the philosophy of Plato’s successors, his remark is equally true of interpretations of Plato himself. The Platonic dialogues are filled with nuanced, turbulent ideas that demand deep, thorough, and elaborate contemplation. To properly address or understand each of those ideas, an interpreter or scholar would have to write a footnote the length of a thesis, and will still, almost definitely, fall short.

As ambitious as it might seem or in fact be, my intention in writing this thesis was to create a clarifying - or even, dare I say it, edifying - interpretation of Plato’s works. Having attempted to do so, I now realize that my interpretation is merely an elaborate footnote to one of his concise yet groundbreaking ideas. This idea, of course, is his “third wave of justice,” which became relevant in the last two chapters as a crucial theme of the *Republic*. There, Plato famously claims that in the perfectly just city, the philosopher would have to rule, for in her wisdom, she lacks the desires and longings that corrupt other rulers (520d). Because of this virtue, the Platonic Socrates issues a commandment to philosophers, at least those conceived as guardians of the just city:

> You must go down, each in his turn, into the common dwelling of the others and get habituated along with them to seeing the dark things. And, in getting habituated to it, you will see ten thousand times better than the men there, and you’ll know what each of the phantoms is, and of what it is a phantom, because you have seen the truth about fair, just, and good things. And thus, the city will be governed by us and by you in a state of waking, not in a dream as the many cities nowadays are governed, by men who fight over shadows with one another and form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good (520c).
This might be described as the essence of the noble. For the sake of the city, the philosopher sacrifices her best life and her happiness, luxuriating in empyrean cogitations on the “Isle of the Blessed”(519c), and instead, devotes her life to seeing dark things, to burdening herself with the vices of others. She does this because the justice of the city demands it, and because it is her duty as someone wise, as an exemplar of civic virtue. This sacrifice is essentially beautiful, and undoubtedly serves the whole community. As such, it is certainly nobility, understood as moral beauty, and morality, by our definition of moral heroism, that is the subject matter of this passage.

As Glaucon quickly notices, this particular conception of moral virtue has its problems. Being a thumotic, honor-loving, rather self-interested character, Glaucon quickly pipes up, asking Socrates: “are we to do them an injustice, and make them live a worse life when a better is possible for them?”(519d). In response, Socrates asserts to his young, impressionable interlocutor “that it’s not the concern of law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives to bring this about in the city as a whole, harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and compulsion”(519e). In other words, Socrates responds “yes, but it’s injustice we have to deal with. It’s just one of those things, kid. Remember the bigger picture: justice cares for the whole, not the one.”

To the careful reader - at least one who actually cares for the philosopher and the philosophic way of life - this response should be unsatisfactory. Injustices left unanswered always fail to satisfy, especially when those injustices are so dire and so grave that they would radically change one’s life from better to worse. This visceral reaction is made worse still by the fact that no one seems to care about nor even remember such an injustice, at least not as much or in the same way as they do the
implications of the other two waves, complete as they are with radical equality and the abolition of the private family. For Socrates rightly describes the intentions of the city: it cares for itself as a whole, not for those few who are better than it; no, those few, for lack of better words, can suck it up and do their part for the city. While there is a certain kind of utilitarian reason that supports the city in this mindset, it leaves the idealist with a bad taste in their mouth and a stirring objection in their gut. It is this feeling, one might interpret, that Plato uses to communicate one of his most important messages, one that we discovered in chapter four: political justice is eternally imperfect. If political justice is a part of and relies on the kind of heroic morality we have investigated, then those imperfections would be present in morality as well.

What does Plato reveal about this political understanding of morality? He reveals that it is indeed imperfect, for it contradicts itself: for the sake of justice, it is unjust; for the sake of moral virtue; it fails to think, let alone care, for the most virtuous among us, and even casts them aside or kills them; for the sake of morality; it is reprehensibly selfish. This city is like the little boy who accosts the giving tree. The philosopher, trapped in place by her roots and compelled to rule, gives and gives the boy all the wisdom that he could want or need. She does this out of the hope that it will provide her with insights about little boys in general, or because she knows that to do so is moral, but she is poorly repaid. Indeed, the tree of wisdom gets only two things in return: the knowledge of her own virtue, and death - death understood as the destruction of her body, or as theft of the life she should rightly live. So not only does Plato reveal the limits of moral heroism on the part of the philosopher, or demonstrate its dangers, but he also paints a very critical and dark picture of its legitimacy and of its inherent worth. From
this picture emanates a clear and very important revelation of its own: what we think to be noble is never fully or completely so; the noble, as a human virtue, is stained by humanity, and so made imperfect and contradictory, so much so that moral heroism is and always will be intertwined in selfishness.

**Implications**

This revelation communicates pressingly relevant and urgently important messages to Plato’s philosophic audience. Descending down into the cave, as described above, might be conceived more broadly as the Socratic attempt to edify the non-philosopher by instilling them with moral virtue, elevating that virtue, and protecting the virtue they already possess, like the kind of attempt we outlined in chapter one. If so, then we might conclude that while this kind of attempt has characterized the Socratic mission, it perhaps should not, for it makes unacceptable sacrifices on behalf of eternally limited political men, men who, as we discovered in chapters three and four, will always be dangerous because of their vice. If there was a way, then, to reason through the human things, to discover customary opinion, to “descend into the cave” without personally attempting to improve such men, at least deeply or thoroughly, then it seems far preferable. Plato provides this option by writing his dialogues; he allows philosophers, especially those young philosophers who most need education, with a way to “interact” with political men, learn the human types, and become acquainted with the customary opinion upon which Socratic philosophy must begin, all in the safety of a book. Their personal, physical interactions with the city can be kept to a minimum and disguised, and instead of devoting too much of their time and energy and safety to the virtue of others, they can stay, as safely as possible, on something close to the Isle of the Blessed - his
Academy, its descendants, or even a library. This would allow the fulfillment of that most precious, most intense philosophic longing for truth that we discovered in chapter two, while minimizing exposure to the risks and injustices that Socrates inevitably faced.

But it would also undermine moral heroism on the part of the philosopher. No more would it seem inherently good for a philosopher to devote one’s time and energy to descending down into the cave, to seeing the dark things, to save those who so desperately need their help. No more would that be a necessary part of the philosophic life. While concealing, or hiding this quest as something more conventional and palatable, would remain necessary, while there may be threads of that cloak that might actually help the city and make them more virtuous (e.g. The Republic’s lesson to moderate one’s expectation of justice), and while moral virtue, properly conceived, would remain a part of wisdom, these noble sacrifices need no longer and should no longer be. The dialogues provide this option for the philosopher, and through them, Plato indicates that it should be chosen for the greater good of wisdom, a good only possible in the philosophic way of life only undertaken a healthy distance from the city. That distance is to be maintained and cherished by the philosopher, for various reasons and in various ways.

Ultimately, I believe that my research illuminates this message. In this thesis, I have attempted to use four dialogues to demonstrate how Plato views the relationship between philosophy and political morality, a relationship we now know to be riven by enduring tensions. While Protagoras showed us that in the philosopher, the greatest power for morality resides, that morality, properly conceived, is of a very different kind or type than the political conception of moral heroism; it is more limited in its activity,
more abstract, and, rather than sacrificing all selfish longings, reconciles morality with
the longing for truth. Symposium further clarified this division, for it showed us that while
political men rejoice at the sight of beautiful things, philosophers transcend the beautiful
by way of their real love: the love of wisdom, truth, and the good. Philosophers thus long
for something quite different, something that leads them above and away from a holistic
devotion to moral beauty. Acting otherwise, as the Apology showed us, is not only a
sacrifice of philosophic happiness or of an inherently precious desire, but also of one’s
safety and life, for political men are both especially good at detecting pretense, the
knowledge of superiority, and secret selfishness, and especially bad at seeing
understanding or valuing the virtue of the philosopher, the philosophic longing, and how
those longings might be reconciled with their own. These limitations are or should be
ingrained in the soul of the philosopher by the myth of Er, and will or should forever call
into question philosophic devotion to the political community. Taken as a whole, this
message, one communicated tensely and through many dialogues, could save
philosophers from sacrificing too much of themselves or their lives. And given how Plato
ostensibly loved wisdom, the wise, and those who seek the life of the mind, it seems at
least likely that in his dialogues, Plato was nobly attempting to do just that.

Areas for Further Reflection

With that established, the relevance of this work is firmly demonstrated, at least to
philosophers. But what about the scholars who read and interpret his works? Are there
immediately relevant applications for them and their understanding of Plato? I will raise
two issues about which there might be. The first, as it happens, was already raised in the
introduction. Lorraine Pangle, in her Virtue is Knowledge, conceives of heroic morality in
only two ways: moral and hyper-moral. While those forms were utilized and seem validated by this research, the conclusions of this research may also challenge the premise that there are only two types of heroic morality in the Platonic dialogues, and instead, present another, third type for further reflection.

This type might be called “transmoral heroism.” It would be defined both by the self-sacrificial heroism that has grounded our understanding of morality, and by Lorraine Pangle’s understanding of “transmoral,” a descriptor that applies only to those values, ideals, and people that transcend and leave behind many conventional rules and applications of those values. While this conception is remarkably absent from Pangle’s account, I contend that it may be present in Plato’s dialogues. If Plato is, as I suggest, attempting to “save,” “protect,” and watch over future philosophers, especially young philosophers, and attempting to do so both with his warnings, and by providing them safe spaces in which to study and learn, then he acts heroically. In doing so, he would follow in the footsteps of his heroic predecessor, who, even if out of necessity and curiosity as well as heroism, chose to sacrifice his life, a choice we discovered in chapter three. The more relevant heroic act there, though, would be the messages imbued into his speech for future generations of philosophers, messages that outlined the proper nature and pursuit of philosophy, and its inevitable dangers. These messages, taken seriously, would both help philosophers philosophize, and protect philosophers by making them more cautious about entering the political community, even in the not-so- “private” way that Socrates did. In delivering these messages, then, Socrates serves what Leo Strauss frequently calls the “class interest of philosophers.”
Only in attempting to do so, one might observe, does Socrates transcend the conventional norm of heroic sacrifice. Only in that attempt does Socrates leave behind the conventional, moral kind of sacrifice that seeks to help and protect all, and instead, chooses to defend and save a few, even sometimes at the expense of many, to protect philosophy, even when it is tension with politics. This attempt, and that of Plato which follows after it, might be used to clarify this idea of transmoral heroism: the transmoral heroic could sacrifice time and energy heroically, and valiantly seek to serve and protect, but on behalf of one apolitical ideal - in this case, philosophy - and for the few who properly value it - in this case, philosophers. In its limitation and separation from the political community, it would transcend or reject the conventional norms of heroism.

Any investigation or support of this form of heroism would have to defend it. And that defense would necessarily arise against the objection that the term “philosophic heroism” seems to be an oxymoron. Any valuation of heroism on the part of the philosopher seems shockingly unphilosophic, at least as this research understands the term. This is because heroism itself, conceived as a self-sacrificial form of morality, seems to be essentially conventional, essentially political, and essentially contradictory, and the philosopher should transcend convention, separate herself from politics, and reason through contradiction to rise above it. Thus, objectors might claim that there is no such thing as a purely “transmoral heroism.” There might be some truth to this objection, truth important to recognize, but it might also be true that those who would raise this objection could fail to recognize how Socratic philosophers are human, as well as philosophers. Socratic philosophers are subject(even if the freest of those subjects) to necessity, as are the rest of us. Indeed, we have emphasized how, even more than others,
Socratic philosophers seem to be characterized by their ability to reconcile themselves with necessity. And necessity demands, in this case, that Socratic philosophers protect philosophy from the many who will always misunderstand it and its practitioners. If necessity does indeed excuse, as Thucydides might seem to teach, then the Platonic or Socratic utilization of transmoral heroism - “transmoral” being loosely or strictly, more philosophically conceived - might be excused or even admired. These possibilities deserve further reflection in scholarly literature.

So too does the relationship between Socrates and Plato. This research also emphasizes the significance of the act of writing and circulating the dialogues, and suggests that philosophers after Plato can and should philosophize differently, and more safely, than Socrates. By writing the dialogues, Plato alters the bounds of necessity for philosophers, and allows them to “descend into the cave,” extract customary opinion, and become equated with the human types, in a very different, less active, less personal, and far less dangerous way. And based on my findings, he does this because of the inevitable and grave danger posed to those who would imitate Socrates, and because the worth of such a quest, to the extent that it edifies non-philosophers, is highly questionable, at best. Thus, there seems to be a distance, or a difference, between Socrates and Plato.

This possible conclusion raises important questions that merit further reflection. Could it be, for example, that we should more strongly emphasize the extent to which the Platonic Socrates is a character? And in Apology, could it be that that character, upon realizing that he is going to die, also, finally and tragically too late, more fully realizes the dangers of the political man, inevitable, grave, and expansive as they are? Could it be that Socrates himself came to this all important conclusion only at this moment, and only
at this moment attempted to communicate it to the philosophers that come after him? And
that before this potential “turn,” he acted too recklessly and thought too highly of the
moral quest to edify the non-philosopher, of the political man, or of the noble more
generally? Or at least that this would be true if he had other, safer ways to philosophize
that did not yet exist? In short, could it be that during the life of Socrates, time and the
lack of dialogues creates a critical distance between Plato and Socrates on the issue of
moral heroism and its reconciliation (or impossibility thereof) with the philosophic quest?

Many scholars have waded into this maelstrom of confusion and contention, and
debated about the possibility of a critical distance between Socrates and Plato. Many
argue that the Socrates of the dialogues is more or less a mouthpiece for Plato’s views
and doctrines (Annas, 1981; Brickhouse and Smith, 1994). Others counter this
“mouthpiece” theory by insisting that an interpreter must dwell on the literary context of
the dialogues, keeping in mind Plato as an author and Socrates as Plato’s literary
character (Strauss, 1964; Voeglin, 1957; and Nightingale, 1996). However, as either side
would likely concede, this debate has not been sufficiently resolved and leaves ample
room for new reflections.

Because of this enduring disagreement, I suggest that further reflection on this
matter, particularly as relevant to the findings of this research on heroic morality, would
be both worthwhile and edifying to the scholarly community. This reflection would be
best attempted within a careful scope. Many scholars believe that Plato’s works can be
divided into roughly three periods: early, middle, and late, and that a visible
transformation of Plato’s doctrines can be traced chronologically, with his views
hardening as time goes on (Irwin, 1995; Bobonich, 2002 and Vlastos, 1973). Others
argue against relying on such a chronological progression, suggesting instead that Plato is consistent in his views but approaches their literary and dramatic presentation differently depending on the topic, characters, and context that he considers (Roochnik, 1988; Shorey, 1960; Zuckert, 2013; and Pangle & Burns, 2015). This debate too is unresolved. As such, any inquiry on this matter, if it intended to find a consistent feature in Plato’s text - this being, perhaps with the exception or different utilization of the *Apology*, a critical distance between Plato and Socrates as a character - would have to choose dialogues that span across the time periods, and closely relate to this subject matter. I suggest that this reflection should begin with the dialogues used in this very thesis. Perhaps in embarking on such reflection, scholars might take one step closer to answering this all-important, penultimately difficult question.

Whatever the answer is to this difficult academic question, we might and indeed will take these revelations to our very real world. Our world fears reason insofar as it questions deeply the dogmas we most revere; it rages with misology as country after country rejects the egalitarian democracy that political reason recommends and slides backward into authoritarianism; it echoes the Athenian democracy as it attacks and hates those who attempt to live the life most devoted to reason, that being the life of the mind.

To such hatred, this research offers a meaningful response. In coming to understand how philosophy and politics must necessarily be kept separate, in some sense, those who see intellectuals as elitist and selfish might recognize that the life of the mind and the political life are not as one. In fact, they exist in completely different realms, realms that operate by different rules, and as such, cannot be judged in the same way or by the same people. Those who devote themselves to philosophy could, by this light, be
exculpated for their lack of enthusiasm for democracy. After all, these modern intellectuals can and must only live half-lives of the mind: they must disguise themselves and respect and uphold the norms of democracy when they interact with the political community, even when the best, most central part of their lives has transcended the need for democracy. Because of this requirement, those who attempt to live the life of the mind, those who aspire to be philosophers, are no teachers of evil, no great or immediate threat to political society. That is, as long as they keep to themselves, and act in a way that appears to be selfish, but in reality, keeps politics safe. In that light, the fear and hatred that they conjure can be assuaged.

Even so, we must remember philosophers, loosely conceived in a modern sense, will never be the same as political men; they will never be dogmatic zealots, trumpeting the moral virtue of democratic life as if it was the best of virtue. To them, it never will be. And is there not something precious about that? Something inherently and essentially worthwhile to study and to love? Virtue demands recognition, and if there exists a person and a life above and beyond the political one, does it not deserve cherishing and protecting? Does not it deserve applause, awe, and appreciation to see that there is a person whose virtue emerges spontaneously, even in spite of the city, who is willing and able to devote themselves fully to an ideal beyond our wildest dreams? Should not that applause only grow louder when we realize that that devotion can provide us with knowledge and lessons about our political community? Should we not rein in our pride and vanity, and resist the urge to conscientiously object to such devotion? Is it not encumbered upon us to do so, not only by intrinsic worth and potential utility of philosophy, but by the fact that we are fundamentally different from philosophers? By
the fact that the essentially apolitical philosophic life is fundamentally different from our
democratic political life? It would seem so. For if philosophers live a fundamentally
different way of life, and if that way of life, as long it mostly keeps to itself, need not
threaten our democratic community, and could in fact benefit our regime, then what right,
we might ask, have we to malign them? What right have we to criticize those we cannot
understand? Who are we to judge? No one, it would seem, but false judges. Or so, we
might conclude, reason responds.

With all this in mind, we might realize, in a very Socratic sense, our own
ignorance, or vice. While it is obvious that the modern world has become technically
skilled, it is far less obvious just how much the modern man has progressed in civic
virtue. For while modern civic virtue claims to be based on reason, it is laced with a fear
and hatred of reason, and starves - indeed, represses - the love of reason that challenges
it. The modern man so understood seems to have as much control over his own norms
and is as aware of his own contradictions as he is of the dangers of his technology, or the
limits of his hubris - that is, much less than he thinks or very little indeed. Contradictions
remain in his life, dangers abound within it, and much is still to be done if his political
community is to become reasonable, let alone good.

Indeed, the modern man has not even yet decided if reason itself is an eminently
good thing, for while he recognizes that he owes his life of plenty to reason, he also feels
that his life is made unsafe by it. He knows, in some part of himself, seen or unseen, that
reason, properly conceived, will always shake the ground beneath his beautifully
manicured feet. And he knows, somewhere deeply hidden, that he is woefully unprepared
to be shaken. So far from earthquakes, he thinks, he actually needs a steady foundation,
one upon which he can rest his large home and fast car. Thus, thinking himself
reasonable, he opts to rely, in his laws and his life, on what he knows. Unbeknownst to
him, he does so without reason: he is ignorant of how little he really knows, how he
knows it, how much of that knowledge is good, or what the good even is. So while it is
clear that the modern man, complete with all his wit and power, lives longest and most
comfortably, it is anything but clear that the modern man lives well. For the good life, the
modern man must still look to philosophers.
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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Ivy Flessen was born on July 27, 1999, in a town of one hundred people in rural Wisconsin, to two Lutheran pastors. From birth, she exhibited an unbending curiosity, a spiritual yearning for something larger than she could understand. When she was very young, her mother left the church to embark on an academic career in biblical studies, and this choice, as well as the natural mobility of the pastoral life, led to several moves around the midwest. Finally settling in Batavia, Illinois, she spent her high school years devoted to academics, sports, music, and theatre.

Flessen, for a variety of personal reasons, had long planned to embark on a legal career. She began her undergraduate career at the University of Maine with a view to this plan: while maintaining a full course load. Flessen spent two years on the historic campaign of Maine’s first female governor, Janet Mills, where she worked as a senior staff member in both the field and communication departments; she concurrently served as a Democratic party staffer in its field efforts; and in the legal field, she worked for the Penobscot County District Attorney’s Office, and, during the summer of 2019, worked with the Manhattan firm Zuckerman Spaeder on national legislation heading for the Supreme Court, regarding both solitary confinement and the opioid crisis. This work and her studies won her many awards, both within the university and from external sources.

Yet this path proved unsatisfactory for Flessen. At the end of the second year of her undergraduate career, she, with the help of wonderful professors, had discovered the great books of political philosophy. Realizing her much greater joy in analyzing these texts, and her dissatisfaction in the practice of law and politics, it did not take her long to accept that her life would be best spent in the company of these authors. It was this realization that led her to spend the final two years of her undergraduate degree independently researching the dialogues of Plato, and which led to the drafting of this thesis.
Flessen plans to continue her academic career at Duke University. She will begin the PhD program in political science there in the fall of 2021, and has every reason to expect that for the rest of her life, she will produce more questions than answers.