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The Intelligent Troglodyte's Guide to Plato's Republic

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The Intelligent Troglodyte's Guide to Plato's *Republic*

Douglas Drabkin

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PREFACE

Or shall I hear the name of [Plato](#) and never read his book? As if Plato were my townsman and I never saw him, – my next neighbor and I never heard him speak or attended to the wisdom of his words. . . . How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book! (Thoreau, *Walden*, [ch. 3](#))

The *Republic* of Plato is one of the classic gateway texts into the study and practice of philosophy, and it is just the sort of book that has been able to arrest and redirect lives. How it has been able to do this, and whether or not it will be able to do this in your own case, is something you can only discover for yourself. The present guidebook aims to help a person get fairly deep, fairly quickly, into the project. You are advised, first, to read the segment of text indicated by the traditional [Stephanus](#) numbers (e.g., “327a-328b”), then to read the commentary, and then, as time permits, to think through the bulleted questions. These questions have been devised through years of discussion with students who have gone before you. Take them or leave them as you please, but they have value and are recommended.

All quotations from the *Republic* in this guidebook are to the translation by C.D.C. Reeve ([Hackett](#), 2004). The links to the text of the *Republic* are to Tufts University’s [Perseus](#) Digital Library setting of Paul Shorey’s translation from Harvard’s Loeb Classical Library. And if you would like access to the Greek text, the same Perseus site links you at the push of a button to John Burnet’s Oxford edition.

Journey well.

Hays, Kansas

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Book I

1 A Religious Festival in the Piraeus

See [327a-328b](#). The dialogue opens on a summer's day at an unspecified time during the [Peloponnesian War](#) (431-404 BCE) in the streets of the [Piraeus](#), the seaside port of Athens and its primary link to the outside world. Plato is writing in hindsight, years after the war. So he and his audience know things that the characters in the dialogue do not. Remarkable military blunders are to result in the fall of Athens to Sparta and the Peloponnesian League. An oppressive anti-democratic government known as "the Thirty" is to come to power. The wealth of the house of Cephalus is to be confiscated. Lysias is to be driven into exile. Niceratus is to be put to death. Polemarchus is to be put to death. The Thirty are themselves to be overthrown, only to be replaced by a restored democracy that in four years time is to try and convict Socrates for promoting unorthodox religious views and corrupting the youth. Socrates is to be put to death. Plato sets his intellectual drama against this background: ruinous war (with Athenian greed and pride at its root), civil strife, political instability, and injustice upon injustice. But in the foreground we find ourselves in a setting of apparent peace and civility. [Socrates](#) narrates in retrospect – how long after is unclear, but at least one season has gone by (see [350d](#)). He and one of Plato's two older brothers, Glaucon, have gone down to the Piraeus to take part in religious festivities dedicated to "the goddess." This goddess, who is identified at [354a](#) as [Bendis](#), was worshipped by the Thracians, allies of Athens during the war. The worship of Bendis may have been instituted in Athens in support of this important alliance. "Do you see how many we are?" Polemarchus asks, playfully. "Certainly." "Well, then, either you must prove yourselves stronger than all these people or you will have to stay here." "Isn't there another alternative still: that we persuade you that you should let us go?" "But could you persuade us, if we won't listen?" Socrates is evidently on good terms with Polemarchus and the others. And yet, one is reminded through this interchange how people deaf to rational persuasion can band together and wield political power.

- How is persuasion different from coercion?

- Is it possible to persuade a person who refuses to listen?
- How does religious ceremony benefit people?
- When if ever are innovations in religion appropriate?

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2 Being Old

See [328b-329d](#). Cephalus, a native of the Greek city of Syracuse and a manufacturer of shields, immigrated to Athens nearly thirty years before the present conversation at the invitation of the influential Athenian politician Pericles. (We know this from the [text](#) of a speech his son Lysias makes before the Athenian assembly in 403 BCE.) He is wealthy, and although not recognized as a citizen of Athens, he has over the years been a prominent financial contributor to the city, funding dramatic performances for religious festivals and giving to the many emergency levies occasioned by the war. Socrates asks him what it is like to be old. He replies that, in his case, old age has brought “peace and freedom” from the appetites of the flesh – from the longings for the pleasures of “sex, drinking parties, feasts, and the other things that go along with them.” Being old “is only moderately onerous,” he says, for the person who is “orderly and contented.”

- What is it to be orderly and contented?
- Is being orderly and contented possible for a young person who feels keenly the appetites of the flesh?
- Can a person be orderly and contented whose brain has significantly deteriorated through one of the progressive dementias not uncommon among the elderly?
- What is the relation between desires and happiness? Do desires contribute to happiness, do they get in the way, or do they do both?
- Are Cephalus and the poet Sophocles right that freedom from sexual desire is desirable?
- Can a very old person be happy, human physical limitations being what they are? In what might the happiness of such a person consist?

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3 Treasure for Heaven

See [329d-331b](#). Cephalus suggests that a certain amount of wealth is needed to bear old age easily: not just to secure the basic comforts of life, but to help us prepare for the afterlife. The traditional stories of the afterlife have it that justice is rewarded and injustice punished. One good thing about wealth is that it keeps us from needing to be unjust: from having to cheat or deceive others in pursuit of money, and from having to die with unpaid debts.

- Does the pursuit of money ever require a person to cheat or deceive others?
- Consider one of the basic rules of commerce, “Buy cheap, sell dear.” Can a person live by this rule and remain just?
- Is there any reason to believe that gods exist, and that they care about or are in any way influenced by sacrifices (devotional religious practices)?
- Is there any reason to believe there will be an afterlife where justice is rewarded and injustice punished?
- Suppose we had reason to believe there are no rewards or punishments in an afterlife. Would we still have reason to be just?

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4 Giving What is Owed

See [331c-332b](#). Socrates wonders if Cephalus' ideas about rewards and punishments in the afterlife are based upon a true conception of justice, and he indicates a willingness to explore the matter. Cephalus, however, would rather return to the public celebration, and so he hands the conversation over to his eldest son Polemarchus who is eager to continue. As a starting point, Polemarchus proposes a definition offered by the poet Simonides: justice is giving to each what is owed to him. This doesn't mean that justice requires returning a borrowed weapon to a dangerously insane friend. It means, he thinks, that to our friends we owe "something good . . . never something bad," but to our enemies we owe "something bad."

- Is justice "to give to each what is owed to him"?
- Polemarchus thinks we owe friends and enemies completely different things. Do you agree? What about other differences between people? Do husbands owe different things to wives than wives owe husbands? Do children owe different things to adults than adults owe children? Do we owe our children different things than we owe other people's children? Do we owe older people different things than we owe younger people? Do we owe our neighbors different things than we owe people in far away lands?
- It is sometimes said that justice requires us to treat people equally. What does this mean? Is it true?
- Is there anything that we owe to each and every person?

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5 The Craft of Justice

See [332b-334b](#). Seeking a deeper understanding of justice, Socrates invites Polemarchus to compare justice to a wide range of crafts (*techne* in the Greek), each of which involves a distinctive way of being knowledgeable and effective in the world: medicine, cooking, seamanship, farming, shoemaking, checker playing, house building, vine pruning, lyre playing, horse breeding, boat building, and soldiering. Supposing for the sake of argument that the just person benefits friends and harms enemies, the question then is what ways of benefiting and harming are characteristic of justice. What, in other words, does the just person know how to do insofar as he or she is just? Polemarchus struggles to come up with a good answer. At first he suggests that the just person is characteristically knowledgeable and effective in “wars and alliances.” But when Socrates asks about justice in peacetime, he changes his mind and says that the just person’s area of expertise is entering into business partnerships. The inquiry then turns to determining the aspect about which a just person is more knowledgeable and effective than someone with expert knowledge about the actual goods or services being traded. Regarding the business of buying and selling horses, for instance, to have mastered the craft of horse breeding is plainly relevant and helpful. But what good is having mastered justice? Polemarchus ends up saying that justice is characteristically useful when it comes to safeguarding deposited money, that it is not especially useful when it comes to actually using money, and that, as a craft, justice must be similar to stealing, in that guardians of money and thieves of money need to know the same sorts of things. But he admits to being confused about this. “. . . I do not know anymore what I meant.”

- In what ways are just people characteristically more knowledgeable and effective than unjust people? What does justice enable a person to do?
- Crafts can be taught. A master cook, for instance, can take an apprentice under her wing and, in time, teach him how to cook. Can justice similarly be taught?
- Certain people appear to have special gifts (talents) for certain crafts. There

are gifted cooks, gifted musicians, and so on. They work hard at what they do, but they appear to achieve more than most of us would for the time and effort they put in. Are some people similarly gifted at being just?

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6 Benefiting Friends and Harming Enemies

See [334c-336a](#). Socrates first convinces Polemarchus to change his definition of justice from benefiting friends (apparent friends) and harming enemies (apparent enemies) to benefiting good people (true friends) and harming bad people (true enemies); for the mark of a true friend is goodness, the mark of a true enemy is badness, apparent friends are not always true friends, and apparent enemies are not always true enemies. But he then convinces Polemarchus to drop the part about harming enemies. The argument for this is as follows: Justice is “human virtue” – that which makes us excellent as human beings. And to harm something, to truly harm it, is to damage it with respect to what makes it excellent. So if justice were to involve harming one’s enemies, then it would involve damaging them with respect to what makes them excellent. This would mean that justice involves making people unjust, which seems impossible. Therefore, justice may be a matter of benefiting (making more just) good people (our true friends) but it is not a matter of harming (making less just) bad people (our true enemies).

- Suppose someone were to present the following argument to Socrates: It is just to punish criminals. Punishment causes suffering. Suffering is a kind of harm. Therefore it is sometimes just to harm people. How do you suppose Socrates would reply? (He is going to share his opinion on this matter, in passing, at [380b](#). For a longer treatment, see [476e-480d](#) in the dialogue *Gorgias*.)
- Is justice the entirety of human virtue – does it in some way encompass all the human excellences – or is it only a part of virtue?
- Suppose someone were to present the following argument to Socrates: There is much more to excelling as a human being than justice. There is, for instance, being aggressively competitive. This is a character trait that has often been admired in human beings, particularly in men. (The heroes of Homer’s *Iliad* come to mind.) But this virtue involves in its very nature competing with and triumphing over others. To triumph over someone – be it in warfare, or business, or love – is to harm them. Therefore human virtue

is not incompatible with harming people. How do you suppose Socrates would reply?

- The conversation between Polemarchus and Socrates is about to be sharply interrupted. But consider what Polemarchus might have come up with were he to have gone on to revise his definition of justice yet again. Where does their conversation seem to be heading?

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7 The Advantage of the Stronger

See [336b-339a](#). Socrates, famous in his day for the brilliance of his conversation, is in the house of Cephalus at the invitation of Polemarchus, who is likely to have known when he invited him that [Thrasymachus](#) would also be present. Indeed, getting the two of them together may have been his intention. Thrasymachus is a visiting sophist – a paid teacher of rhetoric and wisdom – who is in Athens from his native city of Chalcedon in the northeast corner of the Greek world to ply his trade and find buyers for his lessons. He is also a well-known man of words, but quite different from Socrates in philosophical orientation. Thrasymachus sees Socrates as a rival, and is irritated at the cheerful skill with which he instructs Polemarchus and wins him over to his way of thinking. (That Socrates is doing this for free may also contribute to his irritation.) Bursting in upon the discussion, he accuses Socrates of asking questions and refuting answers not out of a genuine interest in the truth about justice but in an effort to best others and win admirers. Socrates denies the charges, and professes to have no definition of his own significantly different from the sort of thing Thrasymachus rules out as “nonsense”: vague definitions such as “the right, the beneficial, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous.” Thrasymachus claims to possess the truth about justice – a better answer – which he is willing to share, but only for a price. Glaucon and the others quickly agree to pay. “Justice,” he announces, “is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger.” Every city is ruled by some one individual or group of individuals, these rulers make the laws, and the laws are designed to benefit the rulers themselves. Since justice is defined by the laws, justice is whatever the rulers make it, as they shape society to their own advantage.

- Has there ever been a time when it was just to own people as slaves? Plainly there have been times when it has been legal and not uncommon to own [slaves](#). (Recall that it is Polemarchus’ slave, not Polemarchus himself, who runs up to Socrates in the street.) But is this justice? “Yes, of course,” Thrasymachus would say; for on his view, justice is whatever the laws demand, and plainly there have been laws defining slaves as property, laws

demanding that slaves obey their masters, and so on.

- Is it possible for a law to be unjust? Can Thrasymachus make sense of the idea of an unjust law?
- As Thrasymachus sees it, is it good for a person to be just?
- What, in truth, is advantageous to a person?

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8 The Good Shepherd

See [339a-348b](#). Returning to talk of crafts, Socrates attempts to get Thrasymachus to accept the proposition that “it is inappropriate for any craft to consider what is advantageous for anything besides that with which it deals.” The craft of [medicine](#), for instance, properly seeks only what is advantageous to a patient’s body. The craft of ruling a city, by analogy, would properly seek only what is advantageous to the citizens. Thrasymachus replies that Socrates is forgetting a craft that makes a better analogy to ruling a city: sheep farming. The shepherd cares for his sheep, to be sure, but only so that he may shear them for wool and slaughter their lambs. Likewise, the ruler of a city keeps the peace, organizes religious festivals, manages the economy, and so on, because this is how an intelligent shepherd of the people gets the most out of his citizens. Farming and ruling are both essentially crafts of exploitation. Socrates replies that just as the craft of medicine and the craft of wage-earning are distinct (not that physicians don’t receive payment for their services), so too with the other crafts. What it is to be a good shepherd, for instance, is distinct from what it is to make money. (What goes in our day by the name of “agribusiness” are two crafts, not one.) And so too when it comes to ruling cities – it is one thing to rule a city well, another thing entirely to benefit oneself in particular.

- What kind of a craft is sheep farming? Does the shepherd truly seek what is in the best interests of the sheep? On the one hand, he looks to the sheep’s food, water, health, and safety. On the other hand, he selects which rams couple with which ewes, and slaughters for meat any animals, young or old, that aren’t necessary for maintaining or improving the flock. When the shepherd cares for his sheep, does he treat them as ends in themselves, as conscious beings with interests different in kind but in some sense equal to his own, or does he regard them entirely as means to his own ends?
- When politicians nowadays in liberal democracies like the United States do what they do in order to maintain high approval ratings and win re-election, what sort of craft are they practicing? Who are they benefiting?

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9 The Blushing Argument

See [348b-350d](#). Thrasymachus admits explicitly that he thinks it preferable to be an unjust person and above the laws than a just person and bound by them. Socrates then proceeds, by force of argument, to bring him to admit that unjust people are “ignorant and bad.” The key premise occurs at [350a-b](#) when they agree that “in any branch of knowledge or ignorance . . . a good and wise person does not want to do better than someone like himself, but someone both unlike and opposite to him.” Socrates seems to have in mind something like this: Suppose you are an expert – in obstetrics, let’s say – and you encounter someone not so good in your area of expertise. If you see them botching up a delivery, you will want to step in and say, “Wait a minute, stop, let me show you how it’s done.” You will want to uphold the standards of excellence of your craft and do better than the incompetent person. If, however, the other person is also an expert, you may attend the delivery, but you won’t be stepping in and correcting them. Socrates thinks that all true experts are like this, including expert rulers. Only incompetent people are so stupid as to try to outdo competent people. And so, since unjust people – and tyrants above all – are indiscriminate with respect to whom they try to outdo, they are stupid. Thrasymachus blushes in irritation and humiliation, but he remains unconvinced.

- What about athletes? Don’t good athletes try to do better than one another? And don’t we admire the amateur athletes who compete with and occasionally beat the professionals? Similarly, don’t good generals strive to outdo one another on the battlefield? Shouldn’t they? Isn’t warfare by its very nature competitive? What about people involved in commercial enterprises? Is it right to describe competition among good companies as “ignorant and bad”?
- What has Socrates’ argument achieved so far, beyond irritating and perhaps humiliating someone? Has Thrasymachus learned anything? Have we?
- The *Republic* is Plato’s composition. That Plato realizes Socrates has offered a weak defense of his position becomes clear at the beginning of

Book II when he has Glaucon say as much. Why then does he have Socrates give a weak argument in the first place? What is Plato inviting us to do?

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10 Function, Virtue, and the Soul

See [350d-354c](#). Notice in particular how Socrates uses the terms “function” and “virtue.” These terms (*ergon* and *arete*) were a perfectly [standard](#) way in Plato’s day to talk about the goodness of things. The function of a thing is the thing’s characteristic activity. The function of a knife, for instance, is to cut. The virtue or excellence of a thing is the quality that enables the thing to perform its function well. Some of the virtues of a knife are therefore being sharp, being hard, and having a handle that is easy to grasp firmly. Or consider an organ of the body such as the eye. Its function is to enable us to see. Its virtues are therefore those qualities that enable us to see well at various distances, under various lighting conditions, and so on. Now in this passage Socrates suggests that the human soul (*psyche*), the conscious, active aspect of a person, has a function: “taking care of things, ruling, deliberating, and all other such things,” or more generally, “living.” Human virtue is therefore whatever enables us to carry out our function well. Recalling that they had identified human virtue as justice ([335c](#)), Socrates concludes that it is justice that enables us [to live well](#).

- Do you agree that your soul has a function, an activity characteristic of the kind of thing you are? Are you, in this respect, like a knife or an eye?
- If there is something you are *for*, then what is it? What kind of a thing are you? What would it be to do the human-being-thing well? Are there human virtues, in the classical Greek sense?
- If we are the sort of thing that has a function, do we all have the same function? Do people with considerable brain damage, for instance, have the same function (and the same corresponding virtues) as people whose brains are healthy? Do men have the same function and virtues as women? Do people in our day have the same function and virtues as people thousands of years ago?
- What about thieves? Do thieves have a function different from other people? Socrates suggests at 351c-d that justice is necessary even in a band of thieves if they are to be successful in achieving their ends. (There may

be no honor among thieves, but there has to be a certain amount of “friendship and a sense of common purpose.”) Would Thrasymachus consider thief-justice a virtue?

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Book II

11 The Division of Goods

See [357a-358d](#). Glaucon thinks Thrasymachus has given in too readily, and so, showing his characteristic courage, he reopens the discussion. He has Socrates consider how good things may be divided into three classes: (1) things desired for their own sake but not for their consequences, (2) things desired both for their own sake and for their consequences, and (3) things desired for their consequences but not for their own sake. What kind of good is justice? Socrates places it in (2). Most people, Glaucon says, place it in (3). So he asks Socrates if he would be willing to defend his view.

- How can reopening a discussion show courage?
- What is it to desire, welcome, or love something “for its own sake”? Is it simply to find the thing pleasurable, or is there more to it than this?
- Do you consider justice something at all desirable for its own sake?
- Consider courage by way of comparison. Plainly it is desirable for its consequences. It gives people the emotional strength to confront fears and temptations and do what needs to be done. But is it desirable for its own sake? Which is it more like: being healthy, which in addition to enabling us to do things is itself pleasant (feels good), or being immune to an antigen, desirable only to the extent that the antigen poses a threat? Besides the benefits that come from doing what needs to be done, is there a kind of satisfaction that comes simply from being courageous?

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12 The Social Contract Theory of Justice

See [358d-359b](#). How, asks Glaucon, do most people understand justice? As a prudent compromise. Human beings have a natural desire to have their way at others' expense. But the badness of suffering injustice exceeds the goodness of doing it to such an extent that people generally find it "profitable to come to an agreement" (a "[social contract](#)," to use the language of modern political theory) and restrict injustice through legislation, law enforcement, courts, and corrections (what we call nowadays "the justice system"). Living under the law is not desirable for its own sake, and may at times be a nuisance, but it is better than having to struggle in a lawless free-for-all.

- Suppose, having grown weary of the social contract, one were to travel to a distant planet and forcibly enslave its inhabitants – gentle, intelligent creatures, in other respects very similar to human beings. Having left the law behind, would there be anything unjust in one's behavior?
- What is the relation between law and justice? Does law create justice or merely help achieve it?
- Imagine a group of people stranded on a desert island. (You might consider the situation in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, if you are familiar with the [story](#).) If they don't set up a system of law, will they inevitably slip into injustice? Does peace, cooperation, and mutual respect among persons require government?

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13 The Magic Ring

See [359b-360d](#). Glaucon tells the story of the Lydian shepherd, ancestor of Gyges, who finds a ring that makes him invisible, enabling him to do injustice with impunity. The shepherd makes his way to the palace, seduces the queen, kills the king, and seizes the throne. Glaucon asks whether a just person with such a ring would not eventually follow the same path as an unjust person.

- If a just person could get away with injustice, could be absolutely undetectable to friends, to enemies, to the law, to spirits, to angels, to any conceivable god or goddess (however absurd this may be theologically) – if a person could do injustice with absolute impunity, would there be any reason not to?
- Suppose only one nation possessed nuclear weapons and the capability to deploy them world-wide. Would this nation have any reason not to use its unique capability to have its way in international relations – to secure cheap natural resources, to pressure other nations to adopt political systems it considers congenial, to open overseas markets for its exports, and so on?
- Is the tendency of power to corrupt people good reason to set term limits for politicians, and in international relations, to oppose any nation's hegemony?
- Does power inevitably corrupt?
- Does a usurper like the Lydian shepherd become the rightful ruler of the nation? What is it to be a rightful ruler other than to be in power?

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14 The Challenge

See [360e-362c](#). Socrates thinks that justice is desirable, not only for its consequences, but also for its own sake. Most people grant only that it is desirable for its consequences. So Glaucon asks Socrates to prove that justice is desirable for its own sake. But in order to be absolutely sure that Socrates doesn't end up appealing in his argument to subtle consequences such as the pleasure people take in being admired as a righteous person in an unrighteous world, Glaucon asks him to prove, in addition, that a just person with a false reputation for injustice – “whipped, stretched on a rack, chained, blinded with a red-hot iron, and . . . impaled” for crimes he did not commit – is actually *happier* than an unjust person with a false reputation for justice, someone rich, powerful, apparently serving and cared for by the gods, loved by his friends, and respected by his enemies. In other words, Socrates is asked to prove not only that justice is desirable for its own sake, but that it is overwhelmingly desirable, more worth pursuing for its own sake than death by torture is worth avoiding. This is a remarkable challenge, and it elicits a remarkable reply. The conclusion is not reached until Book IX.

- Can you meet this challenge? On the one hand there is the undetected crime boss, living in his comfortable seaside home, doing what he loves to do (managing his business partnerships), going sailing in his spare time, looked up to by his neighbors for his civic involvement and generous support of local charities, his carefully laundered investments earning steady returns. On the other hand there is the just man, a city council member (and the only one not taking bribes), striving to uphold the dignity of the unfortunate people being trod underfoot by the mob boss and his organization, framed for a hideous crime he did not commit, caught, beaten, spat upon, tried, and facing crucifixion. Which man is happier?
- Some people suppose that the mob boss will eventually suffer from a bad conscience and be miserable. What is a conscience? Does everyone have one? Does conscience cause everyone to feel [guilty](#) about the same things to the same degree?

- There is a [scene](#) in chapter 16 of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* where Huck, having decided not to turn his friend Jim in to the authorities – Jim is an escaped slave on the run – finds himself full of guilt for what he has chosen to do. He knows what he ought to do: turn Jim in. Jim is a slave, and Jim's owner, old Miss Watson, is a decent white woman. But Huck just can't bring himself to do it, and so his conscience haunts him. What does justice call for Huck to do in this case? What is Huck's conscience doing in this case? Is conscience always a force for good in life?

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15 The Teaching of Justice

See [362c-367e](#). Adeimantus approves of his brother Glaucon's challenge and joins him in urging Socrates to explain how justice "because of itself" benefits a person. He explicitly asks for something more than a mere "argument that justice is stronger than injustice." What he means by this is not entirely clear, but Socrates presumably needs to do more than define justice as human virtue, point out that virtue is necessarily beneficial and injustice necessarily harmful, and leave it at that. He needs to explain what the benefit is – what there is to appreciate in being just – even when one finds oneself universally despised. A further point that Adeimantus thinks Glaucon could have mentioned in setting out the argument for the other side concerns moral education. How are children taught to be just? Parents do not praise justice itself, in fact, but all the good things that eventually come from being thought just: rewards that flow from the esteem of other people and the gods. The way we teach our children suggests that we believe in our hearts that justice is a valuable means to further ends, not that it is itself pleasant or in any way directly desirable.

- What reason should children be given for being just? Any reason? ("Because I said so, that's why." "Because that's how we behave." "Because justice pays." "Because if you don't, you're going to get it.")
- Can a child be taught to love justice for its own sake? If so, how?
- "Would you like it if someone did that to you?" This is generally recognized as a useful rhetorical question to put to a child one is teaching to be good. But what is its point? If it is for children to come to think that harming others will make it more likely that others will harm them – if the point is to get the children to fear reciprocation – then it is not at all clear that the question gets them any closer to valuing justice for its own sake. What other point might asking the question have?
- Is it sensible to try to teach children to value justice for its own sake through a system of rules, rewards, and punishments? At first glance this seems wrong, for rewards and punishments coming from others are plainly

consequences distinct from justice itself, and it appears unhelpful to teach children to be mindful of such things when it is the value of justice itself that one is trying to get them to appreciate. And yet, consider how musicianship is traditionally taught. Parents insist through a system of rewards and punishments (some subtle, some less so) that their children regularly practice their musical instruments. Step by step, year after year, it continues: scales, simple etudes, short pieces, harder etudes, more complex pieces, simple duets, more difficult scales, more complex chamber music, and so on. The idea is that what begins under a regime of incentives as awkward and ugly and frustrating will come in time to be loved for itself – a language through which the child can freely give shape and voice to emotions and thoughts otherwise inexpressible. But it generally goes without saying that musicianship is desirable for its own sake. Is there anything to love for its own sake in justice?

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16 Glaucon's Lover

See [368a](#). Not that this has a direct bearing on the argument that Socrates is about to launch into, but it may be interesting to note that Glaucon is homosexually inclined, and though now a full-grown man, he had in his youth been the beloved of an adult male lover (*erastes*). Passages later in the dialogue ([402d-403c](#) and [474d-475a](#)) show how easily what we now consider the high crime of pederasty entered into conversation in Socrates' day, and how apparently normal and harmless this sort of behavior was [considered](#). The passage at 402d-403c recommends moderation in the relationship, but otherwise there is no indication of censure, shame, or guilt.

- Is it unjust for a man to seduce and make love to a teenage boy? The answer to this question may seem obvious to you, but then again, maybe you need to know more. Do you need to know more about the nature of justice, or about the relationship between lover and beloved?
- If you do consider homosexual pederasty unjust, is it something that is, has always been, and always will remain unjust, or is it something that may well have been just in Socrates' day but happens not to be so any longer?
- Some people have suggested (indeed, Thrasymachus has already insisted with respect to justice) that moral claims are true or false only in specific cultural settings – at given times, in given places. This is a position in ethics sometimes called “cultural relativism.” Suppose you were going to try to argue against cultural relativism. How would you make your case?

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17 From Souls to Cities

See [368a-369b](#). Socrates' first step in addressing the challenge is to figure out what it is for a person to be just. But this is tricky, because, while you can observe a person's actions easily enough, their thoughts, desires, intentions and so on are internal and difficult to observe. So how is one to identify this particular virtue of the soul, justice? By studying cities. Cities are made up of souls – of individual persons, skilled in various ways, working together, to some extent, for the common good. The conflicts, deliberations, and decisions relevant to the nature of justice are more out in the open. So Socrates proposes to devise an imaginary just city and then to study it. His hope is that justice will be easier to identify in the city, and that, having defined it there, they will be able to define it in the soul. This first step in the argument is not completed until the end of Book IV.

- Does the word that gets translated “justice,” *dikaiosune*, mean one thing in the context of cities and something different in the context of souls? Consider how the English word “bank” means one thing in the context of rivers and something quite different in the world of finance. If the Greek *dikaiosune* were similarly ambiguous, then Socrates' proposal to study cities for insight into souls may be deeply confused. What reasons might he have for believing that cities and souls are relevantly similar?

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18 Making the Most of Differences

See [369b-372c](#). In setting up the city, Socrates notes that “we are not all born alike,” but “each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one job, another to another.” Ideally then, each citizen is to do a job in the city for which he or she is ideally suited, so that the goods and services each provides for the others will be of the highest quality. Citizens will obviously benefit from this arrangement as consumers, but presumably also as producers; for people generally enjoy doing what they can do well, provided their work is appreciated and they are treated with respect. (Socrates doesn’t make this last point explicitly, but it stands to reason, and it will in fact be a crucial matter to consider when the time comes to judge whether this city is a desirable one to live in.)

- Is Socrates right that we are all better off if each of us specializes in a particular craft?
- Consider modern assembly line work. Would Socrates consider the performance of repetitive, relatively unskilled tasks a craft fit for human beings? Would he consider it a “craft” at all?
- How should people be selected to train for the various jobs needed by a city? Socrates doesn’t address this in the present passage, but it clearly is an important matter. His answer is going to be, roughly, that everything depends upon a high degree of wisdom in the city’s rulers. What in your opinion would a wise person look for when trying to match persons to jobs?
- What does it mean to have an aptitude for something? Is it possible to be good at something but hate doing it? What does it mean to be good at something?

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19 Luxuries in the City

See [372c-374a](#). Socrates and Glaucon decide their imaginary city is to be a luxurious one. The citizens aren't to eat just nourishing food, but to enjoy "high cuisine" (fish, sweets, and other unnecessary pleasure-foods). They aren't to sit on just anything, but to "recline on proper couches." They are to have "incense, perfumes, prostitutes, and pastries." They are to have sculpture and painting, music and dance, theater and jewelry, "tutors, wet nurses, nannies, beauticians, barbers, and relish cooks and meat cooks." And to cap it off, they are to have an army, for they will need to acquire and defend the land necessary to support such a city.

- Socrates considers the luxurious city to be "feverish" – unhealthy – and so it is a fair question why he agrees to take it on as the basis for his discussion of justice. It will eventually become clear that he has taken it on in much the same way a physician takes on a sick patient. (He describes what he is up to at 399e with a word that can be translated as "purification" or "purgation.") But why this approach? Why, if Socrates is searching for an understanding of the nature of justice, doesn't he focus instead on the simple, "healthy" city?
- What relation, if any, is there between wealth and force? Does ownership require an ability to defend one's possessions?
- What, if anything, do people need to own in order to flourish and be happy?

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20 The Good Soldier

See [374a-376e](#). For the remainder of Books II and III, they are going to be exploring the proper education of the “guardians,” the city’s military. The difficulty that motivates this extended discussion is that these people need to be courageous without becoming savage, defenders of the city without becoming menaces to the city. One does not have to read especially deeply or widely in history to appreciate how corrupting military power can be, and how reasonable their concern is.

- What sort of person is well-suited to be a soldier? Was it a different sort of a person in Socrates’ day, when wars were still fought primarily with [spear and shield](#), than it is at present, with our Zeus-like projectile weapons and supersonic flying machines?
- Are the qualities that make a good soldier any different from those that make a good police officer? Are policing and soldiering two different aspects of the same job or two entirely different jobs?
- Are the qualities that make a good political leader any different from those that make a good soldier? Are ruling and soldiering two different aspects of the same job or two entirely different jobs?

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21 Censoring Homer

See [376e-377d](#). They turn first to the sorts of things that should not appear in stories told to children being educated to serve as responsible guardians of the city. All but a few of the examples they are going to take up in Books II and III come from the narrative poems of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is hard to overestimate the importance of these poems to Greek culture in Socrates' day. Schoolchildren commonly committed them to memory, much as schoolchildren commit the Qur'an to memory nowadays in many of the more traditional communities in the Islamic world. And just as Jews have always drawn together as a community to share public readings of Torah, so too Greeks at the time of Socrates gathered for public recitations of Homer by people called rhapsodes. So the ease with which characters in Plato cite passages from Homer should come as no surprise. It would have been perfectly normal for an educated fifth century Athenian. Imagine then what it might have meant in Socrates' day to hold the Homeric poems up to criticism, to suggest that, uncensored, these poems are unfit for children being raised to be good. It bears remembering that Socrates was eventually sentenced to death by his fellow citizens on the charges of promoting unorthodox religious views and corrupting the youth.

- Is it ever good to restrict what children are allowed to do? Why or why not?
- Is it ever good to restrict what children are allowed to think and feel? Would you be in favor of sheltering children from stories describing the techniques and pleasures of sexual intercourse? From stories of rape? From stories of racial superiority and inferiority? From stories of mothers deliberately drowning their children? From stories of gods deliberately drowning other people's children, or slaying the firstborn of entire nations? Why or why not?

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22 Gods Causing Bad Things

See [377d-380c](#). Socrates thinks that, from an educational standpoint, some of the most important stories told to children are stories about the gods, for however powerful and distant the gods may be, people look up to them and aspire to be like them. The gods must for this reason always be represented as admirable and worthy of imitation, never as “warring, fighting, or plotting against one another,” never as being disrespectful to family members, and never as bringing evils down upon human beings. Socrates’ basic theological premise is that the gods are good – flawlessly good – and therefore never act in any way contrary to goodness.

- Do teachers or coaches who assign their students uncomfortably challenging tasks harm them? It has sometimes been suggested that, like a teacher or coach, God causes (or deliberately allows) suffering in the short term for the sake of benefit in the long run, here or in another life. Socrates would presumably accept this as possible, but he would no doubt insist, in stories that refer to suffering caused by the gods, that the good intentions of the gods be made clear, lest people, and in particular those who are impressionably young, get the wrong idea. Consider for instance *Exodus 4:21*, where God, speaking in his own voice, tells Moses that he is going to “stiffen” Pharaoh’s heart when Moses returns to Egypt seeking deliverance for the children of Israel. It does not appear in the passage that God cares for the repentance of Pharaoh or for the welfare of the Egyptian people. And this, Socrates would say, is a problem. If God means well and does not intend to harm the Egyptians in the long run, then the poet ought to make this clear. Do you agree? (Incidentally, notice how the *Exodus* passage is similar to the one Socrates cites from Aeschylus at [380a](#): “A god makes mortals guilty, when he wants to destroy a house utterly.”)
- Is the uncensored Bible appropriate reading material for children being raised to be good?
- What is it to be a god? Is it to be flawlessly good? Consider Anselm’s celebrated [definition](#) from the 11th century: “a being than which no greater

can be conceived.” Is this what you understand a god to be?

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23 Gods in Disguise or Speaking Falsely

See [380d-383c](#). Socrates argues that the gods should be represented neither as taking on disguises nor as misleading people with falsehoods. These are two separate but related points. Because the gods are flawlessly good, they are, in every conceivable respect, in the best condition. So a change of any sort would be for them a change for the worse. Disguises are therefore out of the question. And being perfect, the gods would never have a reason to speak falsely. They are not ignorant of the truth, they have no enemies they need to deceive, and they have no friends or family members who, being ignorant or insane, might benefit from a mollifying or therapeutic lie.

- What is it to be “best in every way”? Is a being in such a condition incapable of any sort of change at all? What about responding emotionally to works of art or to the joys and sorrows of other persons? Does perfection rule this out? (“Yes” is the answer most commonly given by the medieval philosophical theologians: God, being perfect, is necessarily “impassive” – incapable of being harmed or in any other way moved emotionally.)
- How might a Christian philosophical theologian reply to the objection that God, being perfect, could never have taken on the limitations of human form (“the Incarnation”), as this would have involved limiting (weakening and making vulnerable) that which, of necessity, cannot be limited? Is having to eat, sleep, and so on consistent with being “best in every way”?
- Is having friends who are ignorant or insane inconsistent with being “best in every way”?

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Book III

24 Fear and Grief

See [386a-388e](#). Socrates expands their discussion of censorship to include the poetic characterization of heroes. By “heroes” he means those men and women, superhuman but mortal, who are so prominent in Homeric epic and Greek mythology generally, persons such as Achilles, Helen, Sarpedon, and Aeneas, who come into the world as a result of the union of gods and humans. (The distinction between “heroes” and “humans” gets made explicitly at [391d](#).) Again, the point is that, because gods and heroes are looked up to, it is important for them to be presented as worthy of admiration and imitation. Socrates and the others agree that the guardians “are to be free and to fear slavery more than death.” But if so, then Achilles should not be allowed to say things like that he would rather be a slave than king over the dead. Death should not be presented as a bad thing for a good person to suffer. But then poets should not present gods or heroes grieving on the occasion of a loved one’s death as if this were appropriate behavior for a virtuous person. What message does it send for Achilles to be wandering the beach in anguish, crying for his friend Patroclus even after the funeral has ended? Or for Zeus, king of the gods, to be lamenting the fate of his son Sarpedon? Socrates is open to the possibility of someone defending the propriety of grieving for the dead ([388e](#)), but in the absence of a convincing argument for this view, he urges that the passages be struck, and death not be presented to the young guardians-to-be as a terrible thing, deserving of fear or grief.

- Is it bad to die? If so, how bad is it? If not, why is it feared?
- What is wrong with a guardian fearing death more than slavery?
- Grief is a common enough response to the death of a loved one. But is it ever appropriate in an ideally virtuous person? Is it beneficial?
- Suppose you believed that, upon death, a person’s soul goes on to a better life. If a friend of yours were to die, would it be wrong for you to grieve?

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25 Laughter and Lying

See [388e-389d](#). Socrates' next two recommendations are puzzling. The first suggests that "violent laughter" be avoided lest "a violent reaction" result. The second suggests that permission to tell lies be denied to most citizens, but granted "as a form of drug" to the city's rulers. With respect to the point about laughter, he may have in mind what he was saying at the end of Book II about gods being perfect and therefore incapable of change of any sort, including presumably violent changes of mood. On this interpretation, Socrates is thinking that the guardians should, ideally, be raised to be as godlike as possible, steady and decisive in their judgments and feelings. But he may also be intending to criticize and reject a particular kind of laughter – the callous sort that comes of unjustly ridiculing others. In the passage he quotes from the *Iliad*, the craft-god Hephaestus, who has a noticeable limp, is described as causing the other gods to burst into "unquenchable laughter." To ridicule persons because of their physical handicaps is bad enough, but what is so particularly and grossly unjust in this case is that Hephaestus is doing his best to bring reconciliation and peace between Zeus and Hera, Zeus having just threatened to strangle her. Moreover, Hephaestus' limp, the trigger for all this laughter, was acquired as a result of his having been hurled to earth by Zeus the last time he rose to his mother's defense (see *Iliad*, [I.586-594](#)). So what Socrates may be thinking is that to laugh in this way at such a person in such a situation is to lose one's ethical bearings – something no god could ever do, and no guardian should ever do. With respect to the recommendation about giving permission to lie, this is puzzling because dishonesty seems inconsistent with justice. That rulers should be permitted to lie to enemies in *ruse de guerre* situations is one thing (see [382c](#)), but how can it be just to deceive one's fellow citizens? We will have occasion to consider what Socrates has in mind when he begins to offer examples, the first of which comes at the end of Book III. While it is not entirely clear at present to what extent he approves of the deliberate use of falsehoods, it is clear that for a falsehood to be acceptable it has to be properly authorized, and it has to be prescribed for the good of the city.

- Can a distinction be made between good laughter and bad laughter?
- Do wise people laugh differently, or at different things, than foolish people?
- Can you imagine a situation in which it would be right for the rulers of a city to tell lies to their fellow citizens?

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26 Lust, Wrath, and Greed

See [389d-392c](#). Rounding out their discussion of gods and heroes in poetry, Socrates takes up three ways in which the virtue of temperance (*sophrosune*) is sometimes handled correctly by the poets, but all too often is ignored. He praises Homer for the way he describes Diomedes restraining the wrath of one of his subordinates, and Odysseus holding back his own wrath. But he criticizes Homer for describing Achilles giving in to a long, bloody rage that transgresses the bounds of decency and piety. This sort of thing should not be in stories for young people being raised to value self-control. Nor should Achilles be described as caring so much about material prizes and ransom money. Nor should Zeus be described as losing track of his plans, overcome with sexual desire. Never should gods or heroes be presented in such a way that it appears possible for them to be dominated by irrational desires. As for how ordinary human beings should be characterized in poetry, the topic gets put off until after Glaucon's challenge has been met. They return to it in Book X.

- When people complain nowadays about children being exposed to too much sex and violence, is the problem sex and violence, or lust and wrath?
- Should parents be as concerned about exposing children to wealth as they are about exposing them to sex and violence?
- Lust, wrath, and greed tend to make for highly entertaining stories. Why is this? Can temperance be similarly entertaining, or is there something essentially boring about this virtue?

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27 Narrative Style and Personal Integrity

See [392c-398b](#). Some stories are told entirely through the words and gestures of the characters depicted. Other stories are told entirely in the voice of the poet. Still other stories have a mix of styles, the poet sometimes speaking in his or her own voice, the characters sometimes speaking in their own voices. Plays are of the first sort. Many songs are of the second sort. And epic poems fall into the third category. Which narrative style, Socrates asks, is best suited for the poems that the guardians-in-training are to study? He recommends a version of the third, mixed style: “when a moderate man comes upon the words or actions of a good man in the course of a narration, he will be willing to report them as if he were that man himself” and quote the man directly; but “when he comes upon a character who is beneath him . . . he will be unwilling to make himself resemble this inferior character.” Socrates bases his recommendation upon the principle that every citizen is to do one and only one job, a single craft or integrated cluster of crafts. In keeping with this idea, each citizen should have an integrated moral character. No one should be fickle or moody – passionate about an issue one day, indifferent the next, abstemious one day, drunk the next. Everyone should understand, appreciate, and remain who and what they are. Literary education, therefore, should support and not undermine one’s personal integrity. Recall that young people in Socrates’ day would have memorized the poems they studied by reciting them aloud, probably with feeling and expression, perhaps also with gestures. In this way, the first-person voices woven into the fabric of the poems would have been brought to life by the student again and again. Socrates assumes that imitative playacting of this sort cannot help but influence a person’s character. Hence his proscriptions.

- To what extent are professional actors affected in their private lives by the roles they take on?
- To what extent do children become like the persons they imitate through playacting?
- Suppose someone were to object that the intimacy of first-person narration,

far from corrupting young people, helps them imagine and appreciate what it is like to suffer from a moral vice, and that this is not something they are likely to find appealing afterwards. How might Socrates reply?

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28 The Emotional Power of Tune and Rhythm

See [398c-400e](#). Unfortunately, no text adequately explaining the details of the Greek musical modes (*harmoniai*) survives from the time of Plato. What scholars have been able to piece together with a reasonable degree of certainty is that musicians considered the intervals of the fourth (e.g., c – f) and the fifth (e.g., c – g) “consonant,” that these two intervals, but especially the [fourth](#), structured their scales, determining the top, middle, and bottom notes (see 443d), and that the notes falling between the upper and lower ends of the fourth varied according to the particular mode. (It also appears that the modes make considerable use of [quartertunes](#), notes that fall between adjacent keys on a piano. If it were possible for us to go back in time and listen to this music, accustomed as we are to the conventions of Western music, we might be surprised at its strangeness.) Although descriptions of the musical modes come down to us from late antiquity, quite detailed in some respects, scholars dispute whether the terms used in the *Republic* and the terms used in these texts refer to the same things. And even if they do, no one knows which notes in a given mode would have been emphasized, or in what sequence they would have been played, or with what rhythm, or in what tempo. So when Socrates talks about music in “the mixo-Lydian” or “the syntono-Lydian” we just have to accept that we do not know, and may never know, what sounds he has in mind. That said, the gist of his thought is straightforward enough. The patterns of rhythm and pitch that constitute what we human beings recognize as music have a great power to affect our emotions. And different musical patterns affect the soul differently. For a simple example (simple for our ears), compare the C major scale, c – d – e – f – g – a – b – c, to what has sometimes been called the “gypsy scale,” c – d – e flat – f sharp – g – a flat – b – c. Notice how the long interval between e flat and f sharp stirs up a kind of tension or restlessness in the soul that cannot be achieved in C major. Socrates’ idea is that the harmonic modes and rhythmic meters “imitate” various sorts of people. Just as words and gestures are able to call to mind a person’s actions and thoughts, tunes and rhythms are able to call to mind a person’s emotions. (Consider how directors use music in movies nowadays. We can only speculate

about how the Greek dramatists used it in their theater productions.) And so, just as we should be concerned about the influence of verbal imitation on the guardians-in-training, we should be concerned about the effect on their souls of tunes and rhythms. They should be encouraged not only to act, outwardly, like virtuous people, but also to feel like them within. Socrates thinks two sorts of music should suffice: one that imitates a person courageously standing up to danger or misfortune, and one that imitates a temperate person who calmly persuades others or is in turn persuaded by them.

- How is it that music is able to stir us emotionally in so many different ways? Is Socrates right that it works through imitation? Is there resemblance between people and music?
- Can music encourage a person to live a life of virtue, helping them feel what it is like to live such a life?
- Can music have a corrupting effect on a person, causing them to have feelings in tension with living a life of virtue?
- Suppose someone were to object that emotions have nothing to do with being a good person. What matters instead is whether or not a person acts dutifully, duty being a matter not of following what feels right, but of commanding oneself to do what reason determines is right. How might Socrates reply?

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29 Love of the Fine and Beautiful

See [400e-403c](#). The Greek word *kalon* (*kalos*, etc.) is translated differently in the same context by different people, and differently in different contexts by the same people. It is always a term of approbation (except in contexts of irony), but it appears in English sometimes as “beautiful,” sometimes as “fine,” sometimes as “good,” sometimes as “noble,” sometimes as “splendid,” sometimes as “excellent,” sometimes as “acceptable,” and sometimes as “right.” Later in the *Republic* (in Book V, [475e-476d](#), an important passage), Socrates is going to ask what it is in virtue of which the many *kalon* things are one thing, *kalon*, and it is standard practice to translate his answer as “beauty in itself” or “the beautiful itself.” Why then not consistently translate *kalon* as “beautiful”? The concern is that modern English speakers associate “beautiful” with what is supposed to be too narrow a class of objects – pretty faces, sunsets, Mozart’s music and the like – whereas the word *kalon* was used in Plato’s day to indicate appealing aspects of virtually anything: tools, games, approaches to education, religious processions (as in the second sentence of the *Republic*), dispositions of the soul, mathematical proofs, political arrangements, and so on. But it is debatable whether the refashioning of a single Greek word into several English words is helpful, particularly in this case. If there is something common to all *kalos* things, as Socrates is going to be arguing, then to split up references to this common property by using a variety of words is to invite the reader to lose track of an important point. Besides, the English word “beautiful” is applied more widely nowadays than is often recognized, roughly as widely as the Greeks applied the word *kalon*. When a computer makes a difficult task simple we say that it does it “beautifully.” A long touchdown pass in a difficult situation we call a “perfectly beautiful execution.” Well-designed business plans are said to be “beautifully thought through.” Chairs, bowls, and buildings, if elegant and functional, are said to be “beautiful.” And when it comes to persons, we recognize “inner beauty” as well as “outer beauty.” It may seem odd to suppose that so diverse a set of things could have something in common in virtue of which they all deserve to be called “beautiful,” but Socrates evidently believes this to be so and considers it an

important truth. In the present passage, he describes how enlightened craftsmen such as painters, weavers, and architects are to join the poets and musicians in creating for the guardians-in-training an ideally beautiful environment; “the influence exerted by those fine works” is to affect the senses “like a healthy breeze,” guiding them “from earliest childhood,” and without their being aware of the fact, “into being similar to, friendly toward, and concordant with the beauty of reason.” The idea is that a person can internalize “the beauty of reason” as a result of growing up in an environment pervaded by it. Having acquired the right tastes and distastes – a certain trained sensitivity to the presence or absence of beauty – while “he is still young, before he is able to grasp the reason . . . he will welcome the reason when it comes and recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself.” Socrates uses an analogy to hint at what he means here by being “able to grasp the reason.” Just as one doesn’t really know how to read until one knows the letters and how they can be combined to make words and phrases, one is not truly educated in music and poetry until one knows “the different forms of temperance, courage, generosity, high-mindedness, and all their kindred, and their opposites too, which are carried around everywhere,” and can “see them in the things in which they are, both themselves and their images.” This is noteworthy as the first statement in the *Republic* of a distinction that will ultimately be crucial to understanding Socrates’ reply to Glaucon’s challenge. We will have occasion later to consider it in greater detail, when it is set out more fully. For now, it is perhaps enough to see two things: first, that Socrates distinguishes between “forms” of things and “images” of things; and second, that Socrates thinks the knowledge of forms plays a role in the value judgments of a properly educated person similar to the role played in reading by a person’s knowledge of letters, i.e., a fundamental role. But knowledge of the forms is for a later stage of education. At present, the guardians-in-training are to acquire an appreciation of beauty at the level, not of reasoning, but of feelings. They are to be surrounded by beautiful things, and encouraged to love what is beautiful. Socrates describes and commends in this context a kind of interpersonal relationship that has at times been called “platonic love,” a drawing together in love of persons whose bodies and souls “share in the same pattern” of beauty. But it is a love that is not to suffer distortion through the “excessive pleasure” of sexual intercourse. However

sexually attractive the lovers may find one another, the point of this kind of love is to direct the soul away from beauty as it appears in the flesh and towards the pattern of beauty itself. Platonic love is described more fully in other dialogues, especially the *Lysis*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*.

- Does acquiring an appreciation for beauty make one a better person?
- When we speak of a person's "inner beauty," what is it that we have in mind? Is being morally virtuous what it is for a human soul to be beautiful?
- How are feelings and reason related? Notice that to be interested in something is, in a way, to care about it. Is reasoning a way of caring about things?
- Suppose someone were to object, in the spirit of Thrasymachus, that beauty is whatever the people in power make it. If the king and queen start wearing high-heeled shoes and powdered wigs, then high-heeled shoes and powdered wigs come to be recognized as beautiful. It may be the case that acquiring a taste for beauty typically precedes acquiring an understanding of beauty, but this is only because there is nothing more to understand about beauty than the conventions of the day. All this talk of coming to resemble and enter into harmony with the beauty of reason is a distraction from what's really going on here – cultural brainwashing. How might Socrates reply?

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30 Physical Training

See [403c-404e](#). The guardians need to be strong, alert, and resilient, “like sleepless hounds,” keen of sight and hearing, with a kind of health that adapts to the changes in temperature and diet typical of a soldier’s life in the field. To this end, Socrates recommends a regime of diet and exercise similar in kind to the training in music and poetry already described, the emphasis being on simplicity. They are to work out like athletes but keep to the simplest foods such as plain roasted meats. They are to avoid drunkenness, fancy dishes, and prostitutes.

- What if someone were to object that restricting experiences in the way Socrates recommends is no way to teach the kind of toughness he is looking for. If you someone to develop a cast iron stomach, then you should work as much variety into their diet as possible: hot and cold preparations, large and small portions, sweet dishes, peppery dishes, bland dishes, etc. The same goes for exercising the body. Long-distance running is fine, but sprinting should also be included, and pole vaulting, and racquetball, and swimming, and shot putt, and wrestling, and tightrope walking, and so on. In general, if the idea is to prepare people to cope with difficulties arising from changing conditions, then simplicity in diet and exercise is undesirable. How might Socrates reply? What value does he see in keeping diet and exercise simple?

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31 Doctors and Judges

See [405a-410a](#). The goal of medicine, Socrates argues, is to restore sick or injured people to health and active living, not to prolong pointless, inactive living. Life does not benefit people who cannot do their work, nor does it benefit their cities, and so it is appropriate to let people die who are suffering from incurable, incapacitating diseases. Capital punishment is, for the same reason, an appropriate sentence for people who are incurably unjust. If one is morally unfit to do one's work, then one has no proper place in the city. Socrates notices a certain basic similarity between doctors and judges. Doctors treat illness in the body; judges treat injustice in the soul. But while the best doctors "are not especially healthy by nature, and have themselves experienced the illnesses they treat," the opposite is true of judges, the best of whom do not discover what injustice is like in youth, indulging in it themselves, but at a later time, "as an alien thing present in other people's souls." One might think that first hand experience would benefit doctors and judges equally, but Socrates thinks that injustice is significantly different from illness in being an affliction of the soul that tends to pervert a person's judgment, leaving them "stupid, distrustful at the wrong time, and ignorant of what a healthy character is."

- When is it right to let a person die? This has never been a more pressing moral question than it is at present, physicians now having at their disposal antibiotics, intravenous feeding, radiologically-supported surgery, blood transfusions, organ transplants, respirators, blood pumps, dialysis machines, hormone treatments, and a host of other devices and procedures. Nowadays it is no longer even necessary for a human being to have a living brain to be maintained on life support.
- Socrates thinks that the only life worth supporting is a meaningful life, and the only meaningful life is a life of doing good work. So if one cannot do good work – work that makes good use of what one has to offer and benefits the city in some way – then one may as well die. Do you agree?
- Can a person be incurably evil? What would such a person be like?

- When Socrates suggests that the best judges come from people who are kept free from injustice in their youth, he seems to be assuming that injustice is permanently damaging to the souls of young people who have been afflicted by it. Is there any reason to believe this is true?
- Suppose someone were to object that people who have always been good – who have never themselves fallen deeply into moral corruption – never really understand what it is like to be morally corrupt. And just as patients in drug abuse treatment programs need to be able trust that their counselors know what they are going through, criminals in community abuse treatment programs need to be able to trust that those working with them are similarly knowledgeable. Therefore, the best judges would be those who used to be unjust. How might Socrates reply?

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32 Harmony in the Soul

See [410a-412a](#). Socrates suggests that musical training and physical training are crafts of divine origin for the strengthening and balancing of two distinct sources of motivation in the human soul, one “philosophical” (wisdom-loving) and the other “spirited.” He is going to be arguing explicitly for the existence of these parts of the soul in Book IV. For now, what is noteworthy is the metaphor through which he integrates the various elements of education they have considered so far. It is as if each guardian-in-training were a lyre with strings in need of adjustment – tightening here, loosening there – the goal being harmony in the soul. Education in music and poetry stimulates and refines one aspect of the soul. Physical training stimulates and refines another aspect. Both aspects matter. The result of an education that carefully harmonizes both is a person who is courageous without being savage, and sensitive to beauty without being enfeebled through over-refinement.

- What are the chief arguments given nowadays in support of requiring students to engage in physical training?
- How does physical training benefit the soul? Socrates suggests in the present passage that it can help a person become more courageous. Is he right? If so, how does this work?
- What virtues of the soul besides courage might physical training cultivate? Consider the various East Asian martial arts and what they aim to achieve.
- Is what Socrates is calling “the soul” the same thing that we nowadays call “the mind”?
- It is generally recognized that certain disturbances of the mind can cause problems in the body (emotional distress can cause stomach ulcers, for instance) just as certain disturbances of the body can cause problems in the mind (brain tumors can cause hallucinations, for instance). And there are of course even more obvious causal connections between mind and body, as when you see a tasty morsel on the table, decide to eat it, reach for it, eat it, and enjoy it. How should the relation between mind and body be

understood? Are they identical? Are they two different aspects of the same thing? Are they two different things altogether?

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33 Rulers

See [412b-414b](#). It has been evident for some time that this city will require rulers, if only to steer people toward the right jobs and oversee the education of the soldiers. A moment's thought makes it clear that the soldiers also have to be led, that foreign policy has to be managed, that public works have to be planned, funded, and executed in a timely and orderly manner, and so on. How many rulers the city requires is unclear, but Socrates recommends that they be selected from among the best of the guardians: those who have the conviction that their own interests are inseparable from the city's interests, and who are most successful at maintaining this conviction in the face of distractions, deceptions, seductions, and threats. More will be said about the selection and training of the rulers in Book VII. Henceforth, ordinary soldiers – those not serving as rulers – will be called “auxiliaries.”

- “We must watch them right from childhood, and set them tasks in which a person would be most likely to forget such a conviction or be deceived out of it. . . . we must subject our young people to fears and then plunge them once again into pleasures, so as to test them more thoroughly than people test gold in a fire.” Can you imagine how such tests might run?
- Is there a good reason to select the rulers from among the best of the soldiers? Why not from among the best of the farmers, the best of the teachers, the best of the builders, or the best of the doctors? (What is a city more like – a farm, a school, a building project, a medical patient, or an army?)

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34 The Myth of the Metals

See [414b-415d](#). Socrates had considered at [389b-c](#) (see also [382a-d](#)) the possibility of rulers making justified use of falsehoods for the benefit of the citizens. Here he proposes one such use, a myth for the city. In the first part of the myth, the land itself is said to have given birth to the city's inhabitants. This is to promote loyalty and solidarity – to encourage citizens to love the land in which they live as “their mother and nurse” and to be willing to “deliberate on its behalf, defend it if anyone attacks it, and regard the other citizens as their earthborn brothers.” In the second part of the myth, every person is said to have a certain amount of metal in their soul – bronze, iron, silver, or gold – each metal indicating a different kind of soul with a different set of strengths and weaknesses. Souls that have gold in them do best as rulers. Souls that are silver do best as auxiliaries. And souls that are chiefly bronze or iron do best as farmers or in one of the other crafts. Because parents with one type of soul can give birth to children with a different type of soul, however, “the first and most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of their offspring.” Every citizen should have the job “appropriate to his nature,” and it shouldn't matter what family one is born into when it comes to finding one's proper place.

- Are people innately different in important ways? Are some people better suited by nature to serve as leaders for the rest of us?
- Suppose “silver” parents were to have an “iron” child, or “bronze” parents a “gold” child. How might this be discovered?
- Can you think of beneficial falsehoods that you believed at one time?
- Might some of the things you believe at present be beneficial falsehoods?
- Is promoting myths like these ever advisable?

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35 Private Property, Private Interests

See [415d-417b](#). Socrates warns that if the auxiliaries and their leaders the guardians were to “acquire private land, houses, and currency” they would become “household managers and farmers instead of guardians – hostile masters of the other citizens, instead of their allies.” His thought is that private property would encourage private interests, interests independent from and potentially in conflict with those of the city as a whole. (Compare this to the idea behind celibacy for the Roman Catholic priesthood.) The guardians are to be concerned for the city’s welfare with minimal distractions, and without the temptation to use public power for private gain.

- In what respect, and to what extent, does money corrupt politics?
- Should modern politicians be required to renounce wealth?

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Book IV

36 The City as a Whole

See [419a-423d](#). In reply to the objection that the guardians of the city will not be very happy living under the monastical conditions described at the end of Book III, Socrates says that “we are not looking to make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so as far as possible.” What he means by a happy city is an integrated, flourishing city: each citizen dedicated to the job for which he (or she, more on this in Book V) is naturally suited, the work of each coordinated with the work of the others for the mutual benefit of all. Most cities, by contrast, are “a great many cities, but not a city,” the primary fracture being between the rich and the poor. Wealth and poverty are evils for a city, and both should be guarded against. Wealth makes for luxury and idleness by removing the incentive to work. Poverty makes for slavishness and bad work by forcing people to make do with inadequate resources. Wealth and poverty together provide the conditions for revolution, the haves seeking to maintain what they have and the have-nots seeking to get more of what they don’t. Wealth does enable a city to fund a large military, but Socrates is convinced that a smaller, unified city can defend itself against a larger, divided city, however wealthy it may be, in part through excellence on the battlefield, but also through shrewd alliances, the richer, divided city being vulnerable to internal subversions and external alliances. Socrates warns that the city must not be allowed to grow beyond a certain point if it is to maintain its unity and integrity. Perhaps his thought is that, if the city were to get too large, the system of job placement would break down, work would cease to be properly coordinated, and mutual assistance would end up taking a back seat to private gain. Socrates does not specify the ideal size for their city, but he does mention, in passing at [423a](#), that an army of “a thousand men” would be a fighting force of adequate size. If he is serious about this number, then, assuming that the auxiliaries, as full-time, professional soldiers, would be considerably fewer in number than the farmers and craftsmen, and assuming that he means an army of “men” and not “men and women” – the proposal regarding women serving in the military not having been introduced yet – this city of theirs would, by ancient standards, be no small town. It wouldn’t approach Athens, which at the start of

the Peloponnesian War had a total population that has been estimated at a quarter of a million, but it might very well compare with the more typical Greek city of the day, which had something more in the range of twenty to fifty thousand inhabitants (including men, women, and children; free and slave).

- What makes a group of people a community? Is there anything more to it than living in close proximity and selling one another goods and services?
- How bad is it to be wealthy? Should wealth be better controlled nowadays?
- What are the advantages of living in a small town? What are the advantages of living in a large city? Is there an ideal size for a human community?
- Would you enjoy belonging to a community like the one Socrates is describing?

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37 Lawfulness Internalized, Legislation Minimized

See [423d-427c](#). Drawing their sketch of the good city to a close, Socrates emphasizes the importance of maintaining the high educational ideals already discussed and of guarding against lawlessness slipping in under the guise of innovation. To this end, the rulers should also be concerned with the games children play, “the silence appropriate for younger people in the presence of their elders, the giving up of seats for them and standing up in their presence, the care of parents, hairstyles, clothing, shoes, the general appearance of the body, and everything of that sort.” Socrates takes these “seemingly insignificant conventions” very seriously, and shows himself in this regard similar to [Confucius](#), the father of Chinese philosophy (roughly a contemporary of Socrates, their births being within a hundred years of each other); both Socrates and Confucius insist that the little details of life are morally significant, particularly for young people learning to be good, who benefit from living in a way that has been carefully and consistently ordered. But for all his concern about regulating education, Socrates warns against passing laws regulating contracts, torts, taxes, and things of that sort. He suggests that, in general, people rely too heavily on legislation to solve social problems. Instead of becoming good themselves – internally virtuous – people try to bring about goodness through laws and the external compulsion that laws entail. It is like “sick people who, because they are intemperate, are not willing to abandon their bad way of life,” but are always seeking “some new drug that will make them healthy.” Education is the only true cure for social problems. Anything else is “just cutting off a Hydra’s head.” With respect to determining the proper religious practices for the city, Socrates admits to having “no knowledge of these things,” and indicates that the god at Delphi, Apollo, should be consulted.

- Do the games children play affect their moral development? Do some encourage crass materialism or discourage cooperation? Do some cultivate desirable intellectual or emotional traits?
- Does it perhaps not matter *what* children play but *how* they play? Consider

the virtue of good sportsmanship and how it is acquired.

- What effect could hairstyle and clothing conceivably have on moral development?
- What tools do rulers have to effect positive social change besides legislation?

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38 Wisdom in the City

See [427d-429a](#). Having declared their initial sketch of the good city complete, Socrates proceeds to define its virtues, the characteristic ways in which it is excellent. Notice that there is no controversy when he states that the city “is wise, courageous, temperate, and just.” These were recognized in Socrates’ day as central moral virtues. Other virtues were of course recognized – piety, for instance, and hospitality – but these appear to have been considered secondary virtues, perhaps because they could be construed as aspects of one or another of the four central virtues. (Hospitality, for instance, could be understood as justice towards guests, and piety as justice towards the gods.) Socrates begins with the virtue of wisdom. What is it for a city to be wise? It is for the rulers to have good judgment, based on real knowledge, concerning the proper ordering of the city as a whole, both internally and in foreign policy. Although wisdom is good for the city as a whole, it is an excellence specifically of one part of the city, the rulers. The city is wise if and only if its rulers are wise. Socrates will have more to say about wisdom and the knowledge that serves as its basis in Books V-VII.

- In a nation as large and complex as, for instance, the United States of America, can any politician at the federal level be wise in Socrates’ sense of the term, actually knowing what is good for the nation as a whole, and possessing good judgment about how to order things? Is anyone capable of thinking beyond the interests of certain “constituents,” a subset of the nation as a whole?
- What does a person need to know to deliberate well about what is good for a city? What concepts? What facts? What values? What skills?

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39 Courage in the City

See [429a-430c](#). What is it for a city to be courageous? It is for the auxiliaries to be steadfast in their convictions, preserving, in the face of temptations, the right beliefs about what should and should not be feared. Because courage has to do with preserving beliefs “inculcated by the law through education,” it is dependent upon the rulers and their wisdom. But it is a virtue specifically of the auxiliaries, who are charged with upholding the integrity of the city through force of arms. Courage is not the same thing as fearlessness, for it is consistent with a certain amount of fear, above all with fear of slavery, which in antiquity meant the dismemberment of a city. (Recall from [387b](#) that the auxiliaries are to be raised to fear slavery more than death.) Courage is especially valuable for resisting the lure of pleasure, which is more potent than any deterrent at loosening the “purple dye” of a good upbringing. In a courageous city, the army cannot be bought off.

- What is good for a city to fear? What is bad for a city to fear?
- Could a city be courageous, on Socrates’ view, if the rulers were unwise and their laws oppressive? Consider a city ruled by someone like Hitler or Stalin.
- If you were a ruler in this city and had to keep an eye out for children who showed signs of being well suited for training as auxiliaries, what would you look for?

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40 Temperance in the City

See [430d-432a](#). The word *sophrosune* is translated by different people as “temperance,” “discipline,” “self-discipline,” “self-control,” “self-mastery,” “self-restraint,” “sobriety,” and “moderation.” The way Socrates defines it, temperance is something beautiful, a harmony between the parts of the city resulting from agreement that those best suited to rule will rule. In a temperate city, the desires of the non-rulers are controlled by the desires of the rulers so that “all sing the same song in unison.” Unlike courage and wisdom, which are virtues of parts of the city, temperance is a systemic virtue, an excellence of the whole, involving the rulers, the auxiliaries, and the workers.

- Socrates calls the rulers “better” and the workers “worse.” What does he mean by this? Plainly the city managers will be better than the cobblers at city management, but then the cobblers will be better than the city managers at shoemaking, and the child care workers will be better at caring for the children, and so on. Is it that one job is more important than the other jobs, or does Socrates have something else in mind?
- Have you ever been part of an organization such as a work crew, a committee, a sports team, or a musical ensemble that seemed to you especially well led? What did it feel like to be part of the group? Did you resent being subordinate to the leader? If not, why not?
- How in this city will the rulers win the trust and allegiance of the workers? The auxiliaries will share the same extraordinary upbringing with the rulers, but what about the other people in the city? How will they come to appreciate that their desires should be guided by the rulers’ desires? Upon what will their trust be based?
- Will the workers be able to tell when their rulers are doing a good job? How might the rulers’ wisdom become apparent?

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41 Justice in the City

See [432b-434c](#). In a flash of insight, Socrates sees what it is for a city to be just: it is for the virtues of wisdom, courage and temperance to be promoted and preserved in the city by each person doing, and keeping exclusively to, the work for which he or she is naturally best suited. Justice is therefore similar to temperance in being a systemic virtue, an excellence of the whole city. Socrates emphasizes the importance of the people best suited to serve as rulers actually serving as rulers, of the people best suited to serve as auxiliaries actually serving as auxiliaries, and of the people best suited to do one of the “money making” jobs in the city actually doing one or another of these jobs. It wouldn’t matter much if someone best suited to make shoes were to do carpentry, or someone best suited to do carpentry were to make shoes. But if a person who should be doing something like carpentry were to join the auxiliaries or the rulers, then real problems could arise. “Meddling and exchange among these three classes,” Socrates declares, “is the greatest harm that can happen to the city and would rightly be called the worst evil one could do to it.”

- Do you agree with Socrates that justice for a city is basically a matter of everyone doing the work proper to them? Should we start thinking of career counselors as part of our society’s justice system?
- Some years back, in an interview, the members of the Guarneri String Quartet were attempting to describe what it is like when they are playing well together. Each of the four musicians – the first violinist, the second violinist, the violist, and the cellist – has a separate part to play. And each must play it and it alone. But in playing their parts they are joining and interrelating with the others in such a way that their parts come alive and become deeply meaningful. At times it is as if a [fifth voice](#) rises above the four blended voices, inspiring the musicians as individuals, but unifying them as one living sound. This sort of thing appears to be what Socrates means by justice in a city. Can you think of other examples that illustrate the idea, examples involving sports teams perhaps, or non-dysfunctional

families you may be fortunate enough to know?

- How does everyone doing one of the jobs for which he or she is best suited enable wisdom, courage and temperance to flourish in a city?
- Notice how at [433e](#) Socrates reintroduces Polemarchus' original "give to each what is owed to him" definition of justice from [331e](#) and incorporates it into the definition he is offering. Do you recall the problems that arose when Polemarchus first set it out? What has become of these problems?
- Is Socrates serious when he says that "meddling and exchange among these three classes is the greatest harm that can happen to the city," or is this just hyperbole? Wouldn't something like enslavement by the Persians, which nearly happened to Athens in [490](#) BCE and then again in [480](#), be worse?

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42 Parts of the Soul -- Appetitive and Rational

See [434d-439e](#). They have determined to their satisfaction what it is for a city to be just. Now they want to know if this definition can be applied to the soul. Since their definition of justice requires that the city have parts, it cannot be applied to the soul unless the soul also has parts. So Socrates is going to try to prove that the soul has parts, that they are three in number, and that their work in the soul corresponds to the work of the three parts of the city – “the rational part” of the soul corresponding to the rulers of the city, “the appetitive part” of the soul corresponding to the city’s laborers and craftsmen, and “the spirited part” of the soul corresponding to the auxiliaries. The key idea in his argument is stated at [436b-c](#): “the same thing cannot do or undergo opposite things . . . in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time.” He has in mind something like this: You are overweight and your doctor has put you on a low-calorie diet for health reasons. One night, the waitress rolls out the dessert tray, and you are face to face with Chocolate Sin Cake. You must have this cake. But clearly, this would be to break your diet and take a step closer to bad health, and you care about improving your health. You find yourself pulled in opposite directions (to eat and not to eat) with respect to the same thing (the cake) at the same time. Therefore, Socrates would say, your soul must have at least two distinct sources of motivation, an “appetitive” part to desire the cake and a “rational” part to desire health. The example Socrates gives in the present passage is of people who are thirsty, but – for some reason left unspecified – don’t want to drink. The concern in opposition to thirst could be any number of things: health again (the water might be dirty), or courtesy (your friend hasn’t finished giving the toast), or piety (the period of fasting has not ended), or group survival (you and the others in the lifeboat are down to your last pint of water). Socrates offers this example as proof that the soul has a rational as well as an appetitive part. How does he understand the difference between these two parts of the soul? He tells us that the appetitive part desires “the pleasures of food, sex, and those closely akin to them,” and that, of the appetites, the clearest examples are hunger and thirst. It appears then, at first glance, that the appetitive part is concerned with pains and

pleasures of the body, with sensual things. But this interpretation is too simple, for Socrates is going to give examples in Book VIII of people who are led by their appetitive part to dabble at times in politics and at other times in philosophy (or what they suppose is philosophy), and the pleasures involved in these activities are not, except accidentally, sensual. What characterizes the appetitive part is not so much its sensuality as the immediacy and narrowness of its concerns. Socrates is careful to point out that thirst, as a paradigm example of the appetitive part at work, is simply the desire for drink, not “for hot drink or cold, or much drink or little, or – in a word – for drink of a certain sort.” There are times of course, especially in the heat of summer, when one desires a cold drink. But in cases like this there are really two different desires at work: one for drink, and one for cooling down. What it is to be thirsty, as opposed to being both thirsty and overheated, is to crave one thing: drink (liquid water). Socrates’ thought appears to be that this sort of craving for some one thing – something that “hits the spot,” as we say, providing immediate gratification – is the essential characteristic of appetitive desire. These desires aren’t looking down the road towards what hitting the spot might lead to in the long run: obesity, poverty, drug addiction, social unrest (in the case of people who dabble in politics), or what have you. Appetitive desires are simply concerned with seeing that the spot gets hit. The desires of the rational part are different. They aspire to order things according to what is good, all things considered. Notice that Socrates is not saying the rational part is good and the appetitive part is evil, as if they functioned in the soul like an angel pulling in one direction and a devil pulling in the other. That this would be a silly view for him to hold is obvious if one just considers what it would be like, while remaining a flesh and blood human being, never to get thirsty or to feel the need to take your next breath (both appetitive desires). Besides, although it is true that the appetitive part gets people into trouble from time to time, the same can be said of the rational part. It is the rational part that mistakenly concocts poisonous medicines, for instance. Nevertheless, as Socrates will explain later, there is a special relationship between the rational part of the soul and goodness. The rational part ultimately desires to order things, not just according to what appears good, but according to what is good. It desires, in other words, the knowledge characteristic of wisdom.

- May it not be the case that our soul has just one part, and that, in the kind of situation Socrates has in mind, our one-part soul is just toggling quickly back and forth between alternative objects of desire (e.g., cake-health-cake-health-cake)? Suppose someone were to ask Socrates how he knows that we experience opposing desires at precisely the same time. How might he reply? (This oscillation theory of psychic conflict appears to have been advanced by the [Stoics](#), a leading school of philosophy after the time of Plato. See [Plutarch](#), “On Moral Virtue.”)
- Do appetitive desires ever oppose one another with respect to the same thing at the same time? If they were to do this, what would it mean?
- Why might Socrates think that thirst or hunger is a clearer example of appetitive desire than sexual desire?

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43 The Spirited Part of the Soul

See [439e-441c](#). Socrates considers the example of Leontius, who finds himself at the site of an execution, desiring to gaze upon the corpses, but at the same time desiring not to. Socrates judges, again, that at least two distinct sources of motivation must exist to explain the phenomenon. The desire to gaze upon the corpses is characteristic of what he is calling the appetitive part, an urge with no concern for anything beyond getting satisfied. But what is the nature of the opposing desire? Is it the rational part at work again, seeking to do what is good overall, or is it something else? Socrates describes Leontius as disgusted, and then, when he gives in to his appetitive desire, as angry. Is this the rational part getting angry with the appetitive part? Is the same part getting both disgusted and angry? Socrates leaves the details of the Leontius example unexplained, but he suggests that anger indicates the presence of a third source of motivation, a spirited part of the soul, which often allies itself with the rational part, but never with the appetitive part. It is particularly in evidence when people become aware that they have been treated unjustly; then it boils up, motivating the soul to fight for what it believes to be just, enabling the soul to endure “hunger, cold, and every imposition of that sort . . . stand firm and win out over them, not ceasing its noble efforts until it achieves its purpose, or dies, or like a dog being called to heel by a shepherd, is called back by the reason alongside it and becomes gentle.” That this spirited part is not just the rational part getting angry can be seen from examples of the rational part doing just this, leashing in anger like a dog. Socrates gives one such example from Homer. Odysseus, twenty years away from home, returns to find his house overrun with arrogant, ill-mannered men, pestering his wife and son, and cavorting with the servant women. Anger wells up in his heart, and he desires to slay the servant women on the spot; but the rational part of his soul, looking ahead as usual, pulls back and devises a plan that will take out the men as well. How then does Socrates understand the nature of the spirited part of the soul? It is the seat of anger and righteous indignation, and it can be directed outwardly at other people, or inwardly at the appetitive part of the soul. In Book VIII, when Socrates describes what it is like for a person to be ruled by the spirited

part, it will be clear that he thinks it desires honor above all – the esteem of other people – and that it therefore lies at the root of a number of important interpersonal concerns: praise, blame, shame, guilt, resentment, revenge, ambitious competitiveness, and concern for reputation. So when Leontius gets angry at himself, it is most likely out of shame. He doesn't want to be known as the sort of person who has a strong appetitive desire to gaze at corpses. It may be helpful to think of the concerns of the spirited part falling in between those of the appetitive part and the rational part. The appetitive part desires to do for the moment what appears to be pleasant at the moment. The rational part desires to take all relevant concerns into account and do whatever is best. The spirited part desires to achieve something in between – the esteem of other people. (Students who have read some [Freud](#) often wonder whether his “id,” “ego,” and “superego” are supposed to be the same things as the appetitive, spirited, and rational parts of the soul. Although Freud's id is similar to Socrates' appetitive part, and the superego – focussing as it does on delaying gratification for the sake of higher social goods – is similar to the rational part, Freud's ego is nothing like the spirited part. Freud imagines the ego seeking compromise and balance between the opposing elements of the id and superego. But the spirited part as Socrates describes it has desires all its own, and in a just soul, these desires are to be satisfied only when subordinated to the desires of the rational part. Justice is best thought of, not as a mediated conflict, but as a benevolent monarchy.)

- Some students think Socrates' examples involving what he takes to be the spirited part of the soul are better explained by supposing that either the rational part or the appetitive part is flaring up in passion. Consider, however, the case of a competitive wrestler who denies himself food so as to be able to “make weight” (weigh-in low on the day of the match so as to achieve a competitive edge). The wrestler's drive to win can plainly be set in simultaneous opposition to his appetitive drive to eat. But now suppose his rational part is also pitted against his competitive drive, pulling away from this thirst for victory-at-any-cost and towards a more balanced, thoughtful, integrated life. It would seem that the wrestler's appetitive and rational desires are both pitted against a third desire. Is this example

sufficient to prove that Socrates is right in thinking that there is a third, spirited part of the soul?

- Is it true that anger never allies itself with appetitive desire? Consider the fierce defensiveness that can flare up when people trying to hide their drug addiction are confronted about their problem.
- Glaucon suggests at one point that children are “full of spirit right from birth” even though they are incapable of “rational calculation.” The souls of newborns presumably lack an active rational part, but is it true that they have an active spirited part? Newborns cry, of course, but is it ever anger they express when they cry?
- Newborns often cry when they should be sleeping. But is this crying ever in opposition to a desire to sleep? They need the sleep, but do they desire it?
- Do newborns have anything in them to oppose their appetitive desires?
- Does the [awarding](#) of shiny medals and colorful ribbons to soldiers make sense? What would Socrates think?

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44 The Virtues of the Soul

See [441c-444a](#). Having established that the soul has an internal structure similar to that of the city, they use the definition of each of the city's virtues as a model for defining each of the soul's virtues. Wisdom is defined as good judgment, based on knowledge, concerning what is advantageous for the soul, "both for each part and for the whole, the community composed of all three." This presumably includes judgment about one's proper relations with other people. Wisdom is a virtue specifically of the rational part of the soul. Courage is defined as preservation, in the face of temptations, of well-reasoned beliefs about what should and should not be feared. Although the rational part does the reasoning, courage is specifically a virtue of the spirited part of the soul. Temperance is defined as harmony between the parts of the soul resulting from agreement that the rational part should rule, that the desires of the spirited and appetitive parts should be controlled by the desires of the rational part. This is a virtue of the whole soul, of all three parts. Finally, justice is defined as each part of the soul doing its proper job so that wisdom, courage, and temperance are cultivated and preserved. This of course is also a virtue of the whole soul, of all three parts. The just person "puts himself in order, becomes his own friend, and harmonizes the three elements together . . . and, from having been many, becomes entirely one, temperate and harmonious. Then and only then should he turn to action, whether it is to do something concerning the acquisition of wealth, or concerning the care of his body, or even something political, or concerning private contracts. In all these areas, he considers and calls just and fine the action that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it."

- Provided the spirited part comes to see it as a matter of honor to defend the interests of the rational part, it is not hard to see how these two parts of the soul can be allies. But how is it possible for temperance to include the myopic appetitive part, so concerned as it is with satisfactions near at hand? How can the appetitive part appreciate that it is in its interest to be ruled by the rational part? (Recall the analogous question above, in section 40, about the workers putting trust in the rulers.) Would Socrates say that the

appetitive part can be educated, or at any rate, trained to be submissive to reason?

- Is Socrates right to define justice as each part of a soul doing its own proper job – the rational part ruling wisely, the spirited part courageously sticking up for what the rational part determines is right, and the appetitive part keeping us eating, drinking, breathing, and so on, under the supervision and guidance of the rational part? Is this what it is for a person to be just?

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45 Injustice is Sick

See [444a-445e](#). If justice is all three parts of the soul keeping to their proper jobs, then, Socrates argues, injustice is “their meddling and interfering with one another’s jobs, the rebellion of a part of the soul against the whole in order to rule it inappropriately.” And this is mentally unhealthy. For if health is a matter of having “the elements that are in the body in their natural relations of mastering and being mastered by one another,” then injustice, by analogy, is sickness of the soul. Glaucon, impressed by this conclusion, thinks his challenge has nearly been met; but Socrates thinks more needs to be said. He turns to identifying and discussing five kinds of cities and five analogous kinds of souls. One pair they have already dealt with, the just city and soul. This constitution they call “aristocracy,” which means, literally, “ruled by the best.” The four pairs of unjust cities and souls, however, are not going to be discussed until Book VIII. The conversation is first going to return to some details concerning the just city, and then, about two thirds of the way into Book V, take an important detour that will run through Books VI and VII.

- What is illness? Is Socrates right about it being a matter of certain elements of the body being improperly ruled by other elements in the body?
- What is [mental illness](#)? Are foolishness, cowardice, licentiousness, and the other vices kinds of mental illness?
- Are all unjust people mentally ill? (Notice this is not the question of whether all mentally ill people are unjust.)
- What does Socrates have yet to prove to meet Glaucon’s challenge? Has he proven that justice is desirable for its own sake? Has he proven that being just is more desirable than being tortured to death is undesirable?
- If you were going to interrupt the discussion at this point, what question or objection would you put to Socrates?

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Book V

46 A Desire to Listen

See [449a-451b](#). Socrates' four interlocutors, Polemarchus, Adeimantus, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon, interrupt and ask what he meant by suggesting "that, as regards women and children, anyone could see that it will be a case of friends sharing everything in common." (This had slipped into the discussion, in passing, back at [423e-424a](#).) How, they wonder, are the children of the rulers and auxiliaries to be conceived and raised? Socrates hesitates – how far do they want to get into this "swarm of arguments"? – until Glaucon declares that "it is within moderation . . . for people with any sense to listen to such arguments their whole life long." Socrates agrees to proceed, but only after making it clear that the matters about which he is going to speak are matters about which he is unsure, about which he is searching for the truth, and about which he would hate to mislead his friends.

- What kind of a desire is a desire to listen to arguments? Is it what Socrates would call an appetitive desire – something fun to do while waiting for the torch race on horseback to start up – or is it something else?
- Do Glaucon and the others expect to be persuaded to share wives and children? What do they hope to get out of listening to Socrates' arguments?
- Do you suppose Socrates knows where he is going with this discussion? Does he have everything worked out, or is he discovering as he goes along?
- Is Glaucon right about arguments of this kind being the sort of thing worth studying one's "whole life long"? Do you expect that you will study the *Republic* again at a later point in your life?

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47 The Natures of Men and Women

See [451c-457c](#). Throughout this passage, when Socrates refers to the “guardians,” he means both the rulers and the auxiliaries from whom the rulers are to be recruited. Should the wives of the guardians live lives separate from the lives of their husbands? Should they stay at home and tend “the puppies” while their husbands – the city’s “guard-dogs” – are out caring for “the flock”? Glaucon answers no, that everything should be shared, and the women should serve as guardians. Glaucon doesn’t explain why he answers in this way. In all likelihood, this is not how his own mother behaved. Free women in Athens at the time lived lives remarkably separate from those of their husbands. They managed the household (particularly water-gathering, cooking, and weaving), directed the household slaves, gave birth to and cared for the children, but did not shop in the agora, did not attend theater productions, did not serve in the army, and did not participate in political decision-making. So what is Glaucon thinking, giving Socrates the nod and agreeing that these women should be, not just the wives of the guardians, but guardians who are wives? It is not hard to imagine what he might be thinking. The guardians are unusual persons with an unusual upbringing and unusual concerns. They live separated from the others in the city, owning nothing themselves but everything collectively. How could a guardian be married to anyone but another guardian? Would the wives have private property but not the husbands? How could a man keep the city as a whole his top priority and yet be joined in marriage to a woman focussed on private concerns? Glaucon and Socrates agree that women well suited to serve as auxiliaries should receive the same upbringing and education in music, poetry, and physical training as the men, and even exercise naked alongside them in the palestras. People may think this is ridiculous, but that is only because, lacking wisdom, they overvalue what is conventional; and it is foolish “to take seriously any standard of what is beautiful other than what is good.” But is it in fact good for women to serve as guardians? What of the principle that everyone in the city is to do the job for which he or she is best suited by nature? Men and women are clearly different by nature. Does it not follow that men and women should do different work? Socrates replies to this

objection, first, by noting that some natural differences between persons are irrelevant to the successful performance of some jobs (whether one is bald or long-haired, for instance, is irrelevant to making shoes), and second, by claiming that the natural differences between the sexes are irrelevant to doing the work of the guardians. It may well be that “one sex,” the male, “shows greater mastery than the other in pretty much every area”; nevertheless, he insists, “many women are better than many men at many things.” It is not clear what Socrates means in suggesting that men are superior to women – perhaps that if one studied the distribution of attributes such as strength, intelligence, and spiritedness in the population it would turn out that the median for men would be higher than for women (or something like this) – but whatever he means exactly, his point is that, with respect to doing the work of the guardians, some women are by nature first-rate. And this is all that matters when it comes to selecting guardians for the city.

- Would it be problematic for a guardian to be married to a non-guardian?
- Is there anything wrong with men and women exercising together naked? Can our present social conventions regarding nakedness – no exposed genitals, no exposed female breasts, etc. – be justified?
- What do you understand masculinity and femininity to be? Are these traits good? Should boys be raised to be masculine and girls to be feminine?
- Is it true that natural differences between men and women are irrelevant to doing the work of the guardians? Do the strongest, smartest, and most spirited of women belong on the battlefield alongside the strongest, smartest, and most spirited of men?
- Is it true, on any reasonable interpretation of the phrase, that men show “greater mastery” than women “in pretty much every area”?
- What do we mean nowadays by “discriminating against” someone, and what makes this a form of injustice?
- Socrates argues that there is no good reason why men and women who are similar in soul should not study together, train together, and work together. This suggestion, a remarkable innovation for Socrates’ day, is fairly common practice in contemporary America. And yet, we still set

limitations. Consider school sports teams. We still have men's basketball and women's basketball, men's soccer and women's soccer, men's volleyball and women's volleyball, and so on. Women rarely get to wrestle, and almost never get to play football. Can this be justified rationally? It might be said that women are on average weaker than men. But, Socrates would say, so what? The strength of the average man or woman is irrelevant. What matters is even matching. A tall brawny woman is likely to be a better basketball player than a short flabby man. The idea wouldn't necessarily be to have the best women players play with the best men players. The idea would be for the best players to play together, the mediocre players to play together, and the poor players to play together. If all the players on a given team were women, or were white, or what have you, it wouldn't matter. The point would be even matching, not forced integration. Is there a good reason not to continue the sexual revolution and achieve equal treatment in school sports?

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48 Good Breeding

See [457c-461c](#). Naturally, the rulers and auxiliaries will be “driven by innate necessity to have sex with one another.” But “unregulated sexual intercourse . . . would not be a pious thing in a city of happy people.” So these sexual relations will need to be regulated. Socrates proposes an elaborate system according to which “festivals” will be held at prescribed times for the conceiving of children. The best men will be matched with the best women – much as breeders pair animals that have desirable attributes – and the city will hope for superior offspring. In order to keep the inferior people from breeding, but also from resenting being kept from sexual intercourse, the rulers will rig lotteries that will make it appear as if the festival pairings occurred by chance, when in fact they were carefully planned. In addition to these breeding festivals, “young men who are good at war or other things must . . . be given a greater opportunity to have sex with the women,” in order to father as many of the children as possible. Children born “deformed” or “of inferior parents” are to be killed.

- Why might Socrates consider unregulated sexual intercourse more impious than infanticide?
- Socrates apparently thinks that biologically inherited differences between people largely determine the kind of person one will become. Is he right? How could the truth or falsity of this be determined?
- In the present passage, Socrates recommends breeding people to serve as auxiliaries and rulers. Elsewhere in the dialogue (for instance, at [415c](#)), he recommends, not breeding people for their jobs, but selecting them according to their demonstrated merits. Are these two proposals consistent?
- Suppose someone were to object that this system of regulation fails to respect the basic dignity of human beings, that it manipulates people with deception, and reduces the person-to-person intimacy of human sexuality to crude insemination. How might Socrates reply?
- How important for happiness is it to have a long-term spouse of one’s own?

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49 Families and the Saying of “Mine” and “Not Mine”

See [461c-466c](#). Socrates recommends arranging things so that no guardian knows any child as his or her own, but rather as a child of this generation or that generation, with the child looking to the older generations, collectively, as his or her parents or grandparents according to their age. Socrates figures that, by breaking up the nuclear families in this way and integrating the guardians into a single family, they will be less likely to have interests in competition with one another. They will “feel more or less the same joy or pain at the same gains or losses.” The greatest good for a city, he thinks, is to be unified. To this end, the guardians should be a single, unified family, and “apply ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ to the same things on the basis of the same principle.”

- Suppose someone were to object, as Aristotle did in the *Politics*, that Socrates’ proposal to break up nuclear families “results in each citizen's having a thousand sons, and these do not belong to them as individuals but any child is equally the son of anyone, so that all alike will regard them with indifference” ([II.3.1261b-1262a](#)). How might Socrates reply?
- How important for the happiness of a child is it to grow up in a two parent family?
- It is remarkable how much love and attention parents direct toward their own children and how little they really seem to care about children living just a few doors down the street. Socrates’ proposal recognizes this as a problem and attempts to address it. Is it a problem? If so, can you think of a better way to address it? Consider the idea of sending one’s own child off to live for a year with another set of parents in one’s community, while taking a child from the other family into one’s care. Would this sort of thing be beneficial?

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50 The Waging of War

See [466c-471e](#). In the event of war, male and female auxiliaries are to campaign together. The sturdiest of their children, mounted upon swift horses, are to be taken along as well, so that they can learn their craft alongside experienced adults, assisting and observing wherever they can do so in reasonable safety. In battle, the adults are expected to be courageous. Those who run away out of cowardice will no longer be permitted to serve as auxiliaries. They are not to allow themselves to be captured, and they are not to be ransomed if they are captured. Extraordinary valor is, however, to be rewarded – with feasting, hymns, seats of honor, and the privilege to kiss and be kissed by whomever one desires. Distinguished deaths in battle are to receive special funerals, and the memory of the fallen is to be preserved. It is to be said that these men and women go on after death to become noble guardian spirits. With respect to the conduct of war, certain rules are to be followed: Greeks are not to be enslaved; enemy corpses are not to be stripped of valuables (a traditional, and at times tactically unfortunate, practice among the Greeks); enemy forces are to be allowed to collect their dead; enemy arms are not to be displayed as trophies in the temples (something Athens did at the time, to the dishonor of the cities it defeated); and although it is permissible to carry off the enemy's stored harvest, the land itself is not to be ravaged, nor the houses burnt. The "attitude of mind" of combatants should be that "of people who will one day be reconciled and who won't always be at war."

- Would it be wrong to encourage children nowadays who aspire to be soldiers to experience real warfare? (Consider the practice in the past of assigning boys in training to be naval officers to serve as "midshipmen," apprentices to the ship's captain.) Perhaps, given the effectiveness of missile weapons in the present day this would be inappropriate. Still, children could help out at air bases and support camps.
- Why might Socrates think a distinction should be recognized in warfare between opponents who are Greeks and those who are non-Greeks?
- It has sometimes been said that the rules and ideals of morality are

irrelevant in a state of war – that soldiers, for instance, cannot be courteous or compassionate towards people they are trying to kill – except perhaps in situations of overwhelming military advantage, or when peace is in sight. Is there such a thing as waging war ethically, or is war, by its very nature, hellish?

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51 Philosophers and Knowledge of the Forms

See [472a-480a](#). When asked how it is possible for the just city they have been describing to come into being, Socrates answers that it is not possible unless the rulers become “philosophers” (literally, lovers of wisdom). But what are philosophers? People who are “ready and willing to taste every kind of learning” and are “insatiable for it”; people who are “lovers of seeing the truth”; and above all, people who “are passionately devoted to and love the things with which knowledge deals,” the “forms.” What are these things seen and embraced by the philosophers, these forms? Socrates encourages us to consider one of them, “the beautiful itself.” Unlike “the many beautiful things” (this particular person, that particular song, etc.), which, depending upon one’s point of view, appear in some respects to be beautiful and yet in other respects ugly – or in fancy language, “partake in both being and not being” with respect to beauty – the beautiful itself “is” beautiful “completely.” People who fail to see and embrace the form of the beautiful may think they know what they are talking about when they say that this person is beautiful or that song is beautiful, but they have mere “belief”; only the person who grasps the form, who truly understands the nature of beauty, has “knowledge.” This is an early statement of a position that philosophers have come to call realism about universals. A modern day proponent of this view might explain it this way: Certain things exist, “universals” such as what it is to be beautiful, what it is to be green, what it is to be three in number, or what it is to be a knife. These things are capable, typically, of having “particular instances,” such as this beautiful face, that green leaf, those three pebbles, or the knife on the table, and it is in virtue of sharing a universal feature that particulars are correctly said to be similar. (Not that every universal must have instances: e.g., what it is to be a square circle, or what it is to be nonexistent.) Universals exist independent of their instances; what it is to be a dinosaur, for example, still exists even though dinosaurs don’t. Universals also exist independent of our minds; what it is to be a dinosaur existed before human beings ever imagined dinosaurs and will continue to exist should we ever cease to think about them. Finally, universals are the sort of thing that can be known, and to know such a thing is to understand the essence

of an aspect of reality. With this topic we reach the midpoint of the *Republic*.

- What would be an example of something you “believe” but don’t “know” (in Socrates’ sense of these terms)?
- Suppose someone were to object that there are no such things as forms in Socrates’ sense of the term; there are of course words and phrases such as “beautiful,” “green,” “three in number,” “knife,” and “just,” but these are merely labels of our devising, manmade things that have no existence outside of the community of English speakers. How might Socrates reply?
- Suppose someone were to object that there are no such things as forms in Socrates’ sense of the term; there are of course general concepts, thoughts in the mind, such as beauty, greenness, the number three, the concept of a knife, and the concept of justice, but these, being thoughts in the mind, have no existence outside the mind. How might Socrates reply?
- For things that depend upon the mind in order to exist, either because they are themselves mental (thoughts, desires, fears, etc.) or because they result from our mental activity (jokes, loaves of bread, baseball games), could the forms of these things exist eternally, independent of our minds? Is there the form of a baseball game? If so, what happens when the rules of the game change? Must there be a different form corresponding to the different sets of rules? Did the form of a baseball game exist before the game was invented?
- Is it not a truism that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”? If so, how can there be a form of beauty, independent of our minds, with a nature that is timelessly fixed? (Here is one way this is conceivable: Suppose the form of beauty were the sort of thing philosophers call a relation. You might consider, by comparison, what it is to be a mother, what it is to be taller, or what it is to be underneath. These forms each relate two or more things. The motherhood relation is between a woman and one or more of her children. The taller relation is between two or more vertical objects. The underneath relation is between two or more objects set atop one another. Might beauty not also be some sort of relation, a response or interaction of a certain sort, between persons on the one hand and things perceived or

imagined on the other? If so, then there would be no contradiction between there being a timeless nature to beauty on the one hand, and people disagreeing about what things are beautiful on the other. For just as a woman may be mother to one person but not to another, something may be beautiful to one person but not to another. The things being related change, but the relation itself remains unchanged.)

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Book VI

52 The Virtues of the Philosopher

See [484a-487a](#). Books VI and VII are largely concerned with exploring what it is to be a philosopher, someone who desires and achieves knowledge of the forms. In these opening pages, Socrates begins to explain some of the ways such people are excellent, and why they belong at the helm of a city. As lovers of knowledge, they are fast at learning things, good at remembering things, and have the greatest concern for the truth (for getting things right). Their soul “has a natural sense of proportion and grace,” and so, proportion and grace being “akin” to truth, their soul is “easy to lead to the form of each thing there is.” And because they are ruled by the rational part and its desires, they are not swayed by the petty appetitive desires that cause a person to fall into vices such as licentiousness, greed, and cowardice.

- Do people who are sensitive to “proportion and grace” tend to be sensitive to truth? If so, why might this be? What is the relation between truth and beauty?
- Socrates says at [485c](#) that philosophers “must never willingly tolerate falsehood in any form.” What then of the marriage lotteries ([459c-460a](#)) and the myth of the metals ([414c-415d](#))? Is this not the toleration, indeed the propagation, of falsehood? How might Socrates defend himself against the charge of inconsistency? Consider what he says at the end of Book II about lying and the divine ([382a-e](#)).
- What makes a good political leader? Is the challenge of politics above all an intellectual problem, a matter of thinking through what is best for the city and how to achieve it?

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53 Philosophical Perspective and the Fear of Death

See [486a-b](#). “And do you imagine that a thinker who is high-minded enough to look at all time and all being will consider human life to be a very important thing?” asks Socrates. “He couldn’t possibly,” replies Glaucon. “Then he won’t consider death to be a terrible thing either, will he?” “Not in the least.” It is a little puzzling why Socrates supposes there is a connection between studying the forms and studying “all time and all being.” Particularly puzzling, perhaps, is the notion of studying “all time.” Forms may or may not be, strictly speaking, timeless (outside of time – a view that has been defended off and on in the history of philosophy), but forms are clearly supposed by Socrates, here in the *Republic* as well as in other Platonic dialogues, to be unchanging. What it is to be beautiful, what it is to be green, what it is to be three in number, what it is to be a knife – these sorts of things remain, on this view, precisely and completely what they are, always. How then is study of the forms a study of “all time”? Perhaps the idea is that, when one knows the forms, one is equipped to recognize instances of the forms – the various particular things in time and space. Unlike some journalists who focus their concern specifically on political developments in the Middle East or historians who make the American Civil War their specialty, the philosopher, Socrates may be saying, studies the general characteristics of things, and in this way is able to contemplate and understand all particular instances of these general characteristics. (This of course is not to say that the same person cannot, in principle, be both journalist and philosopher, or historian and philosopher.) But what would it be like to have this sort of understanding, to be able to grasp the essence of the nature of things? Socrates hints at part of an answer in the passage quoted above. A person given to such a perspective would be freed from the fear of death. Why? Because they would see beyond the transient details of human life to higher and greater things.

- Is it conceivable that there are greater things in reality than human beings?
- Is it possible, by coming to understand certain things, that one can transcend the perspective of humanity? Would achieving this be desirable?

- Is the kind of understanding Socrates has in mind what people ordinarily mean by “being philosophical about death”?

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54 The Uselessness of Philosophers

See [487b-491a](#). Can it be, Adeimantus wonders, that Socrates is serious in suggesting that philosophers – not mere dabblers in philosophy, but people for whom understanding the essential nature of things is their primary concern – should be political leaders? Many would object that serious philosophy renders people “useless to the city.” Socrates agrees that cities as they are typically constituted (without temperance) do render philosophers useless. But this is not to say that philosophers would be useless if they were entrusted with the authority to rule. He likens the city to a ship whose owner, though big and strong, is not particularly bright, and is unable to manage the vessel himself. This owner represents the common citizens. The sailors, politically ambitious people, quarrel with one another about who should run things, each of them thinking “that he should captain the ship, even though he has not yet learned” how to do it well. Only one person, the philosopher, is fit in truth to be captain of the ship, for only he pays “attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft.” The quarrelsome sailors have no appreciation for this craft but care only about what is involved in gaining and keeping control of the helm. And so they ignore the philosopher, calling him “stargazer,” “useless babbler,” and “good-for-nothing.” Why doesn’t the true captain assert himself, push his way through the sailors and beg the owner and the other sailors for a chance to prove himself at the helm? Just as “it is not natural for the captain to beg the sailors to be ruled by him,” and not natural for physicians to beg sick people to submit to their care, it is not natural “for the ruler – if he is truly any use – to beg the subjects to accept his rule.”

- What does Socrates mean when he says it isn’t “natural” for ship captains, physicians, and politicians to beg to help those they are able to benefit? Is his point that begging is undignified? Or that people can only be helped if they themselves seek help? Or is it something else?
- Can someone be wise enough to rule a city well and yet not know how to acquire political power?

- Do the people who would make the best political leaders have a moral obligation to their communities to enter the fray of politics?

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55 Gifted Students and the Sophists

See [491a-497a](#). Socrates considers the problem posed by what educators nowadays call “gifted and talented” students, young people of great potential who learn with ease what others struggle over. These gifted students, having been identified as children, are flattered to the point of smugness and trained while still young in the arts of persuasion and leadership. Instead of learning to philosophize, they turn to the [sophists](#), to people like Thrasymachus, who in the end teach nothing “other than the convictions that the masses hold when they are gathered together.” Socrates likens this to someone “learning the passions and appetites of a huge, strong beast that he is rearing – how to approach it and handle it, when it is most difficult to deal with or most docile and what makes it so, what sounds it utters in either condition, and what tones of voice soothe or anger it. . . . Knowing nothing in reality about which of these convictions or appetites is fine or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, he uses all these terms in conformity with the great beast’s beliefs – calling the things it enjoys good and the things that anger it bad.” The result of this sort of education is a person who, though “brimming with pretention and empty, senseless pride,” nevertheless wields political power. What the gifted student needs is a teacher who gently tells him the truth, “that he has no sense, although he needs it, and that it cannot be acquired unless he works like a slave to attain it.” What he needs is philosophy. But he turns away, leaving philosophy “desolate and unwed,” to be claimed by “worthless little men” with “cramped and spoiled” souls and no true love of wisdom. It is no wonder philosophy has a bad reputation.

- Is what is taught as political science in today’s colleges and universities valuable? If so, for what?
- What characteristics suit a person well to having his or her attention turned to forms such as beauty or justice?
- What is a good way to bring to someone’s attention that he or she lacks any real understanding of beauty or of justice?
- Should gifted students receive an education different in kind from that

provided to ordinary students? If so, how?

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56 Putting Knowledge of the Forms to Use

See [497a-504a](#), also [484c-d](#). Non-philosophers lack a “clear model” of each thing in their souls, and so they “cannot look away, like painters, to what is most true, and cannot, by making constant reference to it and by studying it as exactly as possible, establish here on earth conventional views about beautiful, just, or good things when they need to be established, or guard and preserve those that have been established.” Philosophers, because they know the forms, are different. They can look to “what is in its nature just, beautiful, temperate, and all the rest,” and adjust the city in imitation of “the divine model.” Socrates is convinced that the benefits of being ruled wisely would be so apparent that true philosophers would have no trouble winning the loyalty of their fellow citizens.

- In university departments of teacher education nowadays, much time is spent teaching students how to teach, but very little on the proper aims of education, on the sort of a person education ought to be cultivating. How well do teachers understand the goals of their profession?
- What is an excellent human being? Is it basically the same thing at all times and places or does it vary from culture to culture and time to time?
- If you were serious about inquiring into the nature of human excellence, how would you proceed? Would you conduct an empirical study? If so, what would serve as your data? Would you begin with an examination of flourishing lives? If so, how would you determine which lives are or are not flourishing? What would serve as your standard?

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57 The Form of the Good

See [504a-505b](#). It has been clear from passages such as [484c-d](#) and [500b-501b](#) that, in Socrates' opinion, nothing is more practical for ruling a city than knowing the forms. His thought is basically this: to do it well, you've got to know what you're doing. Just as it is ridiculous for someone who has never seen a giraffe to attempt to paint the image of a giraffe, it is ridiculous for someone to attempt to rule a city who has never contemplated the relevant forms. What forms are these? Presumably not straightforward things like the form of being three in number; for while it is well worth knowing what things are and what things are not three in number, common opinion with respect to three-ness isn't going to lead anyone astray. But things like the form of justice are another matter entirely. Common opinions about justice can be very misleading. And then there is the form of the good. In positing a form of the good, most valuable of all things to understand and yet most easily misunderstood, Socrates is suggesting that there is an essential nature that all things of value have in common. Various things may be variously good in various respects, but they are all variously the same one thing: *good*. To come to know the form of the good is to achieve wisdom.

- Do you think there is such a thing as the form of the good? If so, can you explain its nature? Socrates doesn't think he can give a direct account of it. Instead, he will try to describe it through analogies. Can you do any better?
- Is everything that is graspable by the mind capable of being defined? (Complex things can often be broken down and explained in terms of simpler things. But is everything like this? Is anything so basic that, though it may be indicated, it cannot be explained?)
- Aristotle is of the opinion that what it is to be good is not one thing, a single form, but many things, somewhat loosely grouped together under the word "good." (See *Nicomachean Ethics* [I.6.1096a23-28](#), *Eudemian Ethics* [I.8.1217b26-34](#), and *Topics* [I.15.107a3-11](#).) The chief reason he gives for holding this view is that the many things we call "good" – Fido the dog, God, justice, a line of verse, carrots, a flower arrangement, Henry being at

the starting line, Henry being over the finish line, and so on – are just too different in kind for the term “good” to mean the same thing when applied to each of them. Suppose someone were to raise this objection, basically that the word “good” is ambiguous. How might Socrates reply?

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58 Every Soul Pursues the Good

See [505b-506b](#). Everything done by every soul, Socrates claims, is done in pursuit of the good. They let this slip by with virtually no comment, but it is no small claim, and it deserves some reflection. What about robbers, seducers, embezzlers, betrayers, rapists, murderers, and hypocrites? What could Socrates be thinking? The idea is plainly not that everyone is in fact pursuing what they should be pursuing. More likely it is that everyone pursues the good as it appears to them to the best of their ability; no one voluntarily – with understanding – turns away from it. (Recall [381c](#): “And do you think, Adeimantus, that anyone whether god or human, would deliberately make himself worse in any way?” “No, that is impossible.”) The robber desires a visit to the local drug dealer, and so his treating you as an automatic teller machine seems to him pretty good. Pleasure of a different sort is good in a way that is apparent and motivating to the seducer. But these people fail to understand certain higher goods, and so they don’t appreciate them. A longing for the good is at work in everyone. But only the person who knows the form of the good understands the full range of goods and can reliably assess the relative worth of different kinds. (For related passages from other dialogues see *Gorgias* [499e](#) and *Symposium* [206a](#).)

- Can you imagine what it would be like to be evil? What do evil people care about? In what does their “fun” consist? What do they fear? How well do you suppose they understand what it is like to be good?
- If it is true that everyone is driven in their voluntary choices by a longing for the good, what are the implications for human freedom? If everyone is bound to pursue the good as they conceive it, is it possible for a person to have free will?
- What, on Socrates’ view, would it be for a will to be free? Free from what?

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59 The Sun

See [506b-509b](#). Socrates has us consider the sun and how in the “visible realm” it shines light upon material things and in this way enables our eyes to see these things. He then suggests that the form of the good functions similarly in the “intelligible realm” enabling our soul (presumably the rational part) to understand “intelligible things” (forms) by shining “truth” upon them. The sun-and-seeing part of this analogy is straightforward enough. But how is the form of the good supposed to be able to help us understand the other forms? And what is this analogue of light, “truth,” by means of which the form of the good is supposed to be able to illumine the other forms? One reasonable interpretation is to think of it this way: To understand the form of the beautiful one must know what counts as a good example of something beautiful, and why. Likewise for the form of green and for every other form. In general, then, to understand forms is to know the truth about what constitutes goodness for each kind of thing. But this knowledge is possible only because there is such a thing as what it is to be good. Indeed, one is able to identify a good example of something, and do this with knowledge, only to the extent that the form of the good shines its “truth” upon one’s soul and informs one’s thinking.

- Is understanding essentially a kind of valuing, an *appreciation* of something? If so, then can one give an adequate account of what it is to understand something without discussing what it is to value it?
- Socrates is going to suggest later ([516a-b](#), [517b-c](#)) that the form of the good can illumine other forms before it is itself understood. Can you imagine how this is possible?
- At the end of this passage ([509b](#)), Socrates suggests, strangely, that the good is in some sense “beyond” and “superior to” *being*. How do you interpret this?

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60 Degrees of Clarity (the Line)

See [509c-511e](#). Book VI ends with Socrates ranking four kinds of awareness with respect to their relative clarity: (1) “understanding” is clearest, (2) “thought” is next, (3) “belief” is still less clear, and (4) “imagination” least. (1) “Understanding” is of forms, and is achieved through “dialectic,” the activity of philosophical inquiry. (2) “Thought” is also of forms, but of forms that are contemplated indirectly, as when students of geometry use diagrams to help think about the properties of circles and triangles. (3) “Belief” is of particular things experienced directly, through sense perception. (4) “Imagination,” or “imaging” in some translations, is of particular things experienced indirectly, also through sense perception, but by means of likenesses such as “shadows . . . reflections . . . and everything of that sort.” That Socrates intends “everything of that sort” to include the artistic representation of things – especially descriptions in poetry – will become evident as the dialogue unfolds. (Notice Socrates’ description in Book VII of the shadows in the cave, and, when you get to it, his criticism of the poets in Book X.) In order to better appreciate what he is getting at in distinguishing these four levels of clarity, it may be helpful to consider how they might be used to describe a person’s growing awareness of justice. As a child, one might acquire a level (4) awareness of justice through fairy tales. Snow White, for instance, is driven off into the forest because of her beauty and goodness; then things are set to rights, and she returns home. One is aware, even at a very early age, that this is a happy ending, a just resolution of the story’s problem. But appreciation of this point requires only the vaguest conception of justice. Later, as one matures, one comes to have first hand experience of functional and dysfunctional groups, as well as functional and dysfunctional people. The result is an awareness of justice at level (3). One is not yet able to define justice, and may not even have words to describe the distinction one recognizes between justice and injustice, but one can remember something of the strife and resentment characteristic of injustice, as well as something of what it feels like to be treated fairly by a person of good will, and one cares about the difference. (Socrates observes in the dialogue *Alcibiades*, at [110b-c](#), that children are sensitive to when other children are playing fairly and

when they are cheating.) Moving up to level (2), one's awareness of justice grows close to an understanding of the virtue's essential nature. Indeed, this may be the relation Socrates, Glaucon, and the others are in at present with respect to justice, now that they have come to realize that it is every part of the city or soul doing its own proper work. Like the diagrams of circles and triangles that point students of geometry to the general natures of circularity and triangularity, the phrase "every part of the city or soul doing its proper job" amounts to being a sketch in words that points to the form of justice. This is still not full clarity, however, for there remains a "hypothetical" element (a supposition) in the definition. Consider the proper work of even one of these parts, the rational part of the soul. What is this work supposed to be? To rule the soul well. And what is it to rule the soul well? Wisely. And what is wisdom? Knowing what is good for the soul. And what does one know when one knows that? Ultimately, Socrates would say, the form of the good, the basis of all true value judgments. This is what one must know if one is to achieve a fully clear, "unhypothetical," level (1) understanding of justice. (Socrates will briefly return to describing the difference between the hypothetical and unhypothetical understanding of forms when he takes up the topic of dialectic at [533b-c](#).)

- Recall Socrates' suggestion at [401e-402a](#) that a person can encounter and get a feeling for the beautiful while still young, "before he is able to grasp the reason." Which level of awareness would this be?
- Suppose someone were to object that this four-level ranking glorifies the abstract over the particular to an absurd degree – that what it is, for instance, to understand a violin is to have it in one's hands and use it well, not to theorize about its essence. How might Socrates reply?

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Book VII

61 The Cave

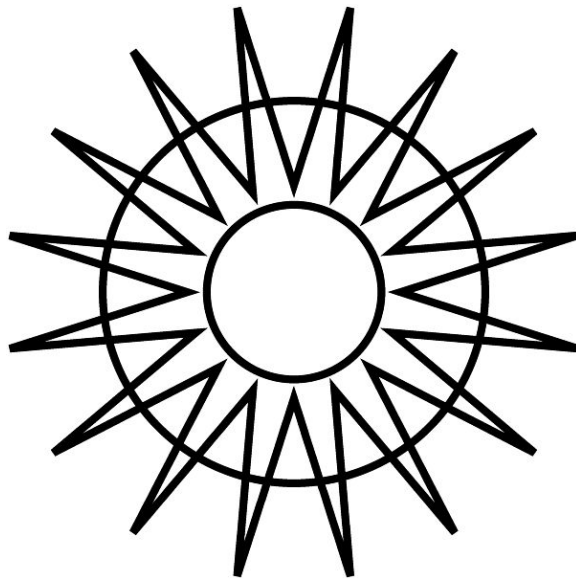
See [514a-517c](#), and perhaps [this](#). Socrates offers his remarkable cave allegory to illustrate in a general way the effect of education on people. At the end of the passage, he explains that the inside of the cave represents “the visible realm” (the world of particular things capable of being perceived through the senses), whereas the outside of the cave represents “the intelligible realm” (the world of forms capable of being understood by the rational part of the soul). The fire in the cave represents the sun in the heavens, while the sun outside the cave – “the last thing to be seen” – represents the form of the good. Socrates leaves the rest for his listeners to work out. Generations of intelligent troglodytes have found the exercise rewarding. See if you can’t work out a consistent set of answers to the following questions:

- What are the bonds fettering the necks and feet of the people on the floor of the cave? (What is it that keeps you tied down to your present beliefs, preventing you from acquiring knowledge that goes beyond your past experiences?)
- Who are the people up along the wall, talking, casting shadows, and in effect constituting the experience of the prisoners down below? (And what modern communication media does the shadow show suggest?)
- What does carrying the statues signify?
- What are the shadows that are cast upon the wall of the cave?
- What is the pain and confusion that the prisoners suffer upon being freed?
- What is it to drag a person into the sunlight?
- What are the shadows and images outside of the cave that at first are the only things the freed prisoners are able to see in the intelligible realm?
- What passes for wisdom among the prisoners in the cave? And how is this pseudo-wisdom acquired?
- Why would the person who has seen the sun prefer to “go through any sufferings” than return to the way of life and mindset of the cave?
- Why would the prisoners want to kill the person who tries to free them and

lead them out of the cave?

- Where do you suppose Socrates sees himself in this allegory? Is he trapped down below? Has he broken free? Is he one of those who has come to know the form of the good (“not reflections of it in water or some alien place, but the sun just by itself in its own place”), or does he still have yet to achieve this highest level of understanding?

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62 Two Kinds of Confusion

See [517c-518b](#). Socrates has us consider what it would be like for an enlightened person to be “compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to compete about the shadows of justice, or about the statues of which they are the shadows, and to dispute the way these things are understood by people who have never seen justice itself.” Such a person would be confused, at least at first, blinded as if suddenly having stepped from sunlight into a dark room. Socrates contrasts this with the sort of confusion caused by stepping from darkness into the light.

- What is it to be confused?
- How might turning one’s attention from forms to particular things and images of particular things be confusing? Would the difficulty be in recognizing the particulars, in communicating to others the inadequacy of the particulars, or in something else?
- How might turning one’s attention to forms for the first time be confusing?
- Is it bad to be confused?

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63 The Craft of Education

See [518b-519b](#). Education, Socrates tells us, is not a matter of putting sight into blind eyes. The soul is not blind; it is just that “the instrument with which each of us learns,” the rational part of the soul, is usually misdirected. It needs to be “turned around.” The trouble is that the appetitive pleasures we experience in our youth forge in us bonds of “kinship with becoming.” The appetitive part, in other words, grows disproportionately strong, and the soul develops an excessive concern for the ever-changing particular things of the world (for “becoming,” as opposed to the unchanging “being” of the forms). The rational part is still present in the soul, and active, and capable of turning ultimately to the form of the good; but, as if with “leaden weights,” its vision is pulled downwards, and it is reduced to cleverness in the service of the appetitive part. (This is a particularly dangerous condition when the rational part is naturally strong and the appetitive part has been seduced by one or more of the darker, addictive desires to which the soul is subject. More on this in Book IX.) The proper goal of education, as Socrates understands it, is to free the soul from an excessively narrow focus on transient particulars, and to turn it “to look at true things.”

- What is it to show a person something?
- Can a person be shown forms?
- Is there anything other than forms that could help tease a person into appreciating forms? (Conversations perhaps? Puzzles? Works of art?)
- How might a person come to be convinced that they would benefit from seeking knowledge of the forms?

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64 Compulsory Service for Philosophers

See [519b-521b](#). To understand the form of the good is to become wise, and wise philosophers will understand and appreciate that justice requires them to do their proper job for the flourishing of the city. Besides, they realize they owe a debt to the city for their upbringing. Therefore, although ruling a city is not as pleasant as remaining in undisturbed contemplation of the eternal nature of things, enlightened philosophers will nonetheless accept the responsibility and return to the cave as politicians. As individuals, they may be happier philosophizing all the time, but the city as a whole will be happier with them ruling.

- Ideally, what should be the motivation for someone to go into politics?
- What does Socrates mean when he suggests that a true philosopher would despise ruling? Wouldn't this be to despise what is good?
- Recalling the division of goods at the beginning of Book II, what would Socrates consider ruling, something good for its own sake, something good for its consequences, or both?
- Is Socrates right that cities are best ruled by people "least eager to rule"?
- Can a person go off like a hermit and philosophize outside of society, or does the activity of philosophy require the kind of interaction that only a city can provide?

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65 Numbers as Summoners

See [521c-526c](#). How can the rational part of the soul be awakened and made to turn toward the forms? Socrates notes that there are certain objects of sense perception – “summoners,” he calls them – that “strike the relevant sense at the same time as do their opposites.” For instance, the same thing can appear both big and small, hard and soft, thick and thin, light and heavy, and so on. Each of these properties is, of course, relational. For something to appear both big and small, it has to appear big in relation to one thing, and small in relation to something else. Socrates’ point is that the question “Is it big?” leads the mind to a further question – “What is it to be big?” – and this question cannot be answered simply on the basis of sense perception. One has to stop looking and start thinking. Socrates suggests that the numerical properties of things are similarly problematic and thought-provoking. His discussion of this is unclear, but he seems to have in mind questions such as these: Is a baseball team one or nine? Is a slice of pie one or one eighth? When one lump of clay is rolled in with another is the result one or two? These questions, of course, have answers. But again, the answers call for more than mere sense perception. The rational part of the soul needs to wake up and consider what it means to be one, nine, one eighth, and so on, and then consider how these numbers “that are accessible only in thought” are relevant in particular contexts. Numbers are some of the simplest and most accessible of forms, and people who make a regular exercise of studying them “become generally sharper than they were.” It therefore makes sense to begin the study of forms with the study of numbers.

- How are mathematical truths (such as that the three interior angles of a triangle are equivalent to two right angles) similar in nature to definitional truths (such as that green is a color)?
- How are mathematical truths different in nature from observational truths (such as that there is beer in the refrigerator)?
- Are mathematical questions better at turning the mind toward forms than other sorts of questions?

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66 Further Mathematical Studies

See [526c-531c](#). After numbers, Socrates recommends studying “geometry” (shapes, both in two and three dimensions), “astronomy” (“the motion of things having depth,” adding the fourth dimension of time to the three dimensions of geometry), and “harmonics” (the proportions that generate musical harmony). The aim of these further mathematical studies is to turn the attention of students away from the transient particulars and toward the eternal forms. This is why Socrates recommends studying problems of a sort that do not require for their solution information gathered through the externally directed senses of the body. There is no need to develop skill at observing the shapes of crystals, the motions of the planets, or the subtleties of audible sounds – indeed, interest in these things could even be counterproductive – when the point is to have the rational part of the soul “purified” of concern for particulars and “rekindled” in preparation for philosophical inquiry.

- Most people appreciate the usefulness of mathematics, but some people love it for its own sake. What is it about mathematics that these people love?
- People skilled in mathematics are often said to be good at abstract thinking. What is abstract thinking?
- The Greeks were aware, on the basis of experiments with altering the length of strings equal in tension and tubes equal in diameter, that the proportion of one to one half (one string or tube being twice the length of the other) generates the musical interval of the octave, that the proportion of one to two thirds generates the fifth, and that one to three fourths generates the fourth. Socrates criticizes his contemporaries for taking the numbers at work in these “audible concordances” seriously, but failing to investigate, apart from sense perceptions, “which numbers are in concord and which are not.” What could he mean by this? Is there a kind of inaudible, purely mathematical, harmony that can be investigated through the study of ratios?

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67 Dialectic

See [531c-535a](#). All these mathematical studies “are merely preludes to the theme itself,” the art of philosophical conversation, or “dialectic,” a form of “inquiry that tries to acquire a systematic and wholly general grasp of what each thing itself is,” and attempts to do this by means of “discussion and apart from sense perceptions.” It is a simple enough activity as Socrates describes it: give “an account of the being of each thing,” and then “survive all examination, as if in battle.” As a description of philosophical conversation, this is like saying that playing the piano is sitting down and pushing the keys in the right order. Still, it characterizes at the most basic level what philosophical conversation has been from Plato’s time down to our own. Its elements are question, answer, objection, and reply. Not all philosophers over the centuries have agreed that forms exist, and not all have made a point of presenting their philosophical reflections dialectically, but these elements – question, answer, objection, and reply – remain essential to the kind of probing, critical thinking characteristic of what philosophers do.

- If the account of a form – say, the form of justice – is examined dialectically and remains unrefuted, is there reason to suppose it is true?
- Is there a better way than dialectical inquiry to determine what it is for a human being to be just? Is there any other way?
- Does dialectic require working with other people or is it something that can be done alone?

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68 Selecting Students for Philosophy

See [535a-537d](#). “People’s souls are much more likely to give up during strenuous studies than during physical training,” Socrates thinks, since the pain is more personal, being peculiar to the student and not shared with his or her body. So it will be important to identify students who have a natural aptitude for the kind of abstract thinking involved in philosophical training. Because children learn more easily than older people, Socrates recommends introducing the preliminary mathematical subjects early, and “not in the shape of compulsory instruction,” but through play. This will make it easier to determine which children are naturally suited for intellectual pursuits. Besides, “a free person should learn nothing slavishly,” and “no compulsory instruction remains in the soul” anyway. Later, after the age of twenty, those chosen to go on to higher education are to study “the subjects they learned in no particular order” as children, and bring them “together into a unified vision of their kinship with one another and with the nature of what is.” Socrates considers this challenge (achieving a unified understanding of mathematical subjects and their relation to the forms) to be “the greatest test for determining who is and who is not naturally dialectical.” Indeed, the ability to achieve this sort of understanding is just what he thinks it is to have a talent for philosophical inquiry.

- When Socrates suggests at [535a](#) that philosophy students should, as far as possible, be good-looking, what could he be thinking? (Consider [402d](#) and [403c](#).) Does the body indicate anything important about the soul?
- Is it true that people give up more readily in hard study than in physical training? If so, is it because the pain of studying “is more their own,” and therefore more profoundly discouraging?
- How can mathematics be taught through play?
- Is it true that “no compulsory instruction remains in the soul”?
- How is skill at giving an account and surviving refutation related to skill at achieving a unified understanding of things?

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69 Abuses of Refutation

See [537d-539d](#). Socrates wants to make clear that he is not endorsing “dialectical discussion as it is currently practiced,” meaning the sort of thing taught by the sophists. This was skill at presenting a point of view persuasively and refuting the other side, not for the sake of getting at the truth, but in order to persuade. Unlike the highly regarded sophist Protagoras, who claimed to teach how to make the weaker side in a dispute appear to be the stronger, Socrates wants a kind of dialectic that reveals the weaker side for what it is. He warns against introducing dialectical refutation to people who are still young (not yet thirty), for, “like puppies,” young people “enjoy dragging and tearing with argument anyone within reach,” until, “when they have refuted many themselves and been refuted by many, they quickly fall into violently disbelieving everything they believed before.” Traditional values and convictions fall quickly to the dragging and tearing of refutation, and if one is not striving with all of one’s might to determine what should take their place, nothing will take their place.

- Is it bad for young people to become disillusioned with traditional ideals?
- Consider how debate is currently taught and practiced in American high schools and colleges. Does participation in this activity harm young people?
- Socrates says that it is a mistake to let people “taste argument while they are young.” And yet he was famous in his day for doing just this. He would walk the streets of Athens and enter into philosophical conversation with all sorts of people, but especially young men and boys who were intelligent, pretentious, or both. Suppose someone were to object that Socrates knowingly took part in corrupting the youth of Athens. How might he reply?

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70 Completing the Education of the Rulers

See [539d-540c](#). People training to be rulers will spend roughly five years, from about age thirty to thirty-five, in dialectical inquiry (this coming on the heels of ten years or so of formal mathematical study). Then, for fifteen years, they will “go down into the cave again,” and “take command in matters of war and the other offices suitable for young people, so that they won’t be inferior to the others in experience.” Socrates appears to have in mind something like a rotating internship, enabling the rulers-in-training to learn first hand how the various jobs in the city are performed, what sorts of people succeed best at what jobs, what problems various workers face, what hopes and fears they have, and so on. This fifteen year internship studying the world of particulars compliments the fifteen previous years focussed on the intelligible realm. Finally, around age fifty, “those who have survived the tests and are entirely best in every practical task and every science must be led at last to the end and compelled to lift up the radiant light of their souls, and look toward what itself provides light for everything.” Having come to understand the form of the good, they are to rule.

- Is practical experience necessary for coming to understand the form of the good?
- Does it make sense to suppose that a philosopher would have to be “compelled” in the end to turn his or her understanding to the form of the good? Is there any reason a lover of wisdom might hesitate and need a gentle push?
- What might Socrates mean when he says that the souls of the philosophers have a “radiant light”?
- If what it is for a soul to be just is for each part of the soul to do its proper job, and if the proper job of the rational part of the soul is to rule wisely, and if wisdom requires knowledge of the form of the good, and if this knowledge is achieved only by philosophers, then it follows that philosophers are the only truly just people. Can this be so?

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71 Establishing Justice

See [540d-541b](#). “Everyone in the city who is over ten years old they will send into the country. They will take over the children, and far removed from current habits, which their parents possess, they will bring them up in their own ways and laws, which are the ones we described before.” This, Socrates and Glaucon agree, would be “the quickest and easiest way” to establish the sort of city they have been discussing; and with this last burst of speculation, they judge that enough has been said about the just city and the just soul. Book VIII will begin where Book IV left off, with an exploration of unjust cities and unjust souls.

- In expressing his opinion that sending away the parents and raising the children in isolation is how a just city “would come into existence, if it ever did,” is Glaucon saying, in effect, that such a city, while theoretically possible, is practically impossible?
- What is the difference between being practically impossible and being actually impossible?
- Consider an example of something that once was, but has ceased to be, practically impossible. What changed?

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Book VIII

72 The Fall of the Aristocratic City

See [543a-547a](#). The passage beginning at [545d](#) is one of the weirdest in the dialogue. “How, then, Glaucon, will our city be changed? . . . Something like this. . . .” Most of what follows concerning perfect numbers, rational diameters, and the achievement of procreative harmonies is presumably tongue in cheek – spoken as it is by the Muses “in tragic tones, playing and jesting with us, as if we were children and they were speaking in earnest.” The basic problem Socrates draws attention to, however, is serious enough. The philosopher-rulers will make mistakes, and to begin with, the city’s eugenics program ([459d-461e](#)), which depends for its administration on “rational calculation combined with sense perception,” will fail to breed the right sort of people to serve as rulers. (Behavioral genetics, as it’s called nowadays, is still a very poorly understood branch of natural science.) When the wrong people come to serve as rulers, they “won’t be able to guard well the testing” of the youth. The career counseling program of the city – assigning each person the job for which he or she is best suited – will therefore fail, cooperation will break down, and the interpersonal struggling and oppression characteristic of injustice will begin.

- Socrates draws attention to a fundamental problem for any institution: matching people to jobs. Getting the right people to serve as leaders is especially important when institutions are highly structured and centrally controlled. Because it is fully expected that sooner or later the wrong people will come to power, the Constitution of the United States requires a division of power and frequent elections. A certain degree of what Socrates would call injustice is accepted in the U.S. without anxiety because it is felt that there is a lawful way to counter it in its worst occurrences. But is this all that should be done? Is there no way the law can be modified to see that more of the right people get into office in the first place?
- Would raising the salary of politicians – perhaps to something in the neighborhood of what some of the better professional athletes make – be helpful in attracting the right people to serve in positions of political

authority, or would it be harmful?

- Would a rigorous civil service exam be a good idea?

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73 The Timocratic City

See [547b-548d](#). When the various people in the city start disagreeing with one another, those who are especially strong in the appetitive part of the soul (“iron and bronze”) pull the city towards economic development and the pursuit of wealth while those especially strong in the rational and spirited parts (“the gold and silver types”) pull the city “towards virtue and the old political system.” Socrates speculates that the city ends up compromising, with the former auxiliaries taking over as rulers. This is a compromise because the spirited values of honor and victory, involving as they do earning the respect of other people, fall between the narrowly self-centered consumer values of the appetitive part and the rational part’s fully informed love of the good. After owning no private property at all in the aristocratic city, the former auxiliaries take possession of all the land and houses, and distribute them in the manner of feudal lords. Then they enslave the city’s workers, “those whom they had previously guarded as free friends and providers of upkeep,” and turn their attention, in foreign affairs, to war, and in domestic affairs, to guarding against uprisings of the people. Socrates describes the domestic situation as enslavement because the workers are no longer working for the harmonious flourishing of the whole city. Instead, they are compelled to be part of the timocratic war machine. Although the rulers value above all else the hard-earned honors of warfare – “timocratic” means honor-ruled – this does not prevent them from indulging their appetitive desires in private; for as far as the spirited part is concerned, what goes on in private doesn’t matter much as long as it remains discreet and doesn’t surface to besmirch one’s reputation. What happens to the philosophers under this constitution is unclear. They presumably desire to return to contemplation of the forms, but they have to find some way to make a living, and the rulers are not going to pay them to undermine their reputations. (Maybe the philosophers end up researching new weapon systems.) The paradigmatic timocracy in Socrates’ day was Sparta, Athens’ primary adversary in the Peloponnesian War. Examples from later chapters in history include Rome under the Republic with its profound concern for timocratic [dignitas](#), and the feudal societies of Europe and Japan with their codes of honor

([chivalry](#) and [bushido](#) respectively).

- How would the life of a worker in a timocratic city be different from the life of a worker in an aristocratic city? Would there be any noticeable difference?
- Were timocratic societies more common in the past than they are at present? If so, why might this be so?

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74 The Timocratic Soul

See [548d-550c](#). Just as the philosopher-led aristocratic city has its parallel in the reason-led aristocratic soul, the soldier-led timocratic city has its parallel in the timocratic soul, which is ruled by the spirited part. Being “a lover of ruling and of honor,” such a person is fiercely competitive and concerned above all with matters of reputation. He is “gentle to free people and very submissive to rulers.” But he tends to be “harsh to his slaves.” They do not share his noble ideals, and so they need stern guidance. He loves music and poetry, but loves physical training and hunting more. As for money, he despises it in his youth, but comes to “love it more and more” as he grows older; for the rational part, being only a servant in his soul, doesn’t insist, as it would if his soul were aristocratic, that temperance is every bit as important in private life as it is in public life. Socrates ends his account of timocracy in the soul describing how a young man, pulled between the philosophical ideals of his father and the immoderate nagging of his mother and others, can end up surrendering the rulership of his soul to the spirited part. The classic literary study of timocratic souls is Homer’s *Iliad*. (Consider the opening [scene](#) between Achilles and Agamemnon, Hector’s [farewell](#) to Andromache, etc.).

- Have you ever known someone ruled by what Socrates calls the spirited part of the soul, someone who cared more about honor and praise than about either immediate gratification or philosophical pursuits? This would be a person who puts a very high value on reputation and the marks of reputation (high grades, prizes, medals, awards, honorary titles, and the like) and on the sort of competition that earns these things. Such a person would be quick to take offense at insults, but slow to give in to licentiousness in its various forms.
- What is there to admire in a timocratic soul? What is there to regret?

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75 The Oligarchic City

See [550c-552e](#). Of the five types of cities and souls that Socrates is discussing, the oligarchic falls in the middle – two are more just (the aristocratic and the timocratic) while two are more unjust (the democratic and the tyrannical). The defining characteristic of the oligarchic city is that rich people rule. Because few are ever really rich in a community – wealth being the curiously relative concept that it is – it makes some sense to call such a government “oligarchy,” which means, literally, government by the few. Money is not, for Socrates, the root of all evil, but he does consider the love of it largely responsible for causing the timocratic city to devolve into an oligarchic city. What begins in the timocratic city as a private amassing of wealth by the rulers eventually comes into the open as shameless money-making, and then as highly respected money-making. Successful money-makers (business leaders) are praised, admired, and assigned so often to leadership positions that wealth ends up a requirement for serving as a ruler. Socrates identifies four problems with the oligarchic city: (1) people who are primarily money-makers have only a partial understanding of the city’s good, so their understanding of how to rule is incomplete, (2) the city “is not one, but inevitably two, a city of the poor and one of the rich, living in the same place and always plotting against one another,” (3) the rulers are not themselves soldiers, and so they are torn between arming, and thereby empowering, the city’s poor, and hiring mercenaries, and (4) – in Socrates’ opinion the greatest of these problems – people are allowed to sell off all their possessions and go on living in the city. Such persons become “drones” (useless persons), either “stingless” drones (beggars) or drones “with stings” (criminals). For historical examples of oligarchic societies, consider the Netherlands in the [heyday](#) of the Dutch East India Company, or France before the democratic revolution of 1789.

- What are some examples of oligarchic societies in the world today?
- Is it unjust for people in a city to be unemployed?
- Is it true that people who spend most of their time making money fail to appreciate non-appetitive values such as honor and knowledge of the forms?

- Does being successful in business prepare a person well for serving as a politician?

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76 The Oligarchic Soul

See [553a-555b](#). Socrates imagines the oligarchic man coming to be when his timocratic father, a lover of honor, is falsely accused, tried, convicted, and stripped of his property. The son, feeling the bite of poverty and suffering a general disillusionment with the pursuit of honor, gives himself over to money-making. Seeking material security, the appetitive part takes command of the soul and subordinates the other parts. The spirited part has its competitive energies turned to the arena of the marketplace, and the rational part is reduced to contemplating the equivalent of Franklin's [maxims](#), the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Fortune* magazine. Socrates explains that it is really only a portion of the appetitive part that rules in the oligarchic person, the "necessary appetites." By this he means those desires we are compelled by nature to satisfy that are beneficial to our health and "useful where work is concerned." (See [558d-559d](#).) Our desire for nourishing food is an example. As oligarchic people see it, health is a good investment, and so they eat well, exercise regularly, and don't smoke. If they are like Cephalus and believe the gods can help arrange a desirable afterlife, then they take part in the appropriate liturgies. One thing Socrates is willing to say for oligarchic people is that they are generally trustworthy, this being good for business. Justice, of a certain conventional sort, pays. But when injustice can be done with impunity – when, say, an opportunity for undetectable tax evasion happens to present itself – then oligarchic people cannot be counted on (to do the right thing). Also, as Socrates wryly observes, although they are basically thrifty and conservative, most of them give in to their "dronish," unnecessary appetites "when they have other people's money to spend."

- Can a person with an oligarchic soul be happy (possess *eudaimonia*)? As the *Republic* draws to a close, one should recall the challenge Socrates is trying to meet. He is to prove that justice is desirable for its own sake, so desirable, in fact, that it is more desirable to be a just man, falsely accused and facing the prospect of being tortured to death, than an unjust man, believed to be just and therefore honored. How bad is the oligarchic life?

How good, by comparison, is the aristocratic?

- The oligarchic person has “dronish,” unnecessary appetitive desires, but these, as a rule, are kept well in check. Would Socrates consider such a person temperate (possessing *sophrosune*)?
- Why does Socrates think the oligarchic soul is less just than the timocratic?
- In distinguishing necessary from unnecessary appetites is Socrates suggesting that the appetitive part of the soul is really more than one part? How might Socrates go about arguing that this is not the case?

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77 The Democratic City

See [555b-558c](#). The upper class in an oligarchic city is generally “not willing to enact laws to prevent young people who have become intemperate from spending and wasting their wealth.” On the contrary, they encourage debt among the young, “so that by buying and making loans on the property of such people, they “themselves can become even richer and more honored.” (Think of the credit card applications hanging from the walls of college campuses nowadays alongside ads for Spring Break bacchanals in the tropics.) As more and more people are reduced to poverty and “drone” status, resentment builds, until it eventually occurs to the lower class that it would be easy enough to overthrow their bourgeois oppressors and seize control of the government. The oligarchic city falls in a democratic revolution. (“Democratic” means, literally, ruled by the people.) Socrates’ description of the city that results is especially interesting, for Athens was at the time one of the most democratic in the world. He describes a city “full of freedom and freedom of speech.” Everyone has “license . . . to do whatever one wants,” and to “arrange his own life in whatever way pleases him.” (That Socrates intends this claim to include slaves, women, aliens, and children becomes clear a few pages later, at [562e-563b](#). Of course, he may be exaggerating a bit.) The democratic city, like a “cloak embroidered with every kind of ornament,” has in it “every sort of character,” and so, of cities, it “would appear to be the most beautiful.” Everyone belongs. Are you a timocratic sort of person? You can join the hawks in the public assembly and argue for an expansionist foreign policy. Is money-making what you love? There is a faction in the assembly that cares for little else but the state of the economy. Are you an aristocratic person with a thirst for wisdom? The philosophers meet every morning under the colonnade off to the side of the agora. Do you just want to attend religious festivals, dinner parties, trials in the law courts, and get drunk? You will find plenty of companions. Liberty! Égalité! Tolerance! These principles characterize life in the democratic city. “Isn’t that a heavenly and pleasant way to pass the time, while it lasts?” Socrates asks. “It probably is,” Adeimantus replies, “while it lasts.”

- Freedom of speech, freedom to arrange one's life as one pleases, freedom from the censure of one's neighbors – this passage strikes a chord with contemporary Americans. We have as national symbols a Statue of Liberty and a Liberty Bell. We put “Liberty” on all our coins. “Give me Liberty or give me Death!” rings through our nation's history. What is Socrates' problem? How can this be unjust? Who doesn't appreciate freedom?
- To be free is to be unbound or unblocked with respect to something one cares about. Is there a kind of freedom that Socrates has in mind in his characterization of the aristocratic city and soul? If so, how might he characterize it?
- What is it to be a good leader in a democracy? Compare your answer with what Socrates says back at [426c](#).

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78 The Democratic Soul

See [558c-562a](#). The democratic soul is like the oligarchic soul in being ruled by the appetitive part, but whereas the necessary desires (the beneficial appetites) are dominant in the oligarchic soul, unnecessary desires (the drones of the soul) are, in the democratic soul, on at least an equal footing. In the story Socrates tells, a young man, having been raised in an oligarchic household, “tastes the honey of the drones” and begins associating with people who can provide him with every sort of appetitive pleasure. Not having been educated well, the rational part of his soul has nothing to say to dissuade him. Just as the rational part works in the oligarchic soul to figure out ways to acquire and retain wealth, its cleverness now comes to be exercised in finding creative ways of achieving these dissolute pleasures. What becomes of such a person? “If he’s lucky,” Socrates says, “and does not go beyond the limits in his bacchic frenzy, and if, as a result of his growing somewhat older, the great tumult in him passes, he welcomes back some of the exiles” – some of the neglected desires, for wealth, for honor, for learning (of a sort) – “and ceases to surrender himself completely to the newcomers. Then, putting all his pleasures on an equal footing, he lives, always surrendering rule over himself to whichever desire comes along, as if it were chosen by lot, until it is satisfied; and after that to another, dishonoring none but satisfying all equally.” This makes for a somewhat disorderly life, but the democratic person considers it “pleasant, free, and blessedly happy.”

- What does it mean to call someone a “well-rounded person”? Are democratic people, with their equal valuing of all pleasures, more well-rounded than aristocratic people?
- How might a democratic person practice philosophy differently than an aristocratic person?
- What is so bad about democratic souls that Socrates ranks them just one step above the most unjust of souls?
- Interpersonal love is an important part of life, and it is interesting, given how wide-ranging the discussion in the Republic is, how little attention

Socrates gives to it. Suppose one were to ask Socrates whether each of the four types of persons discussed so far – the aristocratic, the timocratic, the oligarchic, and the democratic – would love other people in the same way or in characteristically different ways. How might he reply? What is it to love a person?

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79 The Tyrannical City

See [562a-569c](#). “When someone appropriates the possessions of the citizens, on the other hand, and then kidnaps and enslaves the possessors as well, instead of these shameful names he is called happy and blessed: not only by the citizens themselves, but even by all who learn that he has committed the whole of injustice. For it is not the fear of doing injustice, but of suffering it, that elicits the reproaches of those who revile injustice. So you see, Socrates, injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterful than justice.” Thus spoke Thrasymachus in Book I, at [344b-c](#). Here at the end of Book VIII, Socrates explains how such a person can come to power. Freedom is the single overriding value in the democratic city, but it is a freedom that comes at the expense of authority. Fathers aspire to be like their sons, while sons show no respect for their fathers. Teachers flatter their students, while students despise their teachers. “In general, the young are the spitting images of their elders and compete with them in words and deeds, while the old stoop to the level of the young and are full of wit and indulgence, imitating the young for fear of being thought disagreeable and masterful.” Resident aliens and citizens, men and women, slaves and slave owners – all come to have equal freedom. In this atmosphere of freedom and equality, the class of “drones,” which in the oligarchic city were marginalized as beggars or criminals, come into their own and dominate the public assembly. They set themselves up as advocates for the people against what they represent as the unfair material success of the rich, whom they label “oligarchs,” and they see to it that as much “honey” is taxed out of the rich as possible. Some of this public money makes it down to the common people, but the leader-drones “keep the greatest share for themselves.” The rich take offense at being abused at the hands of these people and so they “really do become oligarchs,” which is to say that they move to reform the government so that people of good sense (good sensible money-makers) are in control. In reaction, the people choose one drone “as their special leader,” a man of rare gifts – clever, fierce, and charismatic – and turn to him for their defense. Then something happens. “By leveling the usual false charges and bringing people into court, he commits murder. And by blotting out a

man's life, his impious tongue and lips taste kindred blood. Then he banishes and kills and drops hints about the cancellation of debts and the redistribution of land." In this atmosphere of civil strife, the people, fearing for the safety of their champion and protector, grant him a bodyguard, which he proceeds to strengthen until there is no one left to oppose him in the city. At this point, a different sort of person might resign the position of dictator and return, like [Cincinnatus](#), to the plow. But this champion of the people is no longer a man with any semblance of temperance in his soul. Having tasted "kindred blood," he has become a wolf among men, a tyrant. One of the first things the newly established tyrant does is start up a war, for people feel they need a strong leader most when they are at war. While the war is going on, he works to consolidate his power. As the bravest of those who helped him come to power begin to criticize his regime, he has them seized and killed. He [continues](#) to target such people "until he is left with no friend or enemy who is worth anything at all." Socrates contrasts this sort of purge with that performed by physicians: "they draw off the worst and leave the best, but he does just the opposite." The tyrant finds that the more the people in the city grow to hate him, the more he needs a strong, loyal cadre of bodyguards. So he hires a private army, recruiting people from other cities ("foreign drones") as well as from the ranks of emancipated slaves, the city, of course, picking up the tab. He then gives himself over to ruthless maintenance of power and to the sort of revelry that comes of being above the law.

- Can you imagine a tyrant coming to power in the United States? How could this be achieved? What social conditions would make such a thing more likely?

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Book IX

80 Lawless Desires

See [571a-d](#). Having distinguished the unnecessary desires of the soul's appetitive part from the necessary ones, Socrates now identifies certain of the unnecessary desires as deserving special attention. He calls these desires "lawless." They typically lay submerged, deep in the soul, held in check by the other parts. But in bed, at night, especially after one has glutted oneself on food and drink, and the rational part of one's soul has gone unconscious, they awaken, and "freed from all shame and wisdom," they seek to gratify themselves upon the stage of one's dreams. Incest, bestiality, murder, cannibalism – nothing is too horrible or disgusting. These strangest of desires are essentially transgressive. They involve the exercise of power in violation of values that make peaceful, constructive, orderly living possible. To act upon them is, in other words, to alienate oneself from cooperation with other people, and from the civilizing effect of communal life. They are not merely non-rational, but counter-rational, and therefore potentially very dangerous.

- What is the desire that motivates a rapist? How is it different from other desires involving sexuality?
- Does the presence of lawless desires indicate that a person wants to break free of peaceful, constructive, orderly living? If so, to what end? Is transgression itself gratifying?
- How is it possible for a counter-rational desire to be controlled at all? (In thinking about this, recall the example at [439e-440a](#) of Leontius and the corpses.)
- Socrates suggests that lawless desires can be eliminated from the soul. Can they?

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81 The Right Way to Fall Asleep

See [571d-572b](#). In this curious little passage, Socrates suggests that there is such a thing as the morally right (temperate) way to compose oneself in preparation for falling asleep. The rational part is to be roused, the spirited part soothed, and the appetitive part neither starved nor feasted. One is not to go to bed hungry, thirsty, or bearing grudges, but also not drunk, or bloated with food, or numbed with sexual excess. A nourishing snack, philosophical conversation with friends, a stroll under the stars before turning in – this sort of thing gives us some control over that strangest portion of our everyday lives, our sleep. Not only does Socrates think that the lawless desires can in this way be suppressed, if not exorcised, but the rational part of the soul, “by itself and pure,” can be freed “to investigate and reach out for the perception of something . . . it does not know.”

- Is there such a thing as an immoral thought, something that ought not to be thought?
- Should we be concerned about the things we dream? Can dreams ever harm us, or benefit us?
- Does ethics extend to our sleeping lives?
- What could it be for the rational part of the soul to dream?
- Is it possible to dream a philosophical conversation?

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82 The Tyrannical Soul

See [572b-576b](#). Recall that, in the story Socrates tells of how a tyrant comes to power in the city, the troubles begin with a struggle between the idle drones and the conservative money-makers, which leads to the people choosing a champion from the drones to defend them from the perceived threat of oligarchic conservatism. Socrates thinks something like this can happen in the soul of a person raised in the liberty of a democratic household. Here the struggle is between the various desires of the appetitive part. The young man's prodigal friends are continually pulling him towards the unnecessary pleasures. This prompts his father, who doesn't approve of favoring one set of pleasures over another, to do what he can to pull him back towards a concern for the necessary pleasures. (One imagines him pausing in mid-sentence, vaguely aware that he is lecturing his son in the very words of his oligarchic father: about settling down, getting a job, investing his money, avoiding unmixed wine, and so on.) But the friends win out, for they "contrive to implant a powerful passion in him as the popular leader of those idle and profligate appetites – a sort-of great, winged drone." In other words, one of the lawless desires – for drugs perhaps, or sex, or power – is unleashed from the confines of his dream life, and takes root at the center of his concerns. It grows into such a longing that it takes control of his soul, and a kind of madness sets in. Nothing that stands in the way of its gratification is tolerated. Like the tyrant, who purges the city of whomever dares to question his rule, the tyrannical desire crushes or locks away any old beliefs or desires that rise up to question the prudence or decency of its demands. And so it goes, from bad to worse, until the person finds himself no longer able to fund his lifestyle. With a lawless desire on the throne of his soul, he thinks nothing of turning to purse snatching, temple robbing, or the slave trade. If he is crafty, then the field of politics offers further opportunities, as do the law courts. And if he is spirited as well as crafty, and it is power over others that he craves, then, of course, there is organized crime, the highest form of which is tyranny.

- How similar, psychologically, are political tyrants and drug addicts?

- Imagine a person who is obsessed with pursuing the answer to an exceptionally challenging problem in mathematics. This is all he cares about. Everything in his life is subordinated to finding the answer to this problem. He has contempt for his fellow human beings – “mere particulars,” he calls them – and thinks nothing of stealing from them or manipulating them in other ways if it will help him as he works towards his problem’s solution. Would this person have a tyrannical soul? Socrates assumes that a person ruled by the rational part of the soul will live an orderly, virtuous life. But he also assumes that such a person either knows the form of the good or aspires to attain this knowledge. What then of the obsessed mathematician? Is this example psychologically possible, or does the pursuit of the forms, even of relatively unimportant mathematical forms, inevitably cleanse the soul of selfishness and moral insensitivity?

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83 The First Proof: Analogy of City and Soul

See [576b-580c](#). Socrates' reply to the challenge from Book II is in the form of three arguments, the first of which is an argument by analogy: A tyrannical soul is like a tyrannical city, for the powerful lawless desire of a tyrannical person lords over the rest of the soul much as a tyrant lords over the rest of the city. The tyrannical city is, however, enslaved, poor, fearful, and generally miserable. Therefore, the tyrannical soul is similarly miserable. (It is doubly bad, Socrates thinks, if the person is an actual tyrant, for then he is not only enslaved internally, but, because he is in constant danger of being overthrown by his subjects, he lives in constant fear, a prisoner in his own palace.) It is clear at the end of this passage that Glaucon and Socrates think the argument can be extended to democratic, oligarchic, timocratic, and aristocratic souls as well, with the result that people are happy to the extent that they are just. It never gets stated explicitly, but the general argument appears to be this: The more justice there is in a city, the more each citizen is doing the job for which he or she is best suited, and the more harmoniously the city functions. The more harmoniously the city functions, the more adequately the citizens' desires are satisfied. The more adequately the citizens' desires are satisfied, the happier the city is. So the more justice there is in a city, the happier it is. Similarly, the more justice there is in a person's soul, the more each part of the soul is doing the job for which it is best suited, and the more harmoniously the soul functions. The more harmoniously the soul functions, the more adequately the desires of each part of the soul are satisfied. The more adequately the desires of the parts are satisfied, the happier the person is. Therefore, the more one is just, the more one is happy.

- How good is the analogy between cities and souls? How is the relation between the parts of a soul different from the relation between the parts of a city?
- Is a successful mobster whose rational part is entirely in the service of his appetitive part necessarily miserable? Would the rational part feel pain on account of its servitude?

- What about the democratic city and soul? Didn't Socrates and Glaucon agree that life in the democratic city is pleasant ([558a](#))? So by the same analogy they use to argue against the happiness of the tyrannical soul, wouldn't it follow that the democratic soul lives pleasantly? It samples all the pleasures, and even dabbles in something like philosophy when it feels like it. It may not engage in any real dialectical conversation, or approach the truth about the essence of things, but does it suffer for this?
- Socrates suggests at [576a](#) that the tyrannical person never gets a taste of true friendship. Is this true? What is true friendship, and why might Socrates think that being ruled by a powerful lawless desire prevents it?

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84 The Second Proof: Who's to Say?

See [580c-583a](#). The second argument is as follows: Each part of the soul has a different kind of pleasure associated with it, and the person ruled by that part of the soul values its associated pleasure as most pleasant. But only the person ruled by the rational part (the philosopher) has experienced enough of all three kinds of pleasure to be in a position to judge between them. And only the philosopher is especially practiced at giving and evaluating arguments – an important skill for being a good judge. Since the philosopher is the best judge of the three kinds of pleasure, the pleasure that the philosopher judges to be most pleasant (“the pleasure of learning the nature of the things that are”) is in truth most pleasant. And so, the person ruled by the rational part of the soul – the just person – will live most pleasantly.

- Suppose a wealthy sensualist (a democratic soul) were to go up to Socrates and say, “Listen, Socrates, you say that you philosophers know about the pleasures of the appetitive part of the soul. Well, you think you do, but you don’t. In fact, thinking is just your problem. Thinking keeps you from really enjoying anything outside of philosophy. You talk, talk, talk, forever analyzing our life here on earth. But this is precisely what stops you from ever really enjoying the pleasures of the flesh. You suppose you know what good food or good sex is like. You haven’t a clue. Only the person who embraces sensuality as a vocation, who cultivates its pleasures in all their variety and splendor, who becomes a true connoisseur of this beautiful world (which you so pathetically dismiss as a “cave”) – only such a person is in a position to judge the value of these things.” How might Socrates reply?

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85 The Third Proof: True Pleasures

See [583b-587b](#). “Observe then, that the other pleasures – apart from that of the knowledgeable person – are neither entirely true nor pure.” “But what exactly do you mean?” asks Glaucon. “I will find out, if you answer the questions while I ask them.” In working out his thoughts, Socrates first makes a distinction between enjoyment and relief from pain. Much of what people consider pleasant – eating when famished, scratching an itch, emptying an especially full bladder – is really just pain relief. One is moving from a state of irritation to a state of relative calm in the soul. In contrast, consider walking past a lilac bush in bloom, or conversing with a good friend after dinner over a crème caramel and a cup of dark coffee. Socrates calls pleasures such as these “pure” because they don’t require discomfort in order to be experienced. Is it his view, then, that pure pleasures are always greater than impure pleasures? Would he say, for instance, that the pleasure of basking in the sun after a satisfying meal is greater than that of philosophizing in pursuit of wisdom (a pleasure of anticipation, hence, an impure pleasure)? No, for some pleasures are “truer” than others, and the truer a pleasure is, the greater it is. Socrates explains that the more we are “filled with what is appropriate to our nature,” the truer is the pleasure we feel. And we are “filled” more by things which “are” more, “which partake more of pure being.” Forms “are” more than the particular things we encounter through our senses. They are eternal and unchanging and the basis for understanding the nature of reality. Knowledge of the forms therefore fills us more than anything else can, and so, causes in us the truest of pleasures. This is why a pleasure such as anticipating knowledge of the form of the good is greater than a pleasure such as basking in the sun after a satisfying meal. Although the pleasure of basking in the sun is purer, philosophizing in anticipation of wisdom is truer. (As [Mill](#) puts it, “better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”) Socrates concludes that souls ruled by the rational part are doubly blessed. As lovers of wisdom, they enjoy the truest of pleasures. But also, because the rational part understands the relative worth of pleasures, the spirited and appetitive parts are able to attain under its guidance the truest pleasures possible for them. The appetitive part may think it wants a

McDonalds' hamburger; the rational part, knowing best what pleases the appetitive part, gets *The Joy of Cooking* down off the shelf. The spirited part may think it wants to be widely admired; the rational part, knowing that the only praise worth having is from a virtuous person, has the spirited part spur the soul on to be worthy of such praise. Because the spirited and appetitive parts are generally better satisfied in an aristocratic soul, and the rational part is uniquely well satisfied, it follows that the just person lives the most fulfilling of lives, and is therefore the happiest of human beings.

- So has Socrates successfully met Glaucon's challenge? Let's revisit the ideally just person, alone in his cell, facing death by torture in the morning. His appetitive part doesn't have much to look forward to that isn't pretty dreadful. His spirited part, always courageous, does its job and keeps the appetitive part from whimpering. But how pleasant a job is this? How does it compare, for instance, with the glory of toppling the tyrant currently lording over the city (or even with the glory of becoming neighborhood darts champion)? If Socrates is right, and the just person unjustly facing death by torture is actually happier than the unjust person widely admired for his apparent virtues, then the reason for this happiness has to come down to those pleasures of the rational part of the soul to which the just person has unique access. Ultimately, if Socrates has a case, it must rest on the special joy possessed by the philosopher who has come to know the forms, and in particular the form of the good. What would this be like, to know the form of the good? The experience Socrates has in mind may be something akin to what Buddhists call "enlightenment" or what Western theists call "the presence of God," for it is supposed to be an encounter between a human being and that which is of greatest value in reality. Recall the passage from [486a-b](#): "And do you imagine that a thinker who is high-minded enough to look at all time and all being will consider human life to be a very important thing?" "He couldn't possibly." "Then he won't consider death to be a terrible thing either, will he?" "Not in the least." The person who comes to know the form of the good has, arguably, completed life's quest. Would this be happiness?

- Socrates likens the people who “feed, fatten, and fornicate” to a container that leaks. “Never tasting any stable or pure pleasure,” they are forced to satisfy their recurring desires again and again. Suppose one of these leaky vessels were to go to Socrates and say: “But don’t you see, I look forward to hunger and thirst and the surges of sexual desire. I treasure my curiosity and my wanderlust. Not only don’t I mind the recurrence of these appetites, but I would very much mind if I didn’t have them. If my vessel didn’t have holes, I would knock holes in it for the joy that holes bring!” (Callicles is more or less expressing this view in the *Gorgias* at [494a-b](#).) How might Socrates reply?
- What does it mean to call a pleasure “stable”? That it lasts for hours, days, years? Suppose someone were to object that there is no such thing as a long-term state of pleasure, that the experience inevitably comes to be taken for granted and ceases to be appreciated. How might Socrates reply?
- Socrates says that he will find out what he means if he asks the questions and Glaucon answers them. Does Socrates need other people in order to think?

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86 How Much More Unpleasant is the Tyrannical Life?

See [587b-588a](#). Immediately upon completion of the third proof, Socrates launches into a more or less ridiculous calculation of how many times more pleasant a just person's life is than a tyrant's. (There are many things problematic with the reasoning here. Just to note one thing, no evidence has been given in support of the claim that the amount by which the democratic soul is happier than the tyrannical soul is comparable to the amount by which the oligarchic soul is happier the democratic soul. Likewise for the other soul types. So to infer by "calculation" that one soul type lives more pleasantly than another soul type by a certain quantity of pleasure is unwarranted.) It is hard to know what to make of this passage. Unlike the similarly bizzare calculative passage at [545d-547a](#), we aren't told in this case that the Muses are "playing and jesting with us."

- Should we interpret this as humor, as the giddiness that comes after setting down a great dialectical burden?
- Could it be that Plato (the puppeteer behind the scenes) wants to remind us that Socrates, however much a lover of wisdom he may be, is only human?
- Could Socrates just be trying to shake us up a bit, challenging us to consider the possibility that the lives different people live are not just a little different with respect to happiness, but worlds apart?

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87 An Emblem of the Soul

See [588b-592a](#). As Book IX draws to a close, Socrates offers us “an image of the soul in words.” We are to imagine the appetitive part as “a many-headed beast with a ring of tame and savage heads that it can grow and change at will.” We are to imagine the spirited part as a lion. And we are to imagine the rational part as a human being (reason being a distinctively human capacity). The appetitive part is “much the largest” of the three, while the rational part is the smallest. All are joined together and set within the “image” of a human being (the human body, presumably). Socrates uses this emblem to reiterate the conclusion of the overall argument, that justice is by its very nature beneficial to a person, and to offer some advice: that we should act so as to put the rational part in control of the soul and get the spirited part to serve as its ally; that we should get the rational part to care for the appetitive part “like a farmer, feeding and domesticating the gentler heads and preventing the savage ones from growing;” and that the result should be friendship among the parts of the soul. Socrates goes on to use the emblem to explain how certain conventional vices such as licentiousness, irascibility, laziness, and slavishness have their roots in injustice. In general, “what is fine is what subordinates the beastlike elements in our nature to the human one – or better, perhaps, to the divine, whereas what is shameful is what enslaves the tame element to the savage.”

- Why does Socrates call the rational part of the soul “divine”?
- At [590c-d](#), Socrates suggests that, in a community, “it is better for everyone to be ruled by a divine and wise ruler – preferably one that is his own and that he has inside himself; otherwise one imposed on him from outside, so that we may all be as alike and as friendly as possible . . .” How much imposition from without would Socrates consider permissible? He says that a person ruled by the appetitive part “should be the slave of that best person who has the divine ruler within himself.” But suppose a city were less than entirely temperate, and the person ruled by the appetitive part were unwilling to subordinate himself in this way. How far would Socrates be

willing to go to establish order? He is convinced that the value of true aristocracy would come to be appreciated in the city, eventually and on balance, if not immediately and universally. But in the meantime, what should be done about misfits or malcontents? Does no one in a just society have a right to anti-social opinions and desires, a right to be wrong?

- There are many stories in the science fiction vein that warn about the threat of corrupt rulers bent on using technology to control people for their less-than-wisdom-loving purposes. But imagine a perfectly rational and loving overlord were considering the mass distribution of soul-altering “enlightenment pills,” which would enable imperfectly just people to more readily appreciate the nature and value of wisdom. Would it be wrong to make these pills available, free for the taking? Would it be wrong to administer these pills involuntarily? Would it be wrong for parents *not* to give them to their children?

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88 Will the Just Person Take Part in Politics?

See [592a-b](#). Yes, the just person would be willing to take part in politics, Socrates thinks, but only “in his own city,” the aristocratic city. Should someone object that such a city is purely theoretical and has never existed on earth, Socrates’ reply is that “there may perhaps be a model of it in the heavens” – the form of justice, presumably – “for anyone who wishes to look at it and to found himself on the basis of what he sees.”

- Socrates suggests that the just person won’t take part in politics in the non-aristocratic city, because the honors involved “might overthrow the established condition of his soul.” But how? What threat does he have in mind?
- Can a wise politician do good only in a just city?
- What political obligations does a just person have in an unjust world?

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Book X

89 Return to Poetry

See [595a](#). In Books II and III, as part of his preliminary discussion of the guardians' education, Socrates criticized what poets have to say about gods and heroes. But at [392a-c](#), when he was about to turn to what they say about human beings – “that many unjust people are happy and many just ones wretched, that doing injustice is profitable if it escapes detection, and that justice is another's good but one's own loss” – he stopped himself; for he realized that whether or not this sort of thing ought to be in a poem turns on the very point in question, namely, the nature of the relation between justice and happiness. Having settled this matter in Book IX, Socrates now returns to the poets and their art.

- Much has happened in the discussion since the first part of Book III: rulers have been distinguished from auxiliaries, three distinct parts of the soul have been identified, the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice have been defined, forms have been distinguished from particular things, the form of the good has been identified as the most important object of knowledge, four varieties of injustice have been analyzed, and three arguments have been given in support of the claim that a just person will be happy regardless of what other people think. How might this material enable Socrates to criticize the poets in ways that were not available to him back in Book III?

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90 First Accusation: Imitation in Ignorance

See [595a-602b](#). Socrates' renewed criticism of the poets falls into two general accusations, the first being that poets "imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about, and have no grasp of the truth." This phrase "imitate images" is Socrates' way of indicating the extent to which poets are removed from knowledge of the forms. Consider Homer, who attempted in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to describe human excellence in action. Did he have a genuine understanding of wisdom, justice, and the other virtues? Evidently not, given his depiction of gods, heroes, and men, the best of whom have souls that are paradigmatically timocratic. Homer never attempts a depiction of philosophical dialectic, although he does depict, with notable success, quarreling, plotting, taunting, anguished begging, and lamentation. It is of course conceivable that Homer never in his life met an aristocratic person. And not being a philosopher himself, it is likely that, had he met such a person, he would not have understood her. He presumably had some familiarity with timocratic people. He may have been one himself, driven to win glory through his verses rather than by the spear. But he had no real understanding of the forms of the various virtues. This is Socrates' point. It is Homer's experience of particulars – "images" of the forms – that serves as the basis for his poetic imitations. So these imitations are at best the imitations of images, a shadow of the truth about human excellence. As Socrates sees it, poets "take a mirror" to the world of particulars, and produce more or less accurate representations, not of "the things themselves as they truly are" (the forms), but of the transient, imperfect, and imperfectly knowable things that make appearances on the stage of sense experience. Moreover, poets can only represent certain aspects of the things they imitate. Like someone who is painting a picture of a bed, and must paint it from a certain angle, under certain lighting conditions, with the covers arranged in a certain way, and so on, the poet depicting Agamemnon or Hector or Helen is similarly forced to represent the person's character in just some respects. So what the poets offer us are incomplete representations of imperfect instances of the forms. And yet, if a poet is skillful and effectively uses "meter, rhythm, and harmony," then these shadows of the

truth are highly entertaining. Consider the *Star Wars* movies. How well did George Lucas, or do the writers now working for Disney, understand the human soul, the nature of good and evil, the relative merits of different political systems, or the physical limitations of space travel? What about using “the Force” – did Lucas know what his characters were talking about? Maybe not. But it is an entertaining story all the same, particularly with the costumes and makeup, the cinematography, the special effects, the full symphony orchestra and chorus, and so on. It is sometimes said that, in literature, form is at least as important as content. Socrates thinks this is all too true. Strip a literary work of its “musical colorings,” and what remains is dull and unenlightening. Even the poet treats it as “a kind of game, not something to be taken seriously.” For “if he truly had knowledge of what he imitates . . . he would take deeds much more seriously than their imitations, would try to leave behind many beautiful deeds as his own memorials, and would be much more eager to be the subject of a eulogy than the author of one.”

- Do poets (novelists, songwriters, screenwriters, etc.) know anything that the rest of us don’t, anything beyond the details of the literary craft?
- Is it true that, if poets truly had knowledge of virtue, then they would be virtuous rather than imitate virtue? Is the same true of teachers – that if someone truly knew mathematics, say, then they would be mathematical rather than teach mathematics? Perhaps. But is to successfully teach mathematics not a way of being mathematical? Is to successfully imitate virtue not a way of being virtuous?
- Is to successfully imitate dialectic not a way of being dialectical?

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91 Second Accusation: Injustice Promoted in the Soul

See [602c-606d](#). Socrates' second accusation, going beyond the claim that poets know less than they pretend to know, positively asserts that their poems are a threat to justice in the soul, and therefore, a threat to human happiness. A soul is just when each part is doing its proper job, and in particular, when the rational part rules and the spirited and appetitive parts follow. Socrates' accusation is that poetry undermines this state of affairs by arousing and strengthening the appetitive part to the detriment of the rational part's authority. People enjoy having the appetitive part stimulated through fictional representations, and poets generally give people what they enjoy. So poetry tends to feature displays of lamentation, buffoonery, seduction, and rage. Besides, people who suffer from grief and other disturbances of the soul are relatively easy to imitate; whereas "the wise and quiet character, which always remains pretty much selfsame, is neither easy to imitate nor easy to understand when imitated – especially not at a festival where multifarious people are gathered together in theaters. For the experience being imitated is alien to them." Because poetry tends to feature unjust souls, and to cater to people's desires for appetitive stimulation, it "nurtures and waters" in the soul what "ought to wither and be ruled."

- Can you think of examples of literary characters with stable, aristocratic souls?
- Do unjust people make better literary characters than just people? If so, why might that be?
- What effect does the regular watching of television soap operas have on people?
- Socrates mentions "jokes you would be ashamed to tell yourself, but that you very much enjoy when you hear them imitated in a comedy or even in private." What is going on when one laughs at such a joke? Is the appetitive part of the soul being gratified, as Socrates supposes, to the detriment of the rational part's authority?

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92 A Call to Poetry's Defenders

See [606e-608b](#). “Hymns to the gods and eulogies of good people,” Socrates says, “are the only poetry we can admit into our city.” And presumably he means not just any hymns and eulogies, but only those informed by a genuine understanding of what it is to be good. “The imitative poetry that aims at pleasure” must be rejected, unless an argument can be brought forward that shows that such poetry “gives not only pleasure but also benefit both to constitutions and to human life.” It is clear that Socrates would welcome such a defense of poetry, but in the absence of one, he recommends behaving like people who, having fallen passionately in love, judge their passion to be harmful, and so, make a point of avoiding the source of the temptation.

- The poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation stands accused. Can you defend it? (In thinking this through, you might look at attempted defenses by the English poets Sir Philip [Sidney](#) and Percy [Shelley](#).)
- What would Socrates think of a work of literary art such as Plato's *Republic*?

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93 An Argument for the Soul's Immortality

See [608c-611a](#). Coming full circle, Socrates returns in the last pages of the *Republic* to matters that had concerned Cephalus in the opening pages of Book I – death, life after death, and the further consequences of justice. He begins with an argument in support of the claim that the soul cannot be destroyed, the key premise of which is that, if something has a natural evil, a characteristic way in which it can be bad, and this evil is unable to disintegrate and destroy the thing, then nothing can destroy the thing. “Injustice, intemperance, cowardice, and ignorance” – the vices opposed to justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom – are the characteristic ways in which the soul can be bad. These vices wreak havoc in the soul, but do not destroy it. Therefore the soul is incapable of being destroyed. Having just set us the challenge of defending poetry, Socrates now sets us a second challenge: either “refute these arguments” or “never say that the soul even comes close to being destroyed by a fever or any other disease, or by killing for that matter – not even if one were to cut the entire body up into the very smallest pieces.”

- What is the strongest objection you can think of to this argument?
- Socrates suggests that sickness is the human body's natural badness and that rust is iron's natural badness. What then of something like a thermonuclear explosion? Would he consider it bad both for iron and for the human body?
- Is moral corruption the only way the soul can be made bad? Do strokes and brain tumors not incapacitate the soul in various ways and to various degrees?
- What is the soul's relation to the body?

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94 The Soul Without Barnacles

See [611a-612a](#). What would the soul be without the body? Socrates has us imagine the sea god Glaucus who, though a god, has been buffeted about by the waves and incrustated with mollusks, seaweed, and the like so that he appears more like a “wild beast” than a divine being. The soul’s true nature, he suggests, is just as difficult to perceive, wrapped up as it is in the body. But if it were free of the body, what would be left? Socrates hints that it might be a single part – the rational part, presumably – which, through love of wisdom (*philosophia*), would live in contemplation of the forms (of “what is divine and immortal and what always exists”).

- Whether or not this is idle speculation is debatable, but there is something fascinating about trying to understand what life without a body would be like. Desires for breathing, drinking, eating, and activities of this sort would, presumably, be no more. What else would be different?
- Would gender identities cease?
- What about desires for praise or feelings of shame – would they continue to exist?
- Would one still be spatially located and capable of movement?
- Would one still be able to communicate with others?
- Would music still be perceivable?
- How would disembodied souls differ from one another?
- Would they have different memories?
- Would they care about their pasts or would their attention be fixed exclusively on eternal things?

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95 Rewards from Gods and Human Beings

See [612a-614a](#). Socrates has argued, at length, that justice in the soul is desirable for its own sake, so desirable that it is enough to bring a person happiness. But as people who love their jobs ordinarily receive payment for their work, people who are just are ordinarily rewarded out of appreciation for their virtue. So, for instance, “if a just man falls into poverty or disease or some of the other things that seem bad, it will end well for him . . . surely the gods at least will never neglect anyone who eagerly wishes to become just and, by practicing virtue, to make himself as much like a god as a human being can.” Likewise, human beings generally reward just people (when recognized) with trust and respect, whereas unjust people (when recognized) are vilified and punished. Justice in the soul is therefore desirable for its consequences as well as for its own sake.

- Would the gods reward a virtuous person if the person, being just, were already happy? If so, what would be the point?
- How might a god reward a person who was already fully just? With friendship?

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96 Suffering, Philosophy, and the Choice of a Lifetime

See [614a-621d](#). The dialogue ends as a monologue, but one dramatically placed, with Glaucon and Adeimantus, Polemarchus, Lysias, and Euthydemus, Niceratus, Charmantides, Cleitophon, and Thrasymachus listening to Socrates tell a story. It is about a man named Er who is given a look at the afterlife and is allowed to return to tell about it (similar to Dante Alighieri in the [Divine Comedy](#)). In this afterworld, some souls go off to be rewarded for being relatively just in their previous lives, while others are punished for being relatively unjust. After a time the rewarded souls come down to be readied for rebirth; and the punished souls – those that have been successfully cleansed of their injustice – come up, also to be reborn. The [Fates](#) explain that each soul gets the opportunity to choose the guardian spirit who will determine certain elements of that soul's next embodied life. It is a little unclear what this means, but it appears that what one gets to choose are aspects of one's life that normally are thought to be outside of one's choice: matters of genetics, the nation of one's birth, illnesses one will face, social opportunities, and so on. Here, Socrates thinks, in making the choice of a lifetime, the benefits of philosophy become especially evident: the person will “know what the good and bad effects of beauty are when it is mixed with wealth or poverty and this or that state of the soul; what the effects are of high and low birth, private lives and ruling offices, physical strength and weaknesses, ease and difficulties in learning, and all the things that are either naturally part of the soul or can be acquired by it, when they are mixed with one another. On the basis of all that he will be able, by considering the nature of the soul, to reason out which life is better and which worse and choose accordingly, calling worse the one that will lead the soul to become more unjust, and better the one that leads it to become more just. Everything else he will ignore.” The first soul who gets to choose – “one of those who had come down from heaven, having lived his previous life in an orderly constitution, sharing in virtue through habit but without philosophy” – blunders, and chooses the life of a tyrant. Interestingly, most of the people foolish enough to choose tyrannical situations are “souls who came from heaven, and so were

untrained in sufferings.” In contrast, the last soul to choose is that of Odysseus – “long-suffering Odysseus” as Homer frequently calls him – a timocratic soul in his last life. He looks and looks and then chooses, with relief, “the life of a private individual who did his own work” – not a proud sacker of cities, but a quiet man, who desires only to do his part in a just community. Socrates seems to be suggesting, along with the poet [Aeschylus](#), that there is another way to gain some wisdom in life besides engaging in philosophy. There is suffering.

- Do you agree that there is wisdom to be found through suffering? If so, what sort of wisdom is it? How is it different from philosophical wisdom?

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