

Article

History and the Manifestation of the Good in Plato's *Republic*

Marco Stango

St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry, Rochester, NY 14618, USA; marco.stango@stbernards.edu

Abstract: This paper suggests that history, both personal and political, plays a crucial role in the manifestation (or concealment) of the Good in Plato's *Republic*. After an introduction on how to read Plato's dialogues vis-a-vis the problem of history, this article offers a close reading of Books I and VIII of the *Republic*.

Keywords: Plato; republic; metaphysics; history

The relationship of Plato with history—
this is the crucial problem,
as paradoxical as this might sound!

Werner Jaeger, *Humanistische Reden and Vorträge*, 1960, p. 154

1. Introduction

One of the issues that has always haunted the Platonic tradition is the relationship between ideas and material, concrete beings. The way in which Plato's dialogues have been interpreted has produced at times dualisms so radical that German theologian and philosopher Romano Guardini can even speak of a "dictatorship of the absolute" as an abiding risk for the Platonic tradition [1] (p. 154). Platonic thought has in fact been interpreted as a long and varied series of dualisms ensuing from such a dictatorship of the absolute: 'intelligible' and 'ideal' as opposed to the 'material' and 'concrete'; the 'soul' as opposed to the 'body'; 'knowledge' as opposed to 'opinion', etc. Furthermore, such dualism would run the further risk of eliminating de facto the epistemic and metaphysical relevance of material, concrete, individual beings. Insofar as each individual being has being only by participation in the ideas, its reality would be ultimately defined by a sort of deficiency with respect to the ideas themselves. The ideas, the 'really real,' would reduce the concrete world to the condition of *epistemic meaninglessness* and *metaphysical irrelevance*. In relation to this point, American philosopher D.C. Schindler, in his otherwise extremely sympathetic reading of Plato's metaphysics of participation, has stated that it would not be false to say that, at the end of the day, Platonic philosophy tends to define participated beings in terms of their "lack" vis à vis the ideas [2] (pp. 1–27).

Guardini's assessment of this overall tendency in Platonic philosophy is balanced and accurate. On the one hand, he states that we can certainly find in Plato the risk of dualism as well as of a reduction of concrete existence to an epistemic and metaphysical deficit. On the other hand, however, this tragic outcome is not necessitated by the general spirit of Plato's philosophy, which is more interested in *prioritizing the experience of the discovery of the absoluteness of the transcendent*—the ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness—rather than sully the reputation of the participated world [1] (pp. 69–118), [3]. What is crucial in Guardini's reading for the purposes of this article is the interpretation of the Platonic problem through the category of *history*¹. He reads Plato in the context of his philosophical attempt to unpack the "determinations of existence" (*Existenz*) at the intersection between eternity and history. For Him, "existence" means precisely the historically conditioned, personal being (one could simply say, 'life') of a person [1] (pp. 31–39).

His interpretation allows us, then, to formulate the question guiding this article in precise terms: *what is the role of personal, individual history in the overall economy of Plato's*



Citation: Stango, M. History and the Manifestation of the Good in Plato's *Republic*. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 37. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8020037>

Academic Editor: Vincent Colapietro

Received: 13 February 2023

Revised: 24 March 2023

Accepted: 4 April 2023

Published: 14 April 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

philosophy? Or, in other words: What is the status of finite being? Is finite being defined only by its lack? Is there a way in which finite being, and more particularly, the history of a human being, is essential to the manifestation of the absolute? In order to provide the sketch of an answer to this admittedly gargantuan question, I will focus on Plato's masterpiece, the *Republic*, providing in particular an interpretation of some key aspects of Books I (the so-called 'prologue' to the dialogue) and VIII (the account of political degeneration from timocracy to tyranny) [6].

As is well known, the *Republic* is one of Plato's most enigmatic dialogues. As proof of this, the *Republic* has in fact been interpreted in wildly different and somewhat incompatible ways². Is Plato being literal in his description of the "beautiful city", its structure, and its life? Is he instead describing a political utopia, a sort of regulative ideal for the concrete life of the *polis*? Or maybe he is simply pointing out the inevitable risks that political power brings with itself, even when it falls in the hands of the philosophers³? Could it be that Plato is simply providing a political allegory for the internal organization of the soul?

The difficulty in interpreting Plato is not limited to the *Republic*. The history of Platonism is at the same time a history of different interpretations of Plato's dialogues and thus of Plato's overall purpose in writing them. Why did Plato write dialogues? Is it possible to squeeze a purely philosophical and argumentative essence out of Plato's dialogues—thereby rendering the dramatic elements of the dialogues as unnecessary—or should we rather give more weight to the dramatic elements of the dialogues, including the identity of the characters, their psychology, their 'moves' within the dramatic setting of each dialogue? In the latter case, it would not be possible to isolate an alleged philosophical and argumentative core from the more dramatic, literary, and rhetorical aspects of the dialogues. On the contrary, these dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements of the dialogues would be essential to and constitutive of the very unfolding of the arguments presented by Plato.

It is for these reasons that the recent scholarship has attempted what Francisco J. Gonzalez calls the "third way" in interpreting Plato, and the present article places itself in some sense under the same banner, *si parva licet* [10]. Gonzalez points out that the need for a "third way" is motivated by the wrong assumptions that the two traditional ways to interpret Plato are exhaustive—the "skeptical way", stating that Socrates's arguments in Plato's dialogues are only supposed to refute the interlocutor's mistakes, and the "dogmatic way", affirming that Socrates is in fact the mouthpiece of Plato's positive doctrines. What characterizes the "third way" in interpreting Plato is the fact that it gives "more importance than usual to the literary, dramatic, and rhetorical aspects of the dialogues"⁴, in the vein of the revolutionary approach to the dialogues that was initiated by Schleiermacher. According to Gerald A. Press, one of the exponents of this new way of interpreting Plato, Plato's arguments are always "enactments"; that is, they cannot be unrooted from the concrete shape they take within the dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements of the dialogues⁵. As I will show in the next section, this methodological principle proves particularly fruitful in the case of Book I of the *Republic*. In Book I in fact, so I will claim, it is not possible to make sense of what is going on at the argumentative level if one abstracts from the personalities, biographical backgrounds, and dramatic moves of Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, the first three of Socrates's interlocutors.

While sympathetic with the "third view", my reading of the *Republic* rejects the skeptical tone present in the interpretations of some of the exponents of this school. Press himself tends to privilege the performative nature of the dialogues over their assertoric function. According to Press, Plato's dialogues would be doing something to the reader—for instance, inspiring his philosophical attitude and orienting him towards viewing the world in a certain way—rather than communicating to him specific doctrinal content. Similarly, James A. Arieti states that Plato's chief intention in writing his dialogues is not that of presenting a certain philosophical view of reality, for which Aristotle's treatise form would have been more appropriate, but that of "inspiring" in the reader an engagement in the "life of the mind"⁶. In my view, Plato, with his arguments embodied within the dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements of his dialogues, is certainly trying to inspire

us, but he is *inspiring us to see what he sees*. The entire architecture of the *Republic*, in fact, should be interpreted along these lines: the complex structure of the dialogue, in fact—the allegorical, the dialogical, the argumentative, the dramatic—is supposed to lead Socrates’s interlocutors—and, we should add, the readers of the dialogue themselves—to ‘see’ justice, both in the city and in the soul, as illuminated by the light of the absolute, the Good. In this sense, I interpret the *Republic*, following many others, as a religious drama⁷, in which both Socrates and his interlocutors are engaged in finding their way outside of the cave, where reality can finally be seen in the clarity of the sunlight; that is, from the point of view of the absolute, the Good. As I shall discuss shortly, however, *this does not mean that Socrates or his interlocutors—or Plato, for that matters—believes that we can attain to a god-like view of reality*. As the image of the sun shows, the Good is that ‘in the light of which’ we can see-know everything else, but it is not an object of vision or knowledge itself, at least not in the sense that everything else—the other ideas and, more importantly for our purpose here, the concrete, participated beings of the world—should be ‘left behind’ in the process of knowledge. In short, Plato is trying to communicate to us his philosophical worldview, the demands and the freedom of the experience of the transcendent in the soul. His message is not primarily therapeutic, but metaphysical (and hence, maybe, also therapeutic).

So, what does this have to do with the problem of history raised by Guardini and discussed at the outset of this section? Plato famously describes the “Good” in Book VI of the *Republic* as the ultimate cause of the being, the truth, and the knowability of all things: “that what provides the truth to the things known and gives the power to the one who knows, is the *idea* of the good”; the Good is “the cause of the knowledge and truth” (508 e); “not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them besides as a result of it” (509 b). Following this description, I will maintain that according to Plato in the *Republic*, personal history is essential to the manifestation of the Good. According to this view, *the full knowledge of the good is, in a certain sense, always dependent on the way in which the Good has illuminated and transformed a person and his beliefs, character, attitudes, and gestures*, etc. In other words, for Plato, the manifestation of the Good and the knowledge of it require the central *mediating role of the history of the person*⁸ For these reasons, the full manifestation of the Good is not instantaneous and does not coincide ultimately with the object of a metaphysical intuition that leaves the concrete world behind. Instantaneousness and metaphysical intuition—the famous intellectual “blaze” spoken about in *Letter VII*⁹, and the vision of the Good in the *Republic*—certainly play a part but are not the full manifestation of the Good. But the full manifestation of the Good includes the way in which the Good has brought epistemic, behavioral, moral, emotional, etc., and therefore ontological flourishing to a particular person; that is, a particular personal history.

The famous line in the *Republic* that the Good is “beyond being” (509 b) could be interpreted precisely in this way: the good is “beyond being” in the sense that it is the cause of the being and the growth of what is ‘other’ than itself. This would of course imply in Plato that the statement of ‘what the Good is’ could not be entrusted to a direct form of expression; that is, to a form of expression unmediated by the way in which the history of each character in the dialogue takes shape through the plot and through the significance of their defining dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements. Moreover, it would mean that the manifestation of the Good requires the *memory of a past, the awareness of the present, and the self-presence of a positive change*; that is, of the flourishing (no matter how small!) that has occurred in a person—much more than a mere metaphysical intuition left to its own resources. One could spot here, perhaps, a different, more horizontal meaning of “recollection” (*anamnesis*) as essential to the unfolding of knowledge according to Plato¹⁰.

In this sense, the full manifestation of the Good¹¹ is, first, *radically perspectival*: it depends on the starting point of the person and the way in which the person, given his original epistemic, behavioral, moral, and emotional commitments, has changed due to the Good or through the “icon” of the Good, namely, Socrates [20] (Ch. 3, pp. 139–175). Second, it is always finite, in the sense that it always *requires the mediation of the personal*

history of a character, without, however, in any way deflating the affirmation of the Good in its absolute and “sovereign” reality, to use Iris Murdoch’s expression¹² Third, it is *based on time and history*, namely, the time that was required for the change, the time spanning from the moment grasped in memory and the present time in which the positive change has manifested itself and the person has finally become aware of itself—such as in the sudden spark described by Plato in *Letter VII*, which fulfills a history of communal pursuit of wisdom and opens up to a future of cultivation of the newly acquired insight into the truth. Fourth, it is *intrinsically dramatic*, implying the personal involvement of the person changing within the change-effecting power of the Good, often represented by some of the other interlocutors and, chiefly, by Socrates. The full manifestation of the Good, in other words, is never without us, nor is it possible without our free openness to and engagement with the truth. Finally, it is *radically personal*, depending on the particular epistemic, behavioral, moral, and emotional attitudes of the person.

The great American painter Edward Hopper claimed that he always aspired to paint light and that everything else he painted—houses, coffee shops, people, etc.—he painted only because otherwise painting light would have been impossible. In a similar fashion, I think this helps us clarify what it means for Plato that the manifestation of the Good always requires the history of the human being.

If this approach is true, it could help improve the *status of a participated being*, at least with respect to the epistemic value of participated reality vis à vis the Good. In other words, participated being—and chiefly human history—would not be ultimately defined by a lack compared to the Good. Rather, it would be defined by its *essential mediatory function for the manifestation of the Good*.

As anticipated, I take Socrates in the *Republic* to be the “icon” of the Good. In other words, Socrates analogically represents the Good within the unfolding drama; that is, he enjoys a similarity-within-a-greater-difference with the Good. Hence, Socrates’s spiritual poverty and self-ascribed ignorance in the *Apology*. His spiritual poverty, the spiritual poverty of his wise ignorance, is in a sense the poverty of the Good itself insofar as the Good needs the other—the finite person, in this case, to manifest itself. One might even interpret Socrates’s epistemic poverty and condemnation of knowledge-as-possession (exemplified by the sophists [22] (pp. 9–51)) precisely in this sense: Socrates ‘does not know anything’ and ‘has nothing to teach’ because *the manifestation of the Good is not something he can simply receive directly from the Good or produce by himself*, but something for which he depends upon the other, upon the history of the other and, arguably, upon his dialectical engagement with the other within a common history.

In short, the full manifestation of the Good—namely, the manifestation of the Good that presupposes the direct contemplation and metaphysical intuition of the Good but that is not reducible to it—is not something that can simply be received. To adopt the image dear to Plato, the full manifestation of the Good is not being reached by the light of the sun. Rather, it is witnessing how this light and its warmth have cultivated the ‘seed of truth’ implanted in us through the fruit that we bear and to which we give birth. The full manifestation of the Good is this fruit and not simply the light. And just as a fruit is not reducible to the light of the sun, but requires a fertile soil, a seed that has been planted and cultivated, and time, so the full manifestation of the Good requires a “pregnant” person, the time of understanding, the labor of cultivation and finally giving birth—usually made possible by Socrates, the midwife of the soul¹³.

One could thus interpret in this way both the definition of erotic thinking given in *Drinking Party* (“love of bringing forth and of giving birth in the beautiful”¹⁴) and the image of the midwife used by Socrates in *Theaetetus*. Socrates as the midwife represents the similarity-within-a-greater-difference with the Good: corresponding to his similarity with the Good, Socrates is the one who, through his dialectic, works as a catalyzer of the change that the Good is engendering in the person; at the same time, corresponding to his difference from the Good, Socrates can only help with the giving birth; that is, with the ‘manifestation’ of the change and the development of becoming aware of it. As we

shall see, Socrates's disappointment at the end of Book I of the *Republic* signals precisely this: he has focused only on countering the other person's argument with this dialectic, and this has engendered a change in Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, but he has thus 'forgotten' to bring his interlocutors to the contemplation of the truth Good, the Good in itself, thanks to which only the Good can be manifested by engendering a deeper change in the people involved.

The transformation engendered by the Good in the various characters of the *Republic* could be understood as a *deepening for them of the meaning of reality*, including their words and their attitudes. Thus, reality becomes more meaningful and reveals *deeper layers of value*, or even just its goodness, its having value at all¹⁵ As we will see in the following section, Polemarchus will emerge from his dialogue with Socrates with a new understanding of his role as an "heir" of Cephalus and as a "fighter": now his role, his *Bestimmung*, will be to bring his father's unfulfilled legacy to new maturity; that is, to the fight for true wisdom. Similarly, the sophist Thrasymachus will glimpse at the end of his dialogue the possibility of redemption, the insight, no matter how shame-inducing in light of his previous claims, that relationships are not just governed by power. The opposite, however, is also possible; that is, the loss of reality's many layers of value and human beings becoming insensitive to the value of reason, intersubjectivity, the Good, etc. This stripping is what happens when a person, a community, a *polis*, instead of opening itself up to the changing power of the Good—thus becoming a historical manifestation of the Good—turns away from the Good. This, I submit, is what Plato describes in Book VIII on the degradation of the *polis* in the shift from timocracy to tyranny.

In my reading of Books I and VIII, I will tie together the analysis of the dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements of the dialogues and the reconstruction of the arguments, similarly to what other and better commentators have already done. This paper's contribution is that of framing the dialogue and its chief problem—the manifestation of the Good—according to the mediation of the personal history of the characters. As I said, it is only in the light of the dramatic context that one can weigh and get a 'feel' for what is going on at the dialectical level. At the same time, this decision depends on a certain interpretation of the role that propositional knowledge plays in Plato's dialogues. A word on Gonzalez's take on propositional knowledge might be instructive here. Gonzalez states that Plato's dialogues show how philosophical knowledge is "reflexive"¹⁶ "practical"¹⁷, and "nonpropositional". While Gonzalez does not claim that no dimension of philosophical knowledge can be propositional, he nevertheless stresses (beyond measure?) the nonpropositional nature of the type of knowledge presented in the dialogues by Plato. Schindler is therefore right in correcting Gonzalez's view that philosophical knowledge, while irreducible to the propositional dimension, must also include the propositional dimension. Schindler wants to avoid any risk of reducing Socratic dialectic to mere "inspiration"¹⁸, self-serving dialogue, or other forms of irrationalism. Nevertheless, in his reading of the *Republic*, Schindler also stresses the essential dramatic element present in Plato's approach to philosophical knowledge. In short, Schindler claims that the knowledge provided by Plato is *not merely propositional*—while being, however, always *also* propositional; and that the co-implication of goodness and truth in the *Republic* requires that truth emerges in the context of the good; that is, in a dramatic, action-based, context. To these, I would add a third reason, namely, that *since the full manifestation of the good requires history, all the elements of this history, including gestures, etc.—are essential to the unfolding of Plato's argument concerning justice and the Good.*

Thus, one might say that full, mature knowledge has therefore a three-fold structure. First, it has to do with 'seeing' something in its essence or idea, an act which is never reducible to propositions. Second, this 'seeing something' can be supported and expressed by propositional knowledge, which can be used as a stepping stone towards or a memorandum of the vision of the essence of a phenomenon. This is an essential element of knowledge, as exemplified in dialectic and in Socrates's pursuit of the definition (sometimes identified exclusively with the early dialogues, erroneously), even though this element should not be absolutized.

Thus, truth can and must be asserted, but always by remembering that the truth to which the proposition points is asserted inevitably “roughly and in outline”, to use Aristotle’s phrase¹⁹. Propositions, in other words, enjoy a sort of ‘oscillating’ nature; they are a threshold between vision, enactment, and dialectic²⁰. So, the same should be said of the attempted definitions provided to the question such as, ‘What is courage?’, ‘What is temperance?’, ‘What is justice?’, etc. The *propositional responses must always be aporetic*, not because propositional knowledge is impossible, but because the *entire* response to these questions cannot be given by a definition; that is, by an instance of propositional knowledge, insofar as propositions always and naturally point beyond themselves, to their originating ‘roots’—the vision of the essence—and their ‘fruits’—their perfection in giving shape to a life. And third, propositional knowledge must be *perfected in giving shape to a life*, and it is for this reason that it is exemplified in the dialogues through the richness of the dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements²¹.

The first aspect—seeing the essence—is the properly theoretical (in the Greek sense) dimension of knowledge, but when it is disjoined from the other two aspects—the role of propositions as stepping stones or memoranda of the vision, and the need to perfect propositional knowledge in life—it becomes intellectual mysticism. The second aspect, i.e., the role of propositions, is also essential to philosophical knowledge, and if it is disjoined from the first aspect (the theoretical), it risks becoming formulaic dogmatism or rationalism. Finally, the third aspect, the need to refer knowledge back to its fruits in life, is also crucial, but, when disjoined from the theoretical and the propositional, results in crass instrumentalism, relativism, vitalism, irrationalism, etc. Philosophical knowledge is an ‘organism’ of different, equally essential, dimensions. The important point for the purpose of this article is that the vision of the essence and propositional knowledge are always incipient and imperfect. Their perfection is in ‘other’; that is, in ‘*giving birth to a reasonable growth in the soul of a person, in his history*’²².

Given these premises, what follows in the next sections is not a bird-eye interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*, but rather an exercise in close reading of the text, especially Books I (§ 2) and VIII (§ 3).

2. Unfulfilled Old Promises, New Young Hopes, and the Ashamed Silence of Unreason: Cephalus, Polemarchus and Thrasymachus in Book I

As I stated in the previous section, the different series of arguments contained in the *Republic* must be seen unitarily; that is, they must be organized around a fulcrum, a center, in order to be made sense of. This center is *dramatic* and is chiefly provided by the *history of each character*, as it is recounted and as it changes in the pages of the dialogue. In Book I, we can find different sets of arguments organized around Socrates’s three interlocutors: Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus. If we keep firm the main problem of the dialogue—the problem of the manifestation of the Good, raised through the investigation of the nature of the good life and justice—I think we can state the following: in this first book, the so-called ‘prologue’ of the entire dialogue, Socrates deals with the concrete historical situation of alienation from the Good through which the Good, with his help, will have to break. This *concrete historical situation of alienation* is represented by Socrates’ three interlocutors, in different but complementary ways: the trajectory of Cephalus’ life represents an unfulfilled promise and, in a sense, a failure. Cephalus is now “old” (physically, but more than anything, spiritually) in the sense that he has become insensitive to the call of the Good; he is the aged bourgeois for whom justice has unmovably become a matter of superficial etiquette and religious superstition. He still manifests the ‘light’ of certain genuine insights (his posing of the problem of justice in terms of the characters of people, his concern for the afterlife and thus the unconditional demands of justice, etc.), but over this light prevails the darkness of a tired and spiritually stiff soul closed to the grace of the Good—much like Péguy’s description of the dying, sclerotic soul of old age which has become insensitive to grace [29] (pp. 93–96). In short, his insights turn out to be *unfulfilled promises*. Thus, the sequence of the arguments that we find in

the dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus represents this very polarity—the polarity of existential promises which remain nevertheless frustrated.

Polemarchus, Cephalus's son, is introduced as the "heir" of his father's argument. The attentive reader will immediately perceive the dramatic tension in the shift from Socrates's discussion with Cephalus to his discussion with his son: will Polemarchus be only the "heir" of Cephalus's fortune or, in fact, *the heir of his argument*? In other words: will Polemarchus bring to fulfillment the promises that remained somewhat sterile in his father? Of what kind of patrimony will Polemarchus be the heir? Also in this case, the articulation of the arguments finds its fulcrum in the dramatic unfolding of the character. Polemarchus will in fact undergo a positive change; that is, he will manifest the fruits of the transformative and generative power of the Good, no matter how small these fruits are here in Book I. More specifically, Polemarchus will move from a clientelistic understanding of justice—justice as benefitting one's friends and harming one's enemies, in battle in a time of war and in business in time of peace—to an understanding of justice which is basically the 'fighting' for acquiring wisdom. Polemarchus stands for a *radical deepening of meaning* (in this case, the meaning of "war" and "fight") and the *unveiling of new layers of value* (the value of philosophy, the loving pursuit of wisdom)²³. It is intriguing that what we see happening in Polemarchus in Book I has to do with the true meaning of his name and, in this sense, his history: Polemarchus, "lord of war", has shifted his clientelistic concerns and has now promised to be willing to fight for wisdom alongside Socrates²⁴.

Both Cephalus and Polemarchus represent a moment in the spiritual and political crisis of Athens, what I have called alienation from the Good. But it is with Thrasymachus that the alienation acquires a whole new depth. In fact, in the *Republic*, it is Thrasymachus that embodies the violence of unreason—what has been called, adopting a Platonic terminology, "misologic habits", habits of hatred for reason and thus for the universality of the Good and genuine intersubjectivity [32] (pp. 1–39). Thrasymachus is a sophist and it is sophism that constitutes the deepest level of spiritual alienation from philosophy, the genuine love and pursuit of wisdom. It is often said that Thrasymachus the sophist proposes the idea that justice is ultimately reducible to power relations. While this is certainly true, what strikes in the unfolding of Thrasymachus's arguments is the conclusions to which he comes: that "injustice" is actually "justice", that "vice" is actually "virtue". In other words, his unreason is certainly power and violence, but it is the power and violence that inevitably, sooner or later, accompany a life that has lost the sensitivity for the demands of meaningfulness and truth, a life that is *at ease with contradiction*. The contradictory conclusions of his dialectic manifest the true nature of his corrupt thinking: "by their fruits you will know them". And yet, it is also possible to witness a growth in Thrasymachus, a change, the 'effects' of the Good—here made present by Socrates. At some point during his exchange with Socrates, Thrasymachus blushes and decides not to engage with Socrates anymore, and he does so 'not to displease' Socrates and the audience. Thrasymachus's blushing and silence or lack of engagement have often been interpreted as a sign of complacency—the ultimate 'power move' not to accept the demands of reason. And yet, I think that one could give these dramatic elements a more *positive interpretation*²⁵.

If it is true, as Aristotle says, that the only option for those who reject the principle of contradiction is to remain as silent as a plant²⁶, it is also true that most of them, if not all, rarely remain silent, opting on the contrary for being louder and more talkative than those who abide by the laws of meaning and logic. This is certainly the case for Thrasymachus up to a certain point. Thrasymachus represents the misological unreason of sophistry, the anti-philosophy, in a sense. But at some point in the dialogue, Thrasymachus blushes and after that decides not to engage; that is, *he remains silent*. Thrasymachus, in other words, could be interpreted as a *threshold figure*, the moment in which unreason perceives once again with shame the call of the Good and the demands of reason which have been previously neglected. Thrasymachus decides not to engage, which means that the beginning of his conversion to reason will not bring about mature fruits. Nevertheless, as we read in Book I, he remains silent in order not to displease his audience. How should we interpret this

element? Should we read it as yet another manifestation of sophisticated sycophancy, or rather as the first instance of some recognition of the ‘other’? In the latter case, could this recognition not be understood as a *first opening to the value and meaning of intersubjectivity* and thus to the *demands of reason*? As I will try to explain, my inclination is to read him in this way.

The prologue of Book I, then, does not simply give a “glimpse into life within Plato’s cave”—the alienation represented by people “who articulate and follow flawed conceptions of justice because they are based on the use of exemplars of justice that only approximate the truth” [15] (p. 129). It also establishes the concrete conditions and the necessary premises for the pursuit of the real meaning of justice and the slow unfolding of the political and spiritual meaning of philosophy in the remainder of the dialogue: our best insights must be cultivated with courage, otherwise they will succumb to the superficiality of bourgeois and superstition and remain dramatically unfulfilled (Cephalus); we must be willing to fight the good fight, namely, the fight for true wisdom (Polemarchus); and finally, unreason must be reduced to shameful silence (Thrasymachus)²⁷.

I. *Cephalus*. Cephalus (“head”) is “very old” and Socrates has not seen him “for some time” (328 c). We are immediately offered a crucial passage: “Socrates, you don’t come down to us in the Piraeus very often, yet you ought to. Now if I still had the strength to make the trip to town easily, there would be no need for you to come here; rather we would come to you. As it is, however, you must come here more frequently. . . . I want you to know that as the other pleasures, those connected with the body, wither away in me, the desires and pleasures that have to do with speeches grow the more” (328 e). For Cephalus, speech is relevant insofar as it is a pleasure (for its psychological subjective effects, so to speak, and not for its content) and he is interested in speaking to Socrates because with old age the pleasures related to the body have waned. As we can see already, his old age is not just a biographical fact—it is a feature of his soul.

Socrates wants to learn from Cephalus, given his old age, about the “road” that leads to the “threshold of old age”, whether it is “hard” or not (328 e). In other words, Socrates is raising the question about what constitutes a good life, taking as an example and interlocutor an old man, thus anticipating Aristotle when he claims that a man’s stance with respect to his overall happiness can only be determined from the point of view gained at the end of a man’s life²⁸. We can interpret this by saying that Socrates is already (implicitly, not explicitly) *gesturing towards the problem of the Good*—now in the minimal form of the good life, more explicitly, in the form of “justice”. Socrates is thus already acknowledging that it is hard to see the Good—it is hard to ‘live well,’ it is hard to be “just”. His asking Cephalus about his experience will only confirm this difficulty.

Cephalus, somewhat surprisingly, responds that the point is “the character of human beings”: most people in old age complain about not being able to handle sex, drinking, and other pleasures, and about being manhandled by relatives; others (e.g., Sophocles) rejoice for being finally free from the madness of such pleasures. More deeply, Cephalus says that it depends on the character, on whether people, either young or old, are “orderly and content with themselves” (329 d). Socrates is rightly “full of wonder” at what Cephalus says and wants to hear more. We should not take Socrates’s “wonder” as ironic. Cephalus’s insight is in fact deep and valuable—it is one of the main teachings of the *Republic*. The justice in the *polis* is not possible if the soul is not just. Similarly, as Cephalus suggests, a man’s stance with respect to the ‘good life’ cannot only be determined by external circumstances (e.g., old age), but must be rooted in his character. This is a promising start for Cephalus, which, however, will not be brought to fruition as Socrates continues his inquiry.

Socrates challenges Cephalus suggesting that the “many” (the mob) do not accept his idea (happiness in life depends on the order of the character) because they think that what matters is “substance”; that is, money: “They say that for the rich there are many consolations” (329 e). Cephalus responds: “What you say is true” (330 a). Cephalus recognizes that while it is difficult to be fully happy in old age for somebody with good

character (“decent man”) but no money, it is also difficult to be fully happy for somebody with money but with a bad character.

Socrates then asks Cephalus about the origin of his wealth. Cephalus responds that he has inherited his family fortune and that he plans on growing it for his sons. Cephalus defines himself as a “money-maker”, just like his father and his grandfather (330 b).

“The reason I asked, you see”, continues Socrates, “is that to me you didn’t seem overly fond of money” (330 c). How should one interpret this? Is Socrates being ironic? Is he trying to bring a hidden weakness in Cephalus to light? Or rather is he trying to ‘test the waters’ and see whether Cephalus’s insight about the relevance of the character, of the soul, corresponds in fact to a just soul in him? In other words, *Socrates stresses the positive in Cephalus* and looks for space in him to let the transcendent light of the Good shine through (initiated by Cephalus’s mention of the good life as dependent on the order in the character, put now put on hold by the problem of money).

Socrates asks Cephalus what is the greatest good that he has enjoyed coming from his wealth. Cephalus’s response is extremely interesting. On the one hand, he shows again a certain openness to the light of the transcendent Good, this time in the form of a religious belief about the afterlife—more specifically, an awareness of the absolute demands of justice (expressed by his awareness of the clear distinction between “just” and “unjust”) and of the fact that what we do in life has eternal repercussions (“the tales told about what is in Hades—that the one who has done unjust deeds here must pay the penalty there”; the topic of the afterlife will be taken up again only at the end of the *Republic* in Book X). On the other hand, Cephalus is not quite sure whether this religious consciousness in old age is due to something like dementia and fear of death or if it represents a genuine awareness of reality. To make his initial insight even weaker, Cephalus states that he believes that money is somewhat necessary to do what justice demands of us—a view that was not uncommon in ancient Greece. This last bit is the heart of his response to Socrates’s question. The comment of the absolute demands of justice and the afterlife are a great opening—they provide *religious and metaphysical depth* to the problem of justice—while the *consequent skepticism and disbelief* are a closure. But the lowest point is the implicit affirmation that the demands of justice can only be met under certain conditions; that is, under the conditions of being wealthy. In fact, having money allows one not to cheat or lie to any man against one’s will (330 e–331 b).

Socrates for the first time raises the problem of “justice” explicitly (as the central topic of the ongoing discussion with Cephalus) (331 c) and asks the ‘Socratic’ question *par excellence*: what is justice? Implied in what Cephalus has said is that justice might be “[telling] the truth and giving back what a man has taken from another” (331 c). Socrates questions whether this is sufficient or whether we should also specify the context: “everyone would surely say that if a man takes weapons from a friend when the latter is of sound mind, and the friend demands them back when he is mad, one shouldn’t give back such things, and the man who gave them back would not be just . . . ” “What you say is right” (331 c). We should pause here and note that Cephalus was a metic from Syracuse and an arm-dealer living in Athens; and that his family had made its fortune by selling arms to Athens. One should not miss Socrates’s irony here in his seemingly random example about giving weapons back to a madman.

Cephalus accepts Socrates’s objection but the discussion is interrupted by Polemarchus who, just as in the opening scene of the dialogue, intervenes with impetuosity²⁹: “Then this isn’t the definition of justice, speaking the truth and giving back what one takes”. “It most certainly is, Socrates, interrupted Polemarchus, at least if Simonides should be believed at all” (331 d). And just as in the opening scene of the dialogue, the dramatic interruption means the *interruption of logos*, of reason, of the work of rational persuasion, operated by unreason and therefore violence.

II. *Polemarchus*. After the interruption, Cephalus “hands down the argument” to Polemarchus and leaves for the sacrifices (331 d). Cephalus remains stuck in a *fundamental ambiguity*: is he just superstitious? We cannot shake off the impression that Cephalus is

just “old” after all. The moments of hope that his insights revealed must be entrusted to someone else.

This is, in fact, the way in which Polemarchus is introduced: “Am I not the heir of what belongs to you? said Polemarchus. Certainly, he said and laughed. And with that he went away to the sacrifices” (331 d). Note here the dramatic suspension: is Polemarchus the genuine “heir” of Cephalus—one who will bring the unfulfilled hopes and promises of Cephalus to fulfilment—or somebody who will just inherit his money? Socrates reveals his hopefulness by calling him “the heir of the argument” (331 e).

Polemarchus responds to Socrates stating what Simonides says on justice: “it is just to give to each what is owed” (331 e). Under the power of Socrates’s questioning (rehashing what he said before to Cephalus), Polemarchus clarifies his interpretation of what Simonides means by justice: “. . . friends owe it to friends to do some good and nothing bad” (332 a). Polemarchus introduces for the first time the topic of friendship in the context of a discussion on justice. The connection is most illuminating. In fact, as we shall see shortly, justice is reduced by Polemarchus to *clientelism*, which is what justice and friendship become when they are not illuminated by the transcendent light of the Good. Justice “gives benefits and harms to friends and enemies”, respectively. “Does it mean that justice is doing good to friends and harm to enemies?” “In my opinion” (332 d). Polemarchus’s clientelist understanding of justice (and friendship) is further clarified by the specification of the acts which pertain specifically to just men in dealing with friends and enemies: “In my opinion it is in making war and being an ally in battle” (332 e). This is the first time the topic of war is brought up in the dialogue. Polemarchus then slightly corrects his view by stating that justice is “useful” not only in a time of war but also in times of peace. In this latter case, it is mostly useful for “contracts” and “partnerships” (333 a).

Let us note two things here. First, Polemarchus assumes that justice is a synonym for the “useful”. Clientelism and interests in personal gain in war and business are his version of justice. Second, one should appreciate Socrates’s strategy in dealing with Polemarchus. He is trying to raise Polemarchus from his metaphysical hole—from his dramatically narrow view of justice. In fact, the problem of justice as clientelism is that it is impossibly partial. Socrates attempts to de-partialize Polemarchus’s view by introducing every time a *more universal perspective*: the “acts” of the “arts” (shoemaking, medicine) are in principle ‘useful’ to everybody, not just to friends and clients; the just man seems to be even more useful and to have a more fundamental, more universal value than the “player of draughts” (who symbolizes dialectic), the “housebuilder” (who symbolizes the lawmaker) and the “harp player”, the musician (who symbolizes the educator?). By contrast, Polemarchus keeps responding by *partializing his view* even further: not just friends, but war allies and business partners, etc.; the main concern for the just man is not something even beyond dialectic, lawmaking, and education, but . . . “money” (333 b). Similarly, Socrates tries to show Polemarchus that the art of dealing with money in partnerships does not have a unique universal value because other arts are clearly more important in other contexts (building a boat when that is necessary, piloting the boat when that is required, etc.). In other words, Socrates is trying again to de-partialize Polemarchus’s view of justice by way of de-absolutizing his view of money, etc.

The discussion continues and it becomes clear that knowing how to use money wisely is something that transcends the simple art of dealing with money in establishing partnerships—for the simple reason that one could have a business, for instance, selling weapons to evil war-partners. One needs different “arts” and virtues to know for what things and goals money should be used. Instead of opening himself up to this transcendence and adopting a new perspective, Polemarchus simply admits the ridiculousness of his position: “Then, when gold or silver must be used in partnership, in what case is the just man more useful than the others?” “When they must be deposited and kept safe, Socrates”. “Do you mean when there is no need to use them, and they are left lying?” “Certainly”. “Is it when money is useless that justice is useful for it?” “I’m afraid so” (330 c-d).

At this point, Polemarchus seems to go even deeper into his anti-philosophical hole. Socrates shows that Polemarchus can stick to his position on justice only by reducing everything to pure merchandise, something that ought to be “deposited”, “guarded” and “not used”. Maybe even economical transactions become impossible; instead, only jealously storing and accumulating goods seems possible from the point of view of Polemarchus’s understanding of justice. In fact, if a “shield” and a “lyre” must be used and not just kept, their use requires a different man from the just man (the man who can keep goods and money); namely, the warrior (somebody who knows the art of war, which includes having courage) and the musician (somebody who knows the art of music). But a shield and a lyre are what they are only when they are used in accordance with that for which they are made. So, Polemarchus’s view of justice has metaphysical implications: it tends to destroy reality, to *negate it and turn it into merchandise* (333 d)³⁰.

Socrates also shows that, if “guarding money” is absolutized (identified with justice and the Good), then there is no reason why one should not also steal money from others in order to accumulate wealth. Socrates thus ironically quotes Homer and Simonides and puts them together with Polemarchus. “Justice, then, seems, according to you and Homer and Simonides, to be a certain art of stealing, for the benefit, to be sure, of friends and the harm of enemies. Isn’t that what you mean?” (334 b). Polemarchus replies: “No, by Zeus, he said, But I no longer know what I did mean. However, it is still my opinion that justice is helping friends and harming enemies” (334 b). Polemarchus seems hardly receptive of the light of the Good.

Socrates now, by following Polemarchus’s new statement about friends and enemies, introduces a new element, the essential *distinction between appearance and reality*. This distinction is crucial insofar as it is the distinction upon which any possible deepening of the meaning of reality and any possible unveiling of value both hinge, as the image of the cave later on in the dialogue will make clear. Appearances are, of course, not a nothing. What must be avoided, however, is the absolutization of the appearances. So, Socrates wonders, are friends those “who seem to be good to an individual” or those who truly are? Polemarchus settles for the appearances: “It’s likely, he said, that the men one believes to be good, one loves, while those he considers bad he hates” (334 c). Socrates pushes the argument further by showing that, from the point of view of appearances, one can easily be stuck in a wrong understanding of who is good and who is bad (“mistake”), making it therefore difficult to understand who ought to be benefited (those who are truly friends) and who ought to be harmed (those who are truly enemies, 334 d-e). The whole point of this discussion is Socrates’s attempt to move Polemarchus ‘up’ in considering more seriously the transcendent perspective that is needed to rescue his argument from absurdities—the transcendence here is the perspective of the ‘truth’ which is irreducible to the appearances, which is introduced in the form of the question, ‘Who are the *true* friends?’ (namely, ‘who are the true allies, clients, with whom one ought to partner and whom one should benefit, according to the demands of justice, as Polemarchus understands it?). Polemarchus seems to be responsive to this attempt: “For the argument seems to be bad. . . . But let’s change what we set down at the beginning. For I’m afraid we didn’t set down the definition of friend and enemy correctly” (334 e); “The man who seems to be, and is, good, is a friend, he said, while the man who seems good and is not, seems to be but is not a friend. And we’ll take the same position about the enemy” (335 a). Note here that Polemarchus acknowledges the essential point that “what truly is” must be taken into account and that appearance cannot be the absolute.

Now Socrates shows that once we accept that ‘what something truly is’ must be part of our understanding of the absolute, Polemarchus’s view of justice cannot be maintained anymore. The argument is the following: the musical man must produce music in another man by music (it cannot produce non-music); but the just man, according to Polemarchus, must produce non-justice in the enemy by “harming” him (assuming that harming someone means “making him worse with respect to virtue” and that justice is a virtue); the conclusion

is that Polemarchus's view of justice cannot hold true and that justice can never mean harming someone (335 a–e).

'What truly is,' as opposed to appearances, cannot turn into its opposite. As far as appearances go, cold turns into warm, hard into soft, unjust people turn into just people, etc. But *'what truly is' remains identical to itself*. So, it is not possible that 'justice' turns into 'injustice' (here, in the form of its effects and consequences). This is Socrates's first implicit appeal to the "ideas".

What is more relevant here is that Socrates's arguments seem to have made Polemarchus finally responsive and open to the call of the Good. He does not defend himself anymore but opens himself to 'something other,' the otherness of real justice. In a sense then, Polemarchus *does bring to a certain fulfillment the unfulfilled hopes and promises of Cephalus*. Accordingly, Socrates and Polemarchus conjointly admit that life remains a battle for the Good which is never won once for all: "We shall do battle then as partners, you and I, I said, if someone asserts that Simonides, or Bias, or Pittacus or any other wise and blessed man said it". "I, for one, he said, am ready to be your partner in the battle" (335 e–336 a). The crucial element here is the *radical transformation of the concepts of "battle" and war*. At the beginning, battle and war are understood within the clientelist framework of justice. Now, it has become the fight for real justice—and a universal fight in a sense, at least insofar it has been agreed that justice cannot harm anybody. Socrates has *deconstructed* Polemarchus's clientelistic notion of justice so that Polemarchus could *reconstruct* it philosophically. What justice is has not been established yet, but the de-absolutization of appearances, the universalization of the demands of justice beyond clientelism, and the transfiguration of the idea of battle to mean the fighting pursuit of wisdom denote a radical growth in Polemarchus.

III. *Thrasymachus*. Thrasymachus ("fierce fighter") violently storms onto the scene. "Now Thrasymachus had many faces started out to take over the argument in the midst of our discussion, but he had been restrained by the men sitting near him, who wanted to hear the argument out. But when we paused and I said this, he could no longer keep quiet; hunched up like a wild beast, he flung himself at us as if to tear us to pieces. Then both Polemarchus and I got all in a flutter from fright" (336 b). He asks Socrates to answer the question regarding what justice is instead of refuting other people's answers. Socrates must give a "clear and precise" account of what justice is instead of responding by indirectly comparing it to "the needful, the helpful, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous, etc".

Thrasymachus is like a "wild beast" who wants to "tear them into pieces". According to him, Socrates is possessed by "nonsense" and simply refutes others to "gratify his love of honor". Similar to Polemarchus, but in a much more violent way, Thrasymachus shows a violent impatience with respect to the organic unfolding of the argument (two aspects contrary to 'reason'). He is "exasperated by the argument"³¹.

Socrates fearfully responds that they are searching for real justice, which is much more precious than "gold"; that they are trying to be as serious as possible; any shortcoming in the argument is due to "incompetence" rather than ill will (336 e). Socrates's response here is not simply contextual. It echoes his self-ascribed ignorance in the *Apology* and is supposed to present his discussion with Thrasymachus as the fight between two radical alternatives: the patient love for wisdom which is aware of its own structural power (genuine philosophy) and the impatient violence of unreason, whose only goal is to prove and affirm itself.

Of course, Thrasymachus "busts out laughing very scornfully", pointing out Socrates's "irony". He says he predicted that Socrates would not want to respond (337 a). Socrates points out that he cannot answer because Thrasymachus has established *a priori* 'rules' for the discussion that are too narrow, that do not respect the nature of the subject matter. We see here yet another feature in Thrasymachus that is incompatible with the demands of *logos*, along the line of his impatience. When reason is not acknowledged for what is it—a window open on reality, so to speak, and an eye sensitive to the demands of reality—

discussion becomes a *violent game played according to rules established a priori by the one who attains the greatest force to assert himself*.

Thrasymachus challenges Socrates: “What punishment do you deserve to suffer?”, if I, Thrasymachus, can give you a different definition of justice? “What else than the one it is fitting for a man who does not know to suffer? I said. And surely it is fitting for him to learn from the man who knows. So this is what I think I deserve to suffer”; “That’s because you are an agreeable chap!, he said. But in addition to learning, pay a fine in money” (337 d).

This passage is highly important for the following reason. Neither Socrates nor Thrasymachus have revealed yet what they think about justice. Nevertheless, this exchange is already revelatory of their different points of view and anticipates what will unfold in the rest of the dialogue. Socrates provides the *point of view of real justice* (and ultimately, the Good), while Thrasymachus provides the *point of view of appearance* (here understood as the identification of justice with ‘force’). For Socrates, real justice “punishes” only to redeem, and the punishment is nothing else than the necessary “suffering” that one has to undergo as a consequence of being torn away from his condition of error. This is why Socrates talks about the suffering of “learning”, which amounts to going from a condition of error, or at least ignorance, to a condition of knowledge. For Thrasymachus, on the contrary, punishment and suffering are for their own sake; they are the natural consequence of relationships understood according to force. Punishment ends up having an inevitable *sadistic element*. Noteworthy is also the difference in linguistic style between Socrates and Thrasymachus: the latter uses very violent expressions, while the former calls Thrasymachus “wise”, “best of men”, etc., with a mix of irony and kindness.

Socrates says again that, first, “he does not know and does not profess to know”, and second, that even if he had some “suppositions” on the nature of justice, he would be forbidden to answer because he is inhibited by *a priori* constraints on what he can and cannot say. “It’s more fitting for you to speak; for you are the one who says he knows and can tell” (337 e–338 a).

Thrasymachus pretends to resist Socrates’s invitation, but actually he “desires to speak so that he could win a good reputation, since he believed he had a very fine answer” (338 a). Thrasymachus is a famous orator and his traits are the traits of the sophist: he turns dialectic into a game of winning and losing; he makes it a matter of money; he claims to know and to have something to teach easily; he is moved by love of honor. On the contrary, Socrates is constantly in a position of “learning from others”, has no money, and “makes full payment in thanks” and “praise”, namely, is defined by gratitude.

Thrasymachus’s speech is as quick as his misological impatience and only aspires to impress: “Now listen, he said, I say that the just is nothing but other than the advantage of the stronger. Well, why don’t you praise me? But you won’t be willing” (338 c). One is struck by how concise and anticlimactic Thrasymachus’s answer is, especially after so much build-up. He seems to suggest that all that should be said about justice can be summed up in this sentence and all that is left is to praise him for imparting such profound knowledge.

Socrates’s response (“First I must learn what you mean”, 338 c-d) is instructive. He advances the literal interpretation of “strong” as if it meant physically strong. His ironic and intentionally literal interpretation (to which Thrasymachus reacts by saying, quite charmingly, “You are disgusting, Socrates”) is most likely meant to show that *the idea that a truth can be communicated once and for all through a simple and self-evident proposition is false*. It is now Thrasymachus who succumbs to the rules that he himself has established. Literalism is an almost necessary evil stemming from Thrasymachus’s attitude towards knowledge, and Socrates knows it well. “Just tell me more clearly what you mean”, Socrates continues.

Thrasymachus clarifies his position by bringing up for the first time in the dialogue the different forms of government: “democracy”, “tyranny”, and “aristocracy”. So, the “advantage of the stronger” is the “advantage of the established ruling body” expressed in its laws and in the administration of justice, especially the punishment of those who do not abide by those laws (here left unspecified, but later specified as the advantage of the tyrant) (339 a).

It is interesting to note that Socrates shows that Thrasymachus's position, as it has been stated, is a step backwards compared to what was gained at the end of the exchange with Polemarchus, namely, the distinction between the real and appearance. Here's the argument (note that here, just as before, the distinction is introduced by the possibility of making "mistakes"): if justice is the advantage of the stronger obtained by ensuring that the ruled obey the laws, if the ruling class makes mistakes in these laws about what actually constitute its advantage, then justice (i.e., the ruled respecting the laws) implies non-justice (i.e., producing "disadvantage" for the rulers and stronger), which is contradictory (339 a-e). Thrasymachus cannot yet account for the distinction between the truly real (what is truly advantageous to the stronger) and appearance (what seems to be advantageous).

Polemarchus jumps in, confirming the validity of Socrates's argument. He is a "witness" of the truth (the expression comes from Cleitophon's objection: "What need is there of a witness? Thrasymachus himself agrees . . . ", 340 a). The fact that he has become a "fighter" for the truth seems confirmed by this episode.

Cleitophon tries to rescue Thrasymachus by saying that he simply meant that the just is "what seems to the stronger to be the advantage of the stronger". Socrates asks Thrasymachus if this is his view. Thrasymachus denies with disdain ("you're a sycophant"; compare 341 b), saying that somebody who is in error about his advantage can hardly be said to be "stronger". Thrasymachus explains that when he talked about 'the ruler' he implied in this concept that "the ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, does not make mistakes", therefore excluding the possibility of mistakes of disadvantageous laws for the sake of the argument (just like a "calculator" is not really a calculator *in actu exercito* if he makes a mistake in calculation) (340 d-e). This is speaking in "precise speech". Socrates will challenge this version of Thrasymachus's statement.

The style and the language used by Thrasymachus (341 a-b) portray Socrates as the guilty party or defendant in a lawsuit and Thrasymachus as the injured party and accuser. Thrasymachus in this passage shows that the discussion is for him a *game between winners and losers*. "Do harm to that and play the sycophant, if you can . . . but you won't be able to". "Do you suppose me to be so mad, I said, as to try to shave a lion and play sycophant with Thrasymachus?" (341 c). Compared to a wild beast and a wolf first, Thrasymachus is now compared to a lion.

By sticking to the principle of using "precise speech", Socrates challenges Thrasymachus's argument showing that every "art" is concerned about the good not of itself, but of what that art is about, the good of what that art rules over (e.g., medicine 'properly said' is concerned about the good, not of medicine, but of the body; horsemanship about the good not of horsemanship, but horses, etc.) (341 c–343 a). So, Socrates states: "Therefore, Thrasymachus, I said, there isn't ever anyone who holds any position of rule, insofar as he is ruler ["precise speech"], who considers or commands his own advantage rather than that of what is ruled and of which he himself is the craftsman; and it is looking to this and what is advantageous and fitting for it that he says everything he says and does everything he does" (342 e). Plato stresses that throughout the argument Thrasymachus resists opening himself up to the light of the Good, to overcome his position: "He conceded this too, but with a great deal of resistance"; "He finally agreed to this, too, although he tried to put up a fight about it" (342 c-d).

While Socrates states that "it was evident to everyone that the argument about the just had turned around in the opposite direction" (343 a), it is not clearly stated what the essential value of the argument is. My interpretative hypothesis is the following: Socrates shows that the *self-interest or self-advantage of the "stronger" and the "ruler" cannot be absolute*; it must *necessarily take into account the good of the ruled over* (even if only to functionalize it to the self-interest and self-advantage; and this will be, in fact, Thrasymachus's retort). Once again, instead of opening up to something transcendent (even in the minimal form of the good of that over which the strong rules), Thrasymachus closes up (no good of the other is 'saved' because it is all functionalized to self-interest).

Thrasymachus, first, answers to Socrates that all the good that the strong might see in the ruled is functionalized to the self-interest and self-advantage of the ruler, just like shepherds or cowherds “fatten and take care of” sheep and cows with nothing else in view than “their master’s good and their own” (343 b-c). Second, he states that justice—“the advantage of the man who is stronger and rules, and a personal harm to the man who obeys and serves”—basically means the capacity to be unjust and getting away with it; it means having the force to prevaricate over others and taking whatever one wants without being punished. It is at this level that the functionalization of anything else to one’s self-interest and self-advantage are complete, and this coincides with “tyranny”: “And that is tyranny, which by stealth and force takes away what belongs to others, both what is sacred and profane, private and public, not bit by bit, but all at once. . . . For it is not because they fear doing unjust deeds [maybe like Cephalus, who thinks about the afterlife?], but because they fear suffering them, that those who blame injustice do so. So, Socrates, injustice, when it comes into being on a sufficient scale, is mightier, freer, and more masterful than justice; and, as I have said from the beginning, the just is the advantage of the stronger, and the unjust is what is profitable and advantageous for oneself” (344 a-c).

This is the *crucial turning point* in the dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus. While he was initially supposed to defend what justice is, Thrasymachus’s speech has in fact become a *defense of injustice*. One could not think of a worse kind of confusion than Thrasymachus’s. *Unreason leads to defending contradiction*.

Moreover, the tyrant is the perfect representation of *perfect self-referentiality* and therefore *pure immanence*: somebody completely given to self-interest, functionalizing everything else to himself and remaining perfectly closed to the calling of and the light of the Good. The life of the tyrant is the *denial of any transcendence*.

After this, Thrasymachus believes he can go away, “like a bathman” (vulgar and talkative), says Socrates, without “presenting an argument for what had been said”. We see here, just like at the beginning, the ‘monological’ and ‘misological’ tendencies of the sophist. Those present convince him to stay. Socrates wonders whether he believes that what he just said can be left unargued and that it is “a small matter” and not a “course of life” on the basis of which each of the present should live to be happy.

Socrates now focuses on Thrasymachus’s new thesis. The old thesis was that “the just is the advantage of the stronger”. The new thesis is that “injustice is more profitable than justice”. Socrates claims that he is not convinced and asks Thrasymachus to persuade him. Thrasymachus’s response is violent once again: “If you’re not persuaded by what I’ve just now said, what more shall I do for you? Shall I take the argument and give your soul a forced feeding” (345 b)?

In order to counter Thrasymachus’s thesis, Socrates, first, states again that the pursuit of pure self-interest at the expense of everything and everybody else is incompatible with the definition of “art” they have agreed upon (in “proper speech”, each art and each craftsman must care for the object of their art and craft; each ruler must care for the ruled; the shepherd must care for the sheep; if we think of him as ultimately caring only for himself, we think of him as a “money—maker” and not anymore as a shepherd). One might say that even the tyrant must acknowledge his subjects and concede to them to keep them alive in order to remain a tyrant (although Book VIII on the political decline of the polis problematizes this statement in interesting ways, as we shall see in the next section). In this sense, pure injustice (not caring for anything else other than oneself and functionalizing everything else to oneself) is impossible and not profitable. This movement is once again a *movement of de-absolutization* of the alleged pure self-referentiality of injustice.

Second, he states that this is evidenced by the fact that those who rule “demand wages”: since in ruling the rulers are not pursuing their own advantage but that of the ruled, they have to pursue their advantage in a different way, namely, by being paid. This second movement *further de-absolutizes* injustice by showing that the rulers not only do not pursue their exclusive advantage, but they also need the ‘just’ reward for their work, here expressed in the form of wages.

Third, and in dialogue with Glaucon, he explains that the ‘just’ reward, namely, the reward asked for ruling by the “good” man, is neither “money”, nor “honor” (which are allegedly the rewards asked for by the ‘bad’ man), but the avoidance of a “penalty”. In other words, the good man assumes the task of ruling (for the good of the ruled) out of “necessity” (all the others would be worse, etc.) and for fear of a “penalty” (being forced to do so). “For it is likely that if a city of good men came to be, there would be a fight over not ruling, just as there is now over ruling; and there it would become manifest that a true ruler really does not naturally consider his own advantage but rather that of the one who is ruled. Thus everyone who knows would choose to be benefited by another rather than to take the trouble of benefiting another” (347 d). In this third movement, Socrates shows not only that injustice cannot be beneficial, but that every ruler is also always ‘in credit,’ that something would be owed to him according to ‘justice.’

Socrates’s exchange with Thrasymachus now brings up the distinction between virtue (and wisdom, prudence, good) and vice (the opposite). Socrates’s argument is complex, but the whole point is just to show that Thrasymachus is so steeped in appearance that, just as he identified justice with injustice, he now identifies virtue with vice. Here’s the argument: Thrasymachus states that the injustice is not only advantageous, but that it is “virtue” and that justice is “vice”; the just does not get the better of the just but only of the unjust; that is, of the unlike; the unjust gets the better of everybody, just and unjust, like and unlike; now, those who have an art or prudence (who are therefore “wise”, “virtuous”, and “good” by implication), get the better of the unlike but not of the like (the musician gets the better not of the other musician, but of the non-musician); thus, the unjust cannot be identified with the one who is good and virtuous, etc. (348 c–350 c)³²

And all of a sudden, just as in the case of the sudden blaze about which Plato speaks in *Letter VII*, Thrasymachus, in his behavior and his deeds, undergoes a *minor but radically meaningful change*: “Now, Thrasymachus did not agree to all of this so easily as I tell it now, but he dragged his feet and resisted, and he produced a wonderful quantity of sweat, for it was summer. And then I saw what I had not yet seen before—Thrasymachus blushing” (350 d). Thrasymachus complains that he is not in full agreement but says that he will not speak, otherwise he will be accused of making a “public harangue” by Socrates. “If you want to keep on questioning, go ahead and question, and just as with old wives who tell tales, I shall say to you, ‘All right,’ and I shall nod and shake my head”. “Not, in any case, contrary to your opinion” (350 e)³³

The next step is for Socrates to show that injustice cannot be “mightier” than justice. In fact, if injustice is vice and the lack of wisdom, knowledge, virtue, prudence, good, etc., it will be weakness and not power. All associations (not only “cities” and “armies”, but also criminal associations such as “pirates” and “robbers”) could not function properly if their members behaved unjustly toward each other. Injustice produces factions and fragmentation and hinders action, while justice does the opposite. So, justice must be “mightier” than injustice. The dis-unity of injustice is enhanced by the fact that the gods are just and the unjust men are not friends of the gods (351 a–352 b).

Thrasymachus seems to answer scornfully again: “Feast yourself boldly on the argument, he said, for I won’t oppose you, so as not to irritate these men here” (352 b). However, there is a sense in which Thrasymachus is actually undergoing a *positive change*. If one notices, Thrasymachus, after blushing, manifests a *certain desire to please the others*—or at least not to irritate them!—which implies recognizing the other as other and de-absolutizing the self-referentiality of the tyrant which he has championed previously in the dialogue. Thrasymachus, if not in the argument, at least in his behavior and attitude, shows that he is becoming more open to the transcendent, to reason, to the Good, by way of opening himself to the other, even if this happens in the minimal form of simply ‘giving up,’ such as when he says “All right”, and in the form of wanting to please the others. This is why, I think, Socrates supports this behavior (his attitude is not just ironic) while trying to develop his openness from that positive behavior to a higher level of agreement: “It’s because I am gratifying you, he said”. “It’s good of you to do so. But gratify me this much more and tell

me" (351 c); "Feast yourself . . ." "Come, then, I said, fill out the rest of the banquet for me by answering just as you have been doing" (352 b).

It is important to stress the fact that Thrasymachus will never go beyond this partial change, this basic evolution in behavioral attitude (a new attitude of somewhat reluctant kindness and recognition of the other, if you will). His attitude will never turn into a properly rational recognition of Socrates's argument, not even at the end of the book. Thrasymachus *concedes* but does not *agree*: "It looks like it, he said, according to your argument" (353 e); "Let it be so, he said" (354 a); "Then, my blessed Thrasymachus, injustice is never more profitable than justice". "Let that, he said, be the fill of your banquet at the festival of Bendis, Socrates" (354 a). Thus, *Thrasymachus's change is ambiguous*: on the one hand, he has become more responsive to the call of reason and universality (and implicitly to the Good) by becoming better disposed towards the others (Socrates and the others who are present)³⁴; on the other hand, he remains utterly closed to Socrates's arguments (his misology has not been fully subverted).

The final step in Socrates's argument is to show that the just man will also be happier, he will have a good life. The argument is simple, and at this point Thrasymachus has stopped engaging: everything has its own "work" (eyes see, ears hear, the soul rules, gives life, and deliberates). In order to do its own work successfully, each thing needs its own corresponding "virtue", its own excellence. Successful work results in happiness, but "justice" has been defined as the virtue of the soul; thus, only the just soul is happy because only the just soul can do the work that is proper to the soul, i.e., managing, ruling, deliberating, and living well (352 d–353 e).

Let us quote the conclusion of Book I in full, which provides the final sense of what has been accomplished in the dialogue until now and which represents an ideal bridge to and justification of the remainder of the work:

I owe it to you, Thrasymachus, I said, since you have grown gentle and have left off being hard on me. However, I have not had a fine banquet, but it is my own fault, not yours. For in my opinion, I am just like the gluttons who grab at whatever is set before them to get a taste of it, before they have in proper measure enjoyed what went before. Before finding out what we were considering at first—what the just is—I let go of that and pursued the consideration of whether it is vice and lack of learning, or wisdom and virtue. And later, when in its turn an argument that injustice is more profitable than justice fell in my way, I could not restrain myself from leaving the other one and going after this one, so that now as a result of the discussion I know nothing. So long as I do not know what the just is, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not and whether the one who has it is unhappy or happy (354 b-c).

The first sentence seems to confirm the interpretation I have given about Thrasymachus's change. Socrates's comment is not purely ironic; it states the truth: Thrasymachus has changed for the better. Nevertheless, Socrates admits that, having won, he has lost. Why? Because in a sense he has succumbed to the sophistic logic of Thrasymachus, looking to overturn his interlocutor's argument without, however, succeeding in doing what genuine philosophical thinking is called to do—revealing the relative in the light of the absolute, thus letting the light of the Good itself shine through. What justice is and, more deeply, what the Good is, has not been said. At this point, we know that Thrasymachus is wrong, and even Thrasymachus feels ashamed about this tenet, but Socrates has not yet led his interlocutors to 'see' the Good. By partially neglecting the absolute, Socrates has been subject to the disorienting and accidental forces of the circumstances, which have taken the argument first in one direction, then in another. The argument about the Good will require a different, "longer way", which Socrates and his interlocutors will undertake in the following books³⁵.

3. When the *Polis* Withdraws from the Good: From Timocracy to Tyranny in Book VIII

The reading of Book I that I have proposed in the previous section is overall optimistic. Although Cephalus represents the failure of a personal history that has remained stuck

in the trap of superstition and of a bourgeois understanding of justice, his failures are somehow 'redeemed' in the new hope represented by Polemarchus. In other words, Book I presents a dramatic scene in which the Good, in the person of Socrates, begins to perform its restorative action on Socrates's interlocutors. However, one of the most celebrated books of the dialogue, Book VIII, portrays a much bleaker scenario. As is well known, Plato in Book VIII describes the internal logic of the political decay from timocracy to tyranny through the 'intermediate' forms of degeneration of oligarchy and democracy. Book VIII, then, can be taken as the political and spiritual exemplification of what would happen to Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus if their movement were not towards the Good but still further away from it. After all, Socrates explains, regimes do not "arise 'from an oak or rocks'" but "from the dispositions of the men in the cities" (544 e).

As I will try to show, Book VIII contains a profound *metaphysical message*, which underlies and goes beyond the message about the political order³⁶. If the conversion towards the Good brings about a deepening of the meaning of reality and an unveiling of new dimensions of value, the slippery slope from timocracy to tyranny shows precisely the opposite: *reality's gradual divesting of all sorts of meaning and value*. The conclusion of this logic of decay will be, in fact, the portrayal of the tyrant, for whom the engagement with reality has been reduced to the preservation of his naked life—mere existence, in which not even money-making and pleasure can play a stable role anymore. Thus, the fearful and violently dark naked life of the tyrant stands in sharp opposition to the generous sunlit existence of the philosopher. As I did for Book I, I shall give a unitary account of the unfolding of the logic of Book VIII before providing a close textual analysis of the arguments. Also in this case, the literary, dramatic, and rhetorical elements will play a role in the interpretation.

The first movement in the unfolding of the logic of political and spiritual decay is the shift from aristocracy to timocracy. Aristocracy represents the *primacy of reason* supported by the *excellence of nature* among the rulers. The process that leads to a wanting nature in the newer generations (which I will talk about more in the analysis) forces a *replacement of reason* with an overpowering love of lower things, namely, victory and honors (timocracy). Once timocracy is established, social recognition tends to become more and more identified with wealth. Money is absolutized and thus becomes not only the key to political freedom and life, but also, and more deeply, the *only criterion for meaning and value*. This new shift determines the establishment of an oligarchic regime. Oligarchy is in a sense the key moment in this story of political decay because it represents the moment of radical rupture with any metaphysical horizon: the transcendence of being, analogously realizing the more radical transcendence of the Good, is fully absorbed within the principle of money-making—the principle of universal commodification of reality, as Marx would put it much later³⁷. The two following forms of political degeneration are democracy, corresponding to the *absolutization of "freedom"* understood as pure self-determination for the pursuit of anarchic pleasure, and tyranny, corresponding to the *absolutization of the self-referential power* of the tyrant and to its paradoxical coincidence with its opposite, a *non-power*, or, better, the mere 'power' of protecting one's naked life against ubiquitous and continuous life threats. Democracy and tyranny are then the radicalization of the anti-metaphysical rapture which oligarchy has already performed. Once reason has lost its receptive capacity for what is genuinely true, beautiful, and good, and life has been subjected to the lower drives of human nature, including those that lead to absolutizing money-making, the door to the shift to mere self-referentiality, both in democracy and tyranny, has been opened. Tyranny thus embodies the *most distant point from the Good* that one can imagine insofar as the tyrant is constantly and constitutively forced to kill and on the verge of being killed: removing the Good from the picture implies removing the Good's effects, not only truth and justice, but also being itself. The life of the tyrant is being itself reduced to a minimum, so to speak. In the tyrant's perception of the world and his own life, reality has been stripped of all meaning and layers of value besides the non-value of mere self-existence at the expense of everybody else's death.

The principle of personal history at work in Book VIII also concerns the *relations among the generations* in the *polis*. Only, this time, the principle, instead of being an important factor in the manifestation of the Good, becomes a *factor in its veiling*. Older and younger generations are not capable of reciprocal communication and the virtues of the fathers, still alive in the aristocratic system and still somewhat recognized by the timocratic ruling class, are completely lost in oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny, to the point that, at the end of this process, the tyrant is forced to end the communication with his parents once for all by putting them to death. Instead of a positive evolution of characters, what we witness in Book VIII is an involution of intergenerational relations. The *demolition of the metaphysical structure of reality* inevitably leads to the *subversion of any generational difference* and to the *corrosion of any principle of authority*.

Plato vividly depicts the difficulties fathers have to hand down their legacy to their children. In particular, the younger generations give birth to one of the degenerated regimes due to a certain *unsolved relation to the past of their fathers* and a certain *ensuing want of hope in the future*: the timocratic man is aware of the virtue of his father but, hindered by an imperfect nature, believes that that past of virtue cannot be repeated, and he settles instead for the love of victories and honors under the weight of social pressure and out of a desire for self-affirmation. The oligarchic man is haunted by the public shame to which his father has been exposed and, now poor and fearful, believes that the only way to re-establish his position in the community is through the accumulation of wealth. The democratic man is ruined by the terrible education he has received, in which “stinginess” seems to be the driving force and which Plato explicitly describes as a failure on the part of the fathers. Finally, the tyrannical man is born out of a situation in which it has become literally impossible for fathers to be fathers and for children to be children—each behave like the others, in the utmost confusion—wherein the relationship of the tyrannical man to his parents must end in murder. In short, all forms of degenerated regime seem to be determinations of a failure in the father and son relation.

It is not the case that for Plato there is here a *generational fatality*. The decay is not necessitated by the past and history remains dramatic. This is, I think, a big part of Plato’s refusal of poetry—hence, also tragedy!—as the defining spiritual form of knowledge of the beautiful city. *By denying human freedom, tragedy abolishes history*. Plato in the *Republic* recognizes that existence is always conditioned in ways we cannot anticipate, but he also clearly states, notably in the myth of Er in Book X, that one can freely assume the given conditions of one’s life and pursue a life of wisdom, no matter how compromised or limiting these conditions seem to be [37] (pp. 113–153). What we witness in Book VIII is the opposite of this wise use of freedom—a series of bad choices under the weight of a personal history that seems too compromised to be turned around. It is instructive, however, that Plato explicitly describes the situation of the tyrant as that of an objective lack of freedom: the tyrant must kill the best people around him and maybe even come to parricide, “whether he wants to or not”, because he is governed by a “blessed necessity” (567 c-d). *Tragedy*, Plato seems to suggest, is not due to the envy of the gods, but to a *darkness present in the human soul and unleashed by a history of bad choices*. The move away from aristocracy and thus from the Good involves, at once, a shift from a dramatic to a tragic view of history, in which, however, the ‘tragic’ element of fatality is not received from the gods³⁸ but is self-imposed by man through a series of foolish resolutions.

I. *Timocracy*. The decay of the *polis* and the birth of timocracy—that is, of the regime characterized by the “love of victories and honor” (548 c)—begin with the fact that “the leaders of the city”, though wise and well educated, “will at some time beget children they should not” (546 b). This happens when sex and begetting children are not regulated according to a “perfect” or “geometrical number” (546 b-d); that is, according to order³⁹. The result is imperfect children with “mixed natures”, symbolized by the “chaotic mixing of iron with silver and of bronze with gold”, which “engenders unlikeness and inharmonious irregularity”. Because of this, these children are destined to neglect “music” and “gymnastic” and thus to become “unmusical” and “unworthy” (546 d-e).

This scenario slowly produces “factions” and a war between the iron-bronze people (money-making, land-owning people) and the gold-silver people (the older establishment, representative of true virtue): “Struggling and straining against one another, they came to an agreement on a middle way: they distributed land and houses to be held privately, while those who previously were guarded by them as free friends and supporters they then enslaved and held as serfs and domestics; and the occupied themselves with war and with guarding against these men” (547 b-c). Here, something crucial happens. The *legalization of private property* and the beginning of a *secret accumulation of wealth* (“And such men . . . will desire money just as those in oligarchies do” . . . “private nests” full of gold, 548 b) lead the citizens to become stingy and to act as schemers. This determines the end of that political friendship between the rulers and the ruled which characterized the previous regime. The internal war is accompanied by a spreading custom of illegality, whereby citizens start “running away from the law like boys from a father” (548 b).

Timocracy is somewhere in between aristocracy and oligarchy. While certain aristocratic habits persist, new habits—winds of fragmentation!—emerge. In particular, the beginning of the timocratic regime is marked by the fear of people “to bring the wise to the ruling offices—because the men of that kind it possesses are no longer simple and earnest, but mixed”. Thus, the citizens start “leaning toward spirited and simpler men, men naturally more directed to war than to peace; in holding the wiles and stratagems of war in honor; and in spending all its time making war; won’t most such aspects be peculiar to this regime?” (548 a).

The timocratic men who love “victories and honor” seek them whenever they can. They are exceedingly hard on slaves (“with slaves such a man would be brutal”, 549 a) and deferential towards those who are in power (“but with freemen he would be tame and to rulers most obedient”, 549 a). We witness here a *corruption of intersubjectivity*, which will get worse as the decay increases and which will explode with tyranny.

These people have already abandoned the life of reason because what is ‘in between’ in the soul (*thymoeides*, “spiritedness”) is now in charge. This is in part due to the lack in education they have received. They have been educated not through “persuasion” and arguments but through “force” (548 b-c). As a consequence, not only do the timocratic men establish a regime based on pursuit of victory and honor, but as they age they become more and more interested in money and the honor that is attached to wealth (549 b).

As I said in the introduction to this section, this political decay is fundamentally motivated by an *intergenerational disconnect*. The psychological model of the timocratic man is in fact that of a man of lesser quality, talent, and reasonableness than his father, who nevertheless aspires to the same primacy of the philosophical rulers. Plato characterizes the timocratic man precisely as someone whose nature is not excellent but who nevertheless has aspirations, compensating thus with his spiritedness his lack of natural talent: “He must be more stubborn [than Glaucon] . . . and somewhat less apt at music although he loves it, and must be a lover of hearing although he’s by no means skilled in rhetoric” (549 a); “He is a lover of ruling and of honor, not basing his claim to rule on speaking or anything of the sort, but on warlike deeds and everything connected with war; he is a lover of gymnastic and the hunt” (549 a). He is, at least partially, animated by resentment (he cannot really be what he wants to be) so that he looks for fulfilment in other, less important things. Resentment leads to competition: the timocratic man wants “to be more of a man than his father” (550 a).

It is worth noticing again that Plato stresses the *role played by the family* in giving birth to the timocratic man. The father still “waters the calculating part of his soul”, but the others—his mother, the domestics, other people in town—water “the desiring and spirited part” (550 b). The young man, due to a (partial) lack of philosophical talent, ‘settles for less,’ for a life according to *timoides*. Thus, the birth of the timocratic regime is at the level of the family and is due to a lacking nature and a lack of education. In short, the young man who fits the description of the timocratic man is the man who is somewhat troubled by a virtuous past (his father’s) of which he is not capable; and under the weight of social

pressure, he turns to other, much lower values—victory and honor. The timocratic man is the first stage in the process of replacement of the rule of reason with the rule of appetite⁴⁰. And the slow shift from victory and glory in war to the love for money—that is, the shift of timocratic souls towards oligarchy—is nothing else than the unfolding of this premise.

Once we get to oligarchy, the memory of a past of greatness and virtue, which was still present in timocracy, albeit in a shadowy way, is gone. Timocratic men are still capable of a certain degree of *recognition* of the true greatness of the aristocratic-monarchic regime and its virtue, but they do not have the talent and the quality that is required to reproduce it. In the next regime, the oligarchy, *this recognition is also corrupted*. It disappears insofar as everything is ‘flattened’ through money and money becomes the only criterion of meaning and value. There is a certain *nostalgic sense* in the timocratic regime that is lost in the oligarchic regime and which is totally absent in democracy and tyranny.

II. *Oligarchy*. As anticipated, the love for money grows within timocracy as an agent of even deeper corruption. Oligarchy is thus engendered as “the regime founded on a property assessment” (550 c). This is not to be interpreted only in political or procedural sense.

The love for money has an *anthropological and metaphysical significance*. In fact, drawn more and more into the worship of money, the oligarchic men consider virtue less and less: “they progress in money-making and the more honorable they consider it, the less honorable they consider virtue. Or isn’t virtue in tension with wealth?” (550 e); “when wealth and wealthy are honored in the city, virtue and the good men are less honorable” (551 a). The corruption of customs spreads through mimeticism (“Surely, what happens to be honored is practiced, and what is without honor is neglected”, 551 a) and the oligarchic regime is eventually instituted, either “by force of arms” or by “arousing fear” (551 b).

The ensuing scenario is the following: skills and competence in ruling become irrelevant because the only criterion is wealth, just as if an expert pilot of a ship were excluded in favor of a wealthy man with no competence (this is what Plato calls the “worst mistake” in oligarchy, 551 c-d). The city becomes more and more split between poor and rich (“Such a city’s not being one but of necessity two, the city of the poor and the city of the rich, dwelling together in the same place, ever plotting against each other”, 551 d). Despite being at war inside and outside, the polis loses the capacity to be good at it, both because the rulers are afraid of the “armed multitude” and because they do not want to spend money for the war due to their stinginess.

The most dramatic change, however, occurs at the *metaphysical level*. The *absolutization of money* reduces man to ‘nothing’: the rich are “nothing than a spender” (552 c). “Such a man growing up in a house is a drone and a disease of a city” (552 c). Analogously, the poor are valueless because they have no money—they become just “beggars” and potentially criminals.

The problem of how an oligarchic man is begotten is traced back, once again, to the *father-son relationship*. Plato explains that a timocratic father begets an oligarchic son in the following way. After the father, who was an important social figure (for instance, a general), is publicly humiliated and loses also all his money, the son seeks a way to gain social status. But at this point society has become so corrupt that pursuing social recognition can have no other ground than wealth. Nobody is even sensitive anymore to the greatness of courage in war; only money counts. Thus the son, “humbled by poverty, turns greedily to money-making and bit by bit saving and working, he collects money” (553 c). Oligarchic men are the results of “a want of education, bad rearing, and a bad rearrangement of the regime” (552 e). When the oligarchic man is born, of course the calculating part and the spirited part of the soul are enslaved to the money-making part (553 d).

Psychologically, the oligarchic man would be a sort of “squalid man” (554 b), too stingy even to pursue desires that have nothing to do with accumulating money. Such a man could even have an appearance of virtue, but he would not be virtuous; he would not be ruled by reason but by the “fear” of losing his patrimony, and thus he would be ‘fractured’ within himself: “Then on this account, I suppose such a man would be more

graceful than many, but the true virtue of the single-minded and harmonized soul would escape far from him" (554 e).

III. *Democracy*. Democracy results from the "insatiable" desire to "become as rich as possible" once the only accepted principle of value is money (555 b-c). Accordingly, the rulers allow the young to become "licentious" (i.e., to pursue also the other desires, not just money-making) so that they can become "richer and richer" by giving loans, selling goods, etc. As a consequence, more and more people fall into debt and become poorer and poorer. So they become idle, resentful, humiliated (555 d).

At the same time, the rich become weaker and weaker, having spent no time at all in educating either the body or the soul. As a consequence, at the first good opportunity, the many, the poor, take the power. "Then I suppose these men sit idly in the city, fitted out with stings and fully armed, some owing debts, some dishonored, and some both, hating and plotting against those who acquired what belongs to them and all the rest too, gripped by a love of change" (555 d); "it is often the case that a lean, tanned poor man is ranged in battle next to a rich man, reared in the shade, surrounded by a great deal of alien flesh, and sees him panting and full of perplexity. Don't you suppose he believes that it is due to the vice of the poor that such men are rich, and when the poor meet in private, one passes the word to the other: 'Those men are ours. For they are nothing'" (556 d).

Democracy marks such an inner *psychological division* that the war here is not anymore among the three different parts of the soul, but is within one part of the soul, the lowest, irrational part; it is a fight between the money-making inclination and the other low desires.

The destruction of the recognition of the real value and meaning of things realized by the oligarchic system (where money was the only value-making principle) becomes worse and worse in the absolute licentiousness of the democratic city. The new form of this *disregard for any metaphysical structure* is "freedom" ("each man would organize his life in it privately just as it pleases", 557 b; that is, a total practical indifference based on a total metaphysical indifference; purely subjective self-determination erected to a norm) and "freedom of speech" (no distinction between opinion and knowledge).

Plato compares democracy to a "general store" of regimes (557 d). "When a young man, reared as we were just saying without education and stingily, tastes the drones' honey and has intercourse with fiery, clever beasts who are able to purvey manifold and subtle pleasures with every sort of variety, you presumably suppose that at this point he begins his change from an oligarchic regime within himself to a democratic one" (559 e). In other words: *once every metaphysical awareness of reality has been destroyed* (this is what "lack of education" and "stinginess" mean), *what is left is the complete anarchy of pleasure-seeking desires*. It is worth noting that money, as a public institution, and money-based recognition of the other in oligarchy, still have a certain *minimal intersubjectivity* built into them. On the contrary, the pursuit of anarchic, purely subjective pleasure goes even more in the direction of a *radical functionalization of all relations*.

The origin of the problem is identified once again by Plato in an *intergenerational struggle*. Despite a sort of fight within the young man's soul, the bad desires take over "due to the father's lack of knowledge about rearing" (560 b).

The destruction of authority (the authority of virtue, of real education, etc.) that was initiated in oligarchy with the establishment of money as the chief value is completed with the destruction of all metaphysical hierarchies occurring in democracy. At this point, all values and pleasures are admitted. In a sense, by moving away from the focus on money, the principle of anarchy is purified in democracy. *It is the very idea of a principle of metaphysical hierarchy among goods, pleasures, etc. that is violently rejected at this point*. The democratic man "doesn't admit true speech or let it pass into the guardhouse, if someone says that there are some pleasures belonging to fine and good desires and some belonging to bad desires, and that the ones must be practiced and honored and the others checked and enslaved. Rather, he shakes his head at all this and says that all are alike and must be honored on equal basis" (561 c). The ensuing situation is one of widespread, lived contradictions, where "insolence" is taken for "good education", "anarchy" for "freedom",

“wastefulness” for “magnificence”, and “shamelessness” for “courage” (note the parallel with Thrasymachus’s contradictions at the end of Book I) (561 a).

IV. *Tyranny*. Now that the citizens are used to anarchy and “freedom”, they cannot get enough of it; and if they do not get enough (“if someone proposes anything that smacks in any way of slavery, they are irritated and can’t stand it” 563 d), they end up portraying the democratic leaders as oligarchs and “punishing” them. As a consequence, the laws, written and unwritten, start being overturned.

“Freedom must spread to everything” in such a city, and all the roles are overturned. *The generational relation itself is now overturned*. While oligarchy and democracy weakened the principle of authority, what we witness in the process that leads to tyranny is the *complete corruption of any intergenerational structure*. Before, the problem was that fathers and sons had flaws which were projected into the political system. Now it is *the generational principle itself that is overturned*: in a sense, there are no fathers and no sons any longer. The existence itself of a generational difference—the only remaining manifestation of a principle of authority—is perceived as being incompatible with anarchy-freedom. Fathers behave like their children and have fear of them; children behave like their fathers: “That a father, I said, habituates himself to be like his child and fear his son, and a son habituates himself to be like his father and to have no shame before or fear of his parents—that’s so he may be free” (563 a); “young copy their elders and compete with them in speeches and deeds while the old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that’s so that they won’t seem to be unpleasant and despotic” (563 b).

The same applies to education: “As the teacher in such a situation is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers, as well as of their attendants. And, generally, the young copy their elders and compete with them in speeches and deeds while the old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that’s so that they won’t seem to be unpleasant or despotic” (563 b).

How is the tyrant born in this situation? The democratic society is divided in three: first, the leaders, who are usually the most licentious and the loudest ones; second, the most orderly people, who make and have more money; third, then the rest of the people, those who work, etc. The money-making people are ‘squeezed’ by the leaders. This forces them to develop ‘oligarchic’ tendencies; out of them a “leader” sometimes is born who will now “kill” in order to take the power. The tyrant at first makes promises and acts generously—as a ‘savior’ of the people—but then he needs to constantly “stir up war” so that the people are “in need of a leader” (566 e–567 a).

Forced by necessity (“whether he wants to or not”, 567 c), the tyrant must kill friends and the best of his supporters (who tell him when he is wrong) and enemies (for obvious reasons), and then he must also find the “best” in the city and get rid of them as well. “He is bound by a blessed necessity that prescribes that he either dwell with the ordinary many, even though he is hated by them, or cease to live” (566 d).

The tyrant’s parents support him at first (with money, etc.), but once they turn against him, he is doomed to commit “parricide” (569 b).

In a sense, the mention of the *parricide* at the end of Book VIII *recapitulates the meta-physical drama* which has been unfolding throughout the entire book. With the descent into tyranny, reality has been stripped of value and meaning to such a point that the tyrant has been reduced to his naked, biological life. The tyrant cannot even pursue glory anymore (timocracy), nor money (oligarchy), nor the anarchic pursuit of pleasure (democracy). He can only (that is, he is forced to) pursue the protection of his mere physical existence from everyone else. The denial of the intergenerational relation now becomes the need to suppress such a relation physically. The principle of oligarchy and democracy is thus completed in tyranny: from the instrumentalization of relationships (imperfect in oligarchy, where money still plays the function of a more-than-subjective institution; perfect in democracy, where purely subjective self-determination is the rule), we come in tyranny to the

annihilation of all relations, dramatically represented by the inevitable parricide. Hobbes's violent state of nature [41] is nothing else than the absolutization of the tyrannical (lack of) metaphysics: a state of pure war of all against all. By inheriting his father's argument in Book I, Polemarchus introduces a perspective of hope into the dialogue, which will then be pursued by Socrates in his engagement with Glaucon and Adeimantus. The opposite of this hope is represented by the figure of the tyrant, who stands as the reminder that the radical abolition of tradition, which can even take the extreme form of a parricide, is accompanied by violence and disorder in the present and despair for the future.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Thus, the aim of this article is not to trace a general metaphysics and philosophy of history in Plato, as attempted for instance by Konrad Gaiser [4] and put into question by W. H. Walsh [5].
- 2 Just to mention to exemplarily opposed interpretations, see Leo Strauss [7] and Karl R. Popper [8].
- 3 This latter is, although partial and thus not fully correct, one of the most interesting interpretations of the dialogue. See [9].
- 4 See [10] (p. 2). Other Plato scholars share the same hermeneutical paradigm. See for instance Thomas M. Tuozzo [11] and the exemplary claim that his interpretative approach is "one specific version of a general approach that recognizes the important role that the drama (the ἔργον) of the dialectical encounter has for the meaning of its arguments (λόγοι)" (p. 5)
- 5 See Gerald A. Press's "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments" [12] (pp. 133–152). Already Hans G. Gadamer's "The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy" [13] (p. 99), sees a necessary "correlation of logos (word) and ergon (deed)" in Plato's dialogues. He writes: "Aristotle confirms this correlation when he finds the difference between sophistry and philosophy to be purely the *prohairesis tou biou* (choice of the life [one leads]) (*Metaphysics* 1004b24; *Sophistical Refutations* 169b24, 171b8)." The dramatic, rhetorical, and literary elements in the dialogue help portray the broader 'life' of the characters within which the arguments take place.
- 6 James A. Arieti's "How to Read a Platonic Dialogue" [14] (pp. 119–132). Maybe also Nicholas D. Smith's interpretation of the *Republic's* aim—"educating" the reader—could be considered to belong in a way to this "third way" approach to Plato. See [15].
- 7 See Guardini, *Eternità e storia* [1]; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, vol. III: Plato and Aristotle* [16]; Rosemary Desjardines, *Plato and the Good: Illuminating the Darkling Vision* [17], which claims that according to Plato "piety" is the fundamental attitude of the human being.
- 8 D. C. Schindler claims that the metaphysical concept of mediation is fulfilled in Christianity, see [18].
- 9 "Acquaintance with it [Plato's philosophy] must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining" (341 c-d). In my view, a comment on metaphysics and history by Augusto Del Noce expresses the spirit of Platonic philosophy aptly: "thinking in relation to the historical actuality does not mean denying the eternity of metaphysical problems but, rather, recognizing it in their true sense. Because excluding the theme of progress, both in its scientific and historicist senses, is certainly what characterizes metaphysical thought and is the foundation of the distinction between metaphysics and science; but, in order for this exclusion to be valid, it is also necessary that we unburden metaphysical thought of the immobilization in formulas that makes it liable to look like the alienated image of a certain historical situation; it is necessary that a certain concept of progress apply to metaphysical thought, which can only be expressed as 'explication of the virtual.' Excluding progress and historicism cannot have any other meaning than asserting that 'the metaphysical problem is that which nobody else can have solved for me' and which therefore presents itself to me in always new terms, by reason of the novelty of the historical situation. I do not have in front of me some sort of list of problems that already been solved, which can be collected in a treatise. On the contrary, it is in the course of the personal process of solving the metaphysical problem I recognize my thesis as the explication of a 'virtuality' of an affirmation that was already made in the past. And it is precisely in this 'explication of a virtuality' that the metaphysical thesis becomes 'evident' to me, breaking free from the always contingent form it had taken in its historical formulations," [19] (p. 59).

- 10 It is noteworthy that Socrates's famous description of the "second sailing in search of the cause" is entrusted to a moment in the *Phaedo* in which Socrates *remembers* and then *recounts* how he went from his dissatisfaction with the philosophy of Anaxagoras to the discovery that "there's some Beautiful Itself by Itself and a Good and a Big and all the others" (96 b–100 c). And doesn't Socrates in the same dialogue complain with Cebes and the others that they have *forgotten* what they have learnt about the ideas and the soul?
- 11 Speaking of the 'full manifestation' of the Good does not mean that the Good manifests itself fully; the Good remains necessarily transcendent in its inexhaustibility
- 12 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* [21]. While Murdoch's book has done much to explain relevance of the Platonic attitude, her anti-metaphysical interpretation of the Good is very far from the one I am proposing here.
- 13 *Theaetetus*, 150 c-d: "My art of midwifery is in general like theirs; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me. The reason is this. Heaven constrains me to serve as a midwife, but has debarred me from giving birth. So of myself I have no sort of wisdom, nor has any discovery ever been born to me as the child of my soul. Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions. All who are favored by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as to themselves, although it is clear that they have never learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine." See also Plato's claim that "Beauty is Fate and Helper in birth," *Drinking Party*, 206 d, which makes of him, once again, the image or icon of the ideal. Charles S. Peirce, in his "Evolutionary Love," in a certain sense gives a novel voice to the depth of Platonic philosophy when he explains that Love works by making something grow, thus turning what is good but still partial and deficient (and in this sense, evil) into something fuller and better: "Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely," [23] (p. 354).
- 14 *Drinking Party*, 206 e.
- 15 Martha C. Nussbaum interprets the Republic as the journey to discover not only the value of reality, but also the "point of view of perfection" or the Good, that is, the only point of view from which value can appear in its truth. See [24] (Ch. 5, pp. 136–164).
- 16 Francisco J. Gonzalez, "Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge, and Insight: Plato's Dialectic and the Dialogue Form" [25] (p. 160): "By calling philosophy 'reflexive,' I instead mean that, while it is not subjective or relative but is oriented towards a transcendent reality and truth, it nevertheless is not objective in the way that natural sciences, for example, are. . . . philosophical knowledge, however objective and universal it may be in *some* sense of these words, is not an objectifiable 'result' which as such is separable from the person who knows and the method by which he or she knows."
- 17 See Gonzalez [25] (p. 177): "nothing stands in the way of expressing directly in a treatise a theoretical knowledge *that* something is the case. *That* the earth is round, *that* two plus two equals four, *that* form is distinct from matter, are all knowledge claims which can be set forth in a treatise. On the other hand, if philosophy is a practical knowledge of how to deal with objects, it cannot be expounded as a set of doctrines but can only be *exhibited*, in this case dramatically."
- 18 See Gonzalez [25] (p. 154–183): "by referring to the role of *nonpropositional* insight in philosophy, the present characterization supplies something that would be lacking if we were to describe philosophy as being *simply* practical. . . . The reason is that philosophy clearly has *some* theoretical content. . . . however, this insight is not a definition that is stated at the end of the dialogue but rather something that is 'sparked' by what happens in the dialogue as a whole. . . . no definition succeeds in doing justice to this insight."
- 19 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1094b 19–20.
- 20 Incidentally, this applies to both spoken and written language, as Gonzalez points out, "Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge, and Insight" [25] (p. 185).
- 21 The first dimension corresponds to what Jaakko Hintikka calls "knowledge what", while the second dimension to what he calls "knowledge that." See [26] (pp. 31–49). On the relevance of dramatic, literary, and rhetorical elements, Terry Penner writes: "But in Plato, motivations, reasons, assertions and actions are all intellectual, general and philosophical in content: to try to understand those dramas which are Platonic dialogues without grappling with the philosophical content is to ignore the nature of the actual action of the dramas," "What is the Form of the Good the Form of? A Question about the Plot of the *Republic*," [27] (p. 17). For this reason, Penner can claim, on the one hand, that the analytic philosopher's reduction of Plato's dialogues to arguments without attention to the plot is misguided. And on the other hand, he can call Plato "the very greatest of dramatists" (p. 16) without detracting from the philosophical nature of his works.
- 22 I am therefore sympathetic with Timothy Chappell's claim that in the Republic "conversation" and "dialectic" are instrumental to "conversion"—where "conversion" is the real goal of philosophical education. See his "Conversion or Conversation? A Note on Plato's Philosophical Methods," in [28] (pp. 320–327). He writes that philosophical education "leads you up, if all goes well, to the point where you are rightly oriented, and ready for the vision of truth," p. 321. He rightly stresses that neither the "conversational model" nor the "conversional model" stand on their own.

- 23 Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* [30] (pp. 18–34), does not see any rational growth from Cephalus to Polemarchus. For her, Polemarchus simply brings to greater clarity the same views that Cephalus has, namely, “the best that common sense has to offer about justice, and in Plato’s view . . . this is not very much” (p. 34). Cephalus and Polemarchus would be equal representatives of “moral complacency.” As I have explained, I believe that a greater growth can be appreciated in Polemarchus if one pays due attention to the dramatic elements of the dialogue.
- 24 The ‘promise’ manifested in Polemarchus will then put to the test with Glaucon and Adeimantus, who are Socrates’s main focus. See [9] (p. 7). Roslyn Weiss, “Wise Guys and Smart Alecks in *Republic* 1 and 2” [31] (p. 92) rightly stresses that, while Glaucon and Adeimantus amplify and strengthen Thrasymachus’s argument (the greater profit comes from injustice rather than justice), their intention is radically different from Thrasymachus because “they are rooting for justice” right from the start.
- 25 This would not be the only time that Plato appeals to the dramatic episode of a blush to communicate something important about his philosophy. In *Charmides*, for instance, Socrates asks Charmides if he is temperate. Now, if Charmides responded positively, that would amount to a sort of performative contradiction. If he responded negatively, he would declare to be intemperate. So, what does Charmides do? He blushes and remains silent. Cf. Gonzalez [25] (p. 164): “What makes this scene of great importance can be summarized in two points: 1) any answer the boy could have given to Socrates’s question would have *concealed* his temperance; 2) by failing to answer the question and blushing, the boy *exhibits* his temperance. Charmides’ temperance will of course ultimately prove to be rather superficial; the modicum of temperance he has, however, is made manifest in his reaction to Socrates’ question. In other words, in his *silent blush* Charmides exhibits temperance as he himself will proceed to describe it: temperance as *quietness* (159b) and *modesty* (160e).”
- 26 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 1006a 14–15.
- 27 Cf. Seth Benardete [33] (p. 20): “Thrasymachus begins with insults but ends with blushes. The irrationality of knowledge belongs to man as man; and its bursting in as it does suggests that the price one pays for the departure of Cephalus, which freed the discussion from the hold of the sacred, is the unleashing of Thrasymachus. Philosophy needs the brutal frankness of Thrasymachus, who says what everyone is thinking, more than the indifferent laughter of Cephalus.” But philosophy also needs that unreason in man is always again reduced to shameful silence.
- 28 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I; 1100a 10–13.
- 29 *Republic* 327 a–328 b.
- 30 Note here the parallel with oligarchy in Book VIII.
- 31 Schindler sees in “intellectual impatience” with respect to the demands of the *logos* the common feature of the misological habits [20] (p. 16).
- 32 Cf. “For Thrasymachus, you seem really not to be joking now, but to be speaking the truth as it seems to you” “And what difference does it make to you, he said, whether it seems so to me or not, and why don’t you refute the argument?” “No difference” (349 a-b).
- 33 Note that, while Thrasymachus’s initial prohibition to Socrates to give certain answers and inclination to monologues are misological attitudes, Socrates’s insistence on questioning, responding, and coming to an agreement (dialectic as dialogue) is an invitation to reason.
- 34 Socrates will confirm this later in Book VI when he will state that Thrasymachus and he have become friends, “though we weren’t even enemies before” (498 d).
- 35 On the “longer way” in the *Republic*, see Mitchell Miller, “Beginning the ‘Longer Way’ [33] (pp. 310–344).
- 36 Following Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* [34] (pp. 284–287) and Richard D. Parry, “The Unhappy Tyrant and the Craft of Inner Rule,” [35] (pp. 386–414), I propose that the degeneration of the regimes have to do not only with a corruption of the appetitive dispositions but also of the beliefs—indeed, metaphysical beliefs—of the rulers, no matter how implicit or prereflective such metaphysical beliefs might be. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, [13] (pp. 71–72) makes a similar point and stresses that it is the internal logic of the pursuit of power that tends to undermine the belief in and the pursuit of the Good, that is, tends to undermine the philosophical life: “Is the paradox of the philosopher-king not also meant to give us the positive insight that both aiming at the good and knowing reality pertain to the political actions of the true statesmen as well as to the true theoretical life? . . . The sole issue is what the paradox of the philosopher-ruler means, that is, what it uncovers about rulers and ruling generally. On the one side, we have the law inherent in all power, according to which power never aims at anything but the increase of itself. On the other side, in opposition to this law, we have the individual who gives himself fully to knowledge and for whom power is of no interest. He knows something better, something higher, to which he wishes to devote himself. When Plato opines that such a person is more suited than anyone else to direct public affairs, he thereby exposes what seductiveness there is having power: power wants only itself. The education of the guardians has the purpose of making them immune to this seduction. . . . My contention is that there is more significance here than the merely negative insight into the incompatibility of philosophy and politics.” In this last remark Gadamer is referring to Leo Strauss’s and Allan Bloom’s interpretation.
- 37 Cf. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [36] (Ch. 3, pp. 188 ff.), where he says that gold-money is the “universal measure of value.” Note, however, that Marx’s position is not the same as Plato’s, insofar as for Marx it is actually objectified labor, and not money, the principle that turns all products into commensurable commodities.

- 38 See Charles Moeller, *Sagesse grecque et paradoxe chrétien* [38], Italian translation by Nella Berther, *Saggezza greca e paradosso Cristiano* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1951), in particular the first part on the problem of evil in the Greek tragedies, (pp. 29–75). The meaning of tragedy for the Greeks and for Plato is of course infinitely more complicated than my meagre comments suggest. David Roochnik, *The Tragedy of Reason: Toward a Platonic Conception of Logos* [39], explains that the hero of Greek tragedy is always characterized by a duality: he is responsible to some extent for his own demise while at the same time he is subject to an inescapable necessity or fate
- 39 Some interpreters—e.g., Gadamer—read the famous passage on the miscalculation of the marriage number (546 d) as a comical rendition of “why no system of human social order, however wisely planned or thought out, can endure. . . . The successful calculation of mating, which insures the continuance of the ideally ordered polis, fails not because of malevolence or external forces, but because of its own complexity,” Gadamer [13] (p. 73). I do not discount this interpretation, which I tend to follow for the most part. However, even if this interpretation went too far, it would be indisputable, I think, that the beginning of the problems with the aristocratic regime coincides with the introduction of an element of disorder in the way sex and begetting are practiced, which leads to imperfect unmixed natures in the offspring.
- 40 Cf. Zena Hitz, “Degenerate Regimes in Plato’s *Republic*” [40] (p. 105). According to Hitz’s interpretation of Book VIII, each form of degenerate regime is characterized by what she calls “shadow virtues,” which are “the function of the corrupted and weakened rational elements in both degenerate individuals and degenerate regimes” (p. 118). These shadow virtues would be “courage (without wisdom) in timocracy, moderation (understood to constraint) in oligarchy, and justice (reduced to lawfulness) in democracy” (p. 123). What I see in timocracy—a sort of appreciation for reason accompanied by the bitter acknowledgment that the possibility of a life according to reason has been compromised—could be seen as the origin of the necessity for the timocratic man to turn to shadow virtues.

References

- Guardini, R. *Ewigkeit und Geschichte. Die Bestimmung Existenz im Denken von Platon, Augustinus, Dante*. In *Eternità e Storia. La Determinazione Dell’esistenza nel Pensiero di Plato e Agostino*; Brino, O., Translator; Morcelliana: Brescia, Italy, 2017.
- Schindler, D.C. What’s the Difference? On the Metaphysics of Participation in a Christian Context. *St. Anselm J.* **2015**, *3*, 1–27.
- Reale, G. *Per una Nuova Interpretazione di Platone*; Vita e Pensiero: Milano, Italy, 2003.
- Gaiser, K. *La Metafisica Della Storia in Platone*; Vita e Pensiero: Milano, Italy, 1991.
- Walsh, W.H. Plato and the Philosophy of History: History and Theory in the Republic. *Hist. Theory* **1962**, *2*, 3–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bloom, A., Translator; *The Republic of Plato*; Basic Books: New York, NY, USA, 2016.
- Strauss, L. *The City and Man*; The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA; London, UK, 1978.
- Popper, K.R. *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 1966.
- Rosen, S. *Plato’s Republic: A Study*; Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, USA; London, UK, 2005.
- Gonzalez, F.J. (Ed.) *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 1995.
- Tuozzo, T.M. *Plato’s Charmides: Positive Elenchus in a ‘Socratic’ Dialogue*; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2011.
- Press, G.A. Plato’s Dialogues as Enactments. In *The Third Way*; Gonzalez, F.J., Ed.; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 1995.
- Gadamer, H.G. *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*; Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, USA; London, UK, 1986; p. 99.
- Arieti, J.A. How to Read a Platonic Dialogue. In *The Third Way*; Gonzalez, F.J., Ed.; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 1995; pp. 119–132.
- Smith, N.D. *Summoning Knowledge in Plato’s Republic*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2019.
- Voegelin, E. *Order and History, Vol. III: Plato and Aristotle*; University of Missouri Press: Columbia, MO, USA; London, UK, 2000.
- Desjardines, R. *Plato and the Good: Illuminating the Darkling Vision*; Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2004.
- Schindler, D.C. Mediation: The Distinguishing Mark of Christianity. *Communio Int. Cathol. Rev.* **2021**, *48*, 6–29.
- Del Noce, A. *The Problem of Atheism*; McGill-Queen’s University Press: Montreal & Kingston, QC, Canada, 2021; p. 59.
- Schindler, D.C. *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic*; Chapter 3; The Catholic University of America Press: Washington, DC, USA, 2008.
- Murdoch, I. *The Sovereignty of the Good*; Routledge: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2014.
- Hadot, P. *What Is Ancient Philosophy? Part I*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2002; pp. 9–51.
- Houser, N.; Kloesel, C. (Eds.) *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*; Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, USA; Indianapolis, IN, USA, 1992; Volume 1, p. 354.
- Nussbaum, M.C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*; Chapter 5; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2001; pp. 136–164.
- Gonzalez, F.J. Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge, and Insight: Plato’s Dialectic and the Dialogue Form. In *The Third Way*; Gonzalez, F.J., Ed.; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 1995.
- Hintikka, J. Plato on Knowing How, Knowing That, and Knowing What. In *Knowledge and the Known*; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1991; pp. 31–49.
- Penner, T. What is the Form of the Good the Form of? A Question about the Plot of the Republic. In *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato’s Republic*; Cairns, D., Herrmann, F.-G., Penner, T., Eds.; Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, UK, 2007; pp. 16–17.

28. Chappell, T. Conversion or Conversation? A Note on Plato's Philosophical Methods. In *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's Republic*; Cairns, D., Herrmann, F.-G., Penner, T., Eds.; Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, UK, 2007; pp. 320–327.
29. Péguy, C. *Notes on Bergson and Descartes*; Cascade: Eugene, OR, USA, 2019; pp. 93–96.
30. Annas, J. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*; Clarendon Press: Oxford, UK, 1981; pp. 18–34.
31. Weiss, R. Wise Guys and Smart Alecks in Republic 1 and 2. In *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*; Ferrari, G.R.F., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2007; p. 92.
32. Benardete, S. *Socrates' Second Sailing: On Plato's Republic*; The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA; London, UK, 1989; p. 20.
33. Miller, M. Beginning the 'Longer Way'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*; Ferrari, G.R.F., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2007; pp. 310–344.
34. Irwin, T. *Plato's Ethics*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA; Oxford, UK, 1995; pp. 284–287.
35. Parry, R.D. The Unhappy Tyrant and the Craft of Inner Rule. In *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*; Ferrari, G.R.F., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2007; pp. 386–414.
36. Marx, K. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*; Chapter 3; Section 1; Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, UK, 1982.
37. Reale, G. 'L'henologia' nella Repubblica di Platone: Suoi presupposti e sue conseguenze. In *L'uni e i Molti*; Melchiorre, V., Ed.; Vita e Pensiero: Milano, Italy, 1990; pp. 113–153.
38. Moeller, C. Sagesse grecque et paradoxe chrétien. In *Saggezza Greca e Paradosso Cristiano*; Berther, N., Translator; Morcelliana: Brescia, Italy, 1951; pp. 29–75.
39. Roochnik, D. *The Tragedy of Reason: Toward a Platonic Conception of Logos*; Routledge: London, UK, 1990.
40. Hitz, Z. Degenerate Regimes in Plato's Republic. In *Plato's Republic: A Critical Guide*; McPherran, M.L., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2010.
41. Hobbes, T. *Leviathan*; Chapter 13; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 1996; pp. 82–86.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.