

Once More into Plato's Cave

Reluctance, Compulsion and the Threat to the Pure Realm in *Republic* VII

Jacob M. Ohanian

McMaster University

In Book VII of Plato's *Republic* Socrates argues that philosophers should be required to each take their turn to disengage with their contemplations of the intelligible realm of the Forms in order to spend time ruling the Kallipolis as a gesture of repayment to the city that provided their excellent education.¹ There are interpretive problems that arise from this passage that demand a solution, particularly that Socrates implies an account of justice that conflicts with his earlier claims about justice. The interpretation of this passage determines how we are to best understand the central argument of the *Republic* more generally. In this paper I will first examine why this passage is problematic and then consider some interpretations that have been offered to resolve these problems. More specifically, I will examine Richard Kraut's view of *imitationism* and offer a version of David Sedley's solution that I call the "punishment of inferior rule."² Ultimately, I will argue that Kraut's position proves too much as it undermines Plato's emphasis on reluctance and compulsion in the dialogue, and that a version of Sedley's solution is more plausible because it avoids this problem. Once this has been accomplished, I will then argue that the "punishment of inferior rule" solution is consistent with Plato's account of justice in the dialogue.

The Problematic Counterexample

The initial problem of this passage is that Socrates seems to implicitly contradict the view of justice he is supposed to be arguing for in the *Republic*.

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992) 519c-521b.

²Please note that Sedley does not endorse this phrasing. I have decided to use it for the sake of brevity.

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After he has given the illuminating imagery of the philosopher's ascension to discover the good – the allegory³ of the cave – Socrates states that the enlightened philosopher does not remain in the realm of the good but is instead compelled to descend “down again to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors.”⁴ The cave represents the sphere of politics in which the philosopher lives and works alongside non-philosophers, forced to once again contemplate matters of the sensible world – the shadows of the true forms. Glaucon asks whether this would be contrary to the happiness of the philosopher since surely the life of contemplating the good is a better one than participating in politics.⁵ Socrates responds that in constituting the ideal city they are not concerned with any one person's happiness, but rather they are seeking to “spread happiness throughout the city.”⁶ As Socrates does not counter Glaucon with an argument that ruling is beneficial to the philosopher, his response could be interpreted as an implicit concession that ruling is not in the best interest of the philosopher but that nevertheless having a philosopher-king is in the best interest of the city. If this is in fact Socrates's view it stands in stark contradiction to the account of justice he is supposed to be defending, viz. that justice “benefits its possessors”⁷ as a thing good in itself unlike injustice which harms its possessors. Socrates is emphatic that requiring the philosopher to rule the city will be “giving just orders to just people”⁸. The problem is that if ruling the city is just for the philosophers but also harmful to their self-interest, then it contradicts Socrates's claim that justice is beneficial to its possessors.

The second interpretive problem of this passage – *Republic* 519c-521b – is that Socrates repeatedly refers to “compelling”⁹ the philosophers, or that the

³*Republic* 514a-518a.

⁴*Republic*, 519d.

⁵*Ibid.*, 519d.

⁶*Ibid.*, 519e.

⁷*Ibid.*, 367d.

⁸*Ibid.*, 520e. (my emphasis)

⁹*Ibid.*, 499b, 520a, 521b.

philosophers must view ruling as “compulsory”¹⁰. The philosopher despises political rule; there has to be some form of compulsory force that overrides this aversion towards politics. A natural first thought might be that if the philosopher truly despises political rule and must be compelled in some way to overcome these feelings, then the philosophers must think that ruling is contrary to their interests. However, although Socrates sometimes hints that the supposed founders of the city will “compel” the philosophers to rule,¹¹ the question what constitutes this compulsory force is never fully addressed. The answer to this question has important implications. If the purpose of compulsion is to subordinate the interests of the philosopher, then the “just” act of ruling would not seem to benefit the philosopher. On the contrary, if compulsion can be proven to be congruent with the interests of the philosopher, then the act towards which they are being compelled to undertake (ruling the city) must also be in their best interest, thus avoiding the counterexample against Socrates's view of justice. Since it is unlikely that Plato would knowingly sabotage his central argument for justice, the task becomes to understand *Republic* 519c-521b in a way that shows the “just” act of ruling to be in the philosophers' best interest.

Kraut's Solution

Taking up this task in his article, “Return to the Cave: 519-521,” Richard Kraut astutely remarks that when Socrates replies to Glaucon's challenge that ruling would seem harmful to the philosopher, he does not offer an answer to this challenge. According to Kraut, Socrates's silence on this issue leaves open the possibility that Plato believed the act of ruling was in the philosopher's best interest after all.¹² In hopes of proving this, Kraut attributes to Plato the view of *imitationism* according to which “Plato believes that certain

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 520e.

¹¹ Socrates seems to have himself and Glaucon in mind as being “compellers” in these instances, see 520a.

¹² Kraut, Richard. “Return to the Cave: *Republic* 519-521”, in *Plato*, edited by Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 237-238.

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relationships among people are fitting and harmonious; and that participation in these well-ordered relationships ... constitutes an imitation of the forms.”¹³

Kraut argues that forms of the intelligible realm adhere to a rational unchanging pattern that serves as “the appropriate pattern”¹⁴ of justice. Accordingly it was the duty of the philosopher to imitate these patterns in the sensible world. Hence, Plato’s ideal city in the *Republic* is the “best political imitation of the forms there can be”¹⁵ and this is why it is advantageous for the philosopher to rule because doing otherwise would be tantamount to rejecting the forms, and therefore unjust. In short, Kraut argues that ruling the city is in fact in the best interest of the philosopher because it provides an opportunity to imitate the forms and after all the “best sort of human life is one dedicated to the project of imitating forms.”¹⁶

I think Kraut's interpretation is problematic as it doesn't address Socrates's claim that the philosopher will be reluctant to rule the ideal city. The *imitationism* interpretation maintains holding a position of political power is the best opportunity to imitate the forms in the sensible world so one would think that philosophers would not show the least hesitation at seizing the opportunity. Kraut is well aware of this objection but his response is unsatisfactory; he says that any given action has both a feature that makes us reluctant to perform a task and a feature that makes us keen to perform it. When faced with ruling the philosopher “is no lover of political office, but she is a lover of justice.”¹⁷ However, if the philosopher’s political rule of the city is truly a just act, and the philosopher loves justice, then it is puzzling how justice and political office are not both desirable; if the philosopher loves justice, then it could hardly be said that the decision to rule is contrary to the will of the philosopher in the stringent

¹³Kraut, 247.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁷Kraut, 249

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way Plato suggests; Plato says that the philosopher “despises”¹⁸ and “refuses”¹⁹ the task and they even compete amongst each other to avoid it.

Further, if the philosopher has knowledge of the forms and recognizes that ruling the city is the purest expression of justice in the sensible world, what role would compulsion play in Kraut’s argument? If imitating the forms is the most beneficial task for the philosopher and ruling the city accomplishes this, then it would seem that the philosopher – with their extensive knowledge of the forms – would not need any compelling. Thus, although Kraut’s attempt to show that ruling the city serves the interests of the philosopher is admirable, his view proves too much as it undermines the strong account of reluctance and compulsion given by Socrates in the passage.

The Solution from Compulsion

Coming to Plato's aid means not only showing that ruling serves the self-interest of the philosopher but it is equally important to argue for a view that takes account of the philosopher's reluctance to rule as expressed in the passage as well as a view that offers a plausible account of the compulsory force that is imposed on the philosophers. Before addressing the problem of the philosopher's reluctance to rule, I would like to assess briefly the unique situation of the philosopher within the structure of Plato's ideal city. First, philosophers are human, they possess a body that has desires that must be satisfied in order to survive such as hunger. In the *Phaedo* Plato argues that the human body is an obstacle to the contemplation of the forms since it “keeps us busy in a thousand ways” that render us “too busy to practice philosophy.”²⁰ If Plato is committed to this view, then he can't also maintain that philosophers have uninterrupted access to knowledge of the forms. Nevertheless, Socrates does claim in the

¹⁸*Republic*, 500b.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 519d, 520d.

²⁰Plato, *Phaedo* in *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*, edited by C.D.C. Reeve and Patrick Mille (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 107-137. 66b-d.

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Republic that philosophers spend most of their time living together in the “pure realm.”²¹ I suggest that if there is consistency in Plato’s thought, he must mean by “pure realm” a lifestyle where the philosophers can spend most of their time in theoretical study, largely uninterrupted by bodily appetite or exertion. I think it is uncontroversial that Plato’s ideal city is designed to this possibility; for example, the ruling class does not have to deal with the distraction of money nor with the labours of producing food. The rulers are provided with all the materials to satisfy their necessary desires. A philosopher does not have to work except when it is their turn to rule the city. So it is no wonder that the philosopher would be reluctant to rule since dealing with matters of the physical world pulls the philosopher away from the realm of the forms.

So what will compel them to rule and how does it serve their self-interest? One way to answer this question is offered by David Sedley. Sedley invokes a passage from Book I²² that foreshadows the philosopher’s motivation to rule described in Book VII; in the passage from Book I Socrates claims that a good person would be compelled to rule out of fear of the “greatest punishment” which is “to be ruled by someone worse than oneself.”²³ Plato’s ideal city provides the best opportunity for philosophers to spend the most time contemplating the Good and as a result the city benefits from the philosophers’ rational knowledge when they rule. A city ruled by non-philosophers could not guarantee this advantage. Indeed, a civil war might arise and beget unjust rule so that the philosophers are no longer provided the material means for survival, thus pulling them away from pure contemplation. The philosophers obviously prefer spending their time in the “pure realm” but they also recognize that if they refuse to take their turn ruling, then they may no longer live in a city that caters

²¹*Republic*, 520d.

²²Sedley, David, “Philosophy, Forms, and the Art of Ruling” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, edited by G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 272.

²³*Republic*, 347c.

to philosophical thought.

Hence, the philosopher is compelled to rule out of fear of the “punishment of inferior rule”. The fear is that inferior rule would result in the decay of the city in a way that no longer caters to philosophers and rational order and which would negatively impact opportunities for philosophical thought. This is worse for the philosopher than taking a brief hiatus from contemplating the Good in order to rule. Therefore, since the philosophers are compelled to rule by fear of this “great punishment,” ruling is also in their best interest. Sedley’s solution offers a more plausible account of the passage at 519c-521b than Kraut’s because it takes more seriously the force that reluctance and compulsion must have in Plato’s argument.

Justice and the Philosopher’s Rule

Thus far, I have argued that to rule Plato’s ideal city is in the best interest of the philosopher after all as it preserves a societal structure that caters to philosophical contemplation – avoiding the “punishment of inferior rule” – and therefore what Socrates has referred to as the “just act” of ruling is consistent with his earlier claim that justice “benefits its possessors”²⁴. I have rejected *imitationism* in order to take seriously Socrates's emphasis on the reluctance of the philosophers to partake in political rule. Now I want to examine how this approach to the passage in question complements Plato’s account of justice in the dialogue more generally.

Plato is adamant that once the philosophers are given the order to rule, they will not disobey, and that commanding the philosophers to take up the task of ruling will be tantamount to “giving just orders to just people.”²⁵ But the extent to which it is a just order or law for philosophers to be made rulers seems open to interpretation. At first glance, it seems Socrates returns to the common

²⁴*Republic*, 367d.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 520e.

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conception of justice set forth by Cephalus at the beginning of the dialogue²⁶ as Socrates hints that philosophers will be forced to rule the Kallipolis as a form of repayment for the education they received. However, earlier in the dialogue Socrates was quick to dismiss this simplistic notion of justice, so surely this cannot be the real reason Plato believes it is just to require philosophers to rule; furthermore, this cannot be the wholesome conception of justice Plato is arguing for in the dialogue. I suggest that the account of justice that Plato has in mind here is the same as the view outlined in Book IV of the *Republic*: “a city [is] just when each of the three natural classes within it [does] its own work.”²⁷ In other words, the three natural classes of producers, guardians and rulers should not interfere with the aims of the other classes but rather, they should work together harmoniously so that each class of people best satisfies the desires towards which they are naturally disposed. This harmony is achieved – in both the city and the individual’s soul – when reason moderates the other parts and their corresponding desires.²⁸ Among the classes of the Kallipolis, it is the philosophers who are ruled by reason. Once they have ascended to an understanding of the Good, the philosopher must then descend down again to rule in the sensible realm because only they have an understanding of justice and how a city can be constituted in accord with reason. This is why Socrates suggests that the task of the philosopher-king is to bind the city together since only the philosopher who is ruled by reason has the necessary insight to bring about this rational unity among the classes. For Plato, any divergence from this rational unity is an injustice – in both the city and the individual. For example, it would be unjust for a cobbler to play the role of ruler because the cobbler does not have the required talents to execute this role in accord with reason. Thus, compelling the philosopher to rule is just insofar as a city is just only if it is

²⁶Here I am referring to Cephalus’ belief that justice is telling the truth and repaying one’s debts. *Republic*, 331.

²⁷*Republic*, 435b.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 441-442b.

ruled by a philosopher; furthermore, the philosopher is a just person because only they have a soul that is ruled by reason.

This view of what is just and unjust is consistent with the “punishment of inferior rule” that I have outlined above. In a word, the philosopher’s fear of this punishment is simply a fear of injustice. For a city that is not ruled by a philosopher would lack rational order among natural classes and would thus be unjust. In submitting to the command to rule the city, the philosopher is not repaying a debt for the education they received but rather they are guaranteeing that the rational constitution that made this type of education possible in the first place is maintained. Although the philosopher may be reluctant to deal with matters of the sensible world, they also realize that the alternative is to live in an unjust society, and injustice does not agree with the philosopher’s just disposition.

The Problem of the Law

One might object that the view that I have argued for does not offer a sufficient explanation of Socrates's insistence that a “law”²⁹ is required to force the philosophers to partake in politics. For if the philosophers are aware that to rule is in their best interest, as I have argued, then it is puzzling why a law is still needed that requires each philosopher to take their turn ruling since they should already gravitate towards this task. My response is that a law is needed to prevent a type of free-rider problem that is possible given the conditions that Plato has set in the *Republic*. I would like to emphasize that while it is beneficial to philosophers if the ideal city is ruled by philosophers, one can presume that the just order of society could presumably be achieved by appointing only a handful of philosopher-rulers or perhaps even a single philosopher-ruler. Thus, if there is a surplus of educated philosophers in the city, then a philosopher could conceivably receive the benefit of living in a just society without contributing to the government of the city. Since Plato’s

²⁹*Republic*, 519d-520.

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philosophers would each much rather spend their time in intellectual contemplation, they could “free-ride” and remain in their studies of the pure realm while other philosophers carry the burden of ruling the Kallipolis. Therefore, it seems plausible for Plato to envision the law that each philosopher must take their turn ruling in order to avoid this “free-rider” problem.

Conclusion

The task of this paper is now complete. I have examined two different ways in which the passage in Book VII of the *Republic*³⁰, which commands the philosophers to sacrifice the contemplation of the Good for the sake of political rule, can be best understood while also avoiding conflict with Plato’s view that justice ultimately benefits its possessors. I have shown that Kraut’s *imitationism* does not seem to address the problems in the passage posed by Socrates’s emphasis on reluctance and compulsion. Instead I have given good reasons to adopt Sedley’s view that the “punishment of inferior rule” is what ultimately compels the philosophers to rule, despite their reluctance, and have shown that this view does not prove too much as Kraut’s view does. Furthermore, I have shown this approach to the passage is most consistent with Plato’s account of justice throughout the dialogue for the threat of the “punishment of inferior rule” just is the threat of injustice. Lastly, I have also answered the objection that on my account a law requiring the philosophers to rule seems unnecessary even though Socrates insists it is necessary. I contend that this law is nothing more than a precautionary measure against a potential “free-rider” problem. Thus, while *imitationism* proves too much, a view like Sedley’s avoids this problem and fits quite well with the central themes of the *Republic*.

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³⁰*Republic*, 519c-521b.

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