

Plato

THE REPUBLIC

(ANNOTATED)

A CRITICAL EDITION



TRANSLATED BY BENJAMIN JOWETT

INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARIES
BY JOHN TELLER

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Dr. John Teller

SUMMARY AND KEY THEMES

Plato's *Republic* is one of the most influential philosophical works in Western thought, written in the form of a Socratic dialogue. It is primarily concerned with the question: "What is justice?" and what it means for both individuals and the state. The dialogue features Socrates as the main speaker, who engages with various interlocutors to explore the nature of justice, the ideal political community, and the virtues necessary for both rulers and citizens.

The work begins with a discussion on justice in the city and the individual. Socrates debates with Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, who each offer differing views. Cephalus associates justice with honesty and fulfilling obligations, while Polemarchus claims justice is giving each person what they are owed. Thrasymachus presents a more cynical view: justice is the advantage of the stronger, meaning rulers define what is just to serve their own power. Socrates challenges each perspective, gradually steering the discussion toward a deeper understanding of justice as a harmonious and well-ordered structure.

To illustrate justice on a larger scale, Socrates constructs the metaphor of the ideal city, the *Kallipolis*. In this city, the population is divided into three classes: rulers (philosopher-kings), auxiliaries (warriors), and producers (farmers, artisans, and merchants). Each class performs its proper function, and justice emerges when everyone fulfills their role without interfering in the roles of others. This tripartite division parallels the structure of the soul, which Plato also divides into three parts: rational, spirited, and appetitive. Justice, therefore, is both a social and personal principle: it exists when each part of the soul and each class in society does what it is naturally suited to do.

Plato introduces the concept of philosopher-kings as the ideal rulers of the state. These are individuals trained in philosophy, reason, and virtue,

who can apprehend the Forms, particularly the Form of the Good—the highest reality and ultimate source of truth and moral guidance. Through the Allegory of the Cave, Plato illustrates the philosopher’s journey from ignorance to knowledge, showing that most people live in the shadows of appearances and must rely on guidance to achieve true understanding. The philosopher, having seen the light of truth, is best suited to lead society with wisdom and justice.

Education and the cultivation of virtue are central to Plato’s vision. The guardians of the city undergo rigorous training in music, gymnastics, mathematics, and dialectic, designed to harmonize the soul and prepare them for leadership. Plato also discusses the nature of censorship, poetry, and art, arguing that cultural forms should support moral and civic development. The ideal society, however, is not merely a utopia of rules; it is a reflection of the harmonious order within the soul itself.

Plato also examines different forms of government, including timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny, describing a decline from justice to injustice. Timocracy, ruled by honor, degenerates into oligarchy, dominated by wealth; oligarchy gives way to democracy, driven by desire for freedom; and democracy eventually collapses into tyranny, dominated by a ruler who embodies lawlessness and self-interest. These discussions illustrate Plato’s concern with the fragility of political systems and the consequences of prioritizing personal desire over rational order.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REPUBLIC

The Republic has had a lasting influence in philosophy, political theory, ethics, and education. It is significant for several reasons:

Conceptualizing Justice and the Good Society: Plato’s dialogue frames justice not as a simple legal or social convention but as a principle of harmony and proper function, both in the individual and the community. His theory of the just city has inspired centuries of political thought on the nature of governance, civic duty, and moral order.

Philosophy and Leadership: The idea of the philosopher-king remains one of Plato’s most enduring contributions. It suggests that rulers should be wise, educated, and guided by knowledge of the good, rather than by wealth,

power, or popularity. This ideal continues to influence discussions on ethical leadership and the role of knowledge in governance.

Theory of the Soul and Human Nature: Plato's tripartite division of the soul has had profound implications for psychology and moral philosophy. By linking the virtues of courage, temperance, and wisdom to social and individual harmony, *The Republic* provides a framework for understanding personal ethics in the context of societal well-being.

Epistemology and Metaphysics: Through the Allegory of the Cave and the Theory of Forms, Plato explores the relationship between perception, knowledge, and reality. These ideas have shaped philosophical inquiry for millennia, influencing thinkers from Aristotle to modern metaphysics and ethics.

Education and Civic Culture: *The Republic* emphasizes education as the foundation of moral and political order, advocating structured cultivation of intellect and character. This emphasis resonates in contemporary debates about civic education and the responsibilities of citizenship.

In summary, Plato's *Republic* is both a theoretical investigation of justice and a practical guide to building a moral and stable society. By linking the structure of the state to the structure of the soul, Plato presents a vision in which ethics, politics, and knowledge are inseparably connected. Its influence endures not only in philosophy but also in political science, legal theory, and education, making it a foundational text for understanding the relationship between human virtue and the good of the community.

SOCRATES AS PROTO-CHRIST: SOCRATES' CAVE AND CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HADES

Introduction

The concept of the proto-Christ provides a valuable lens for understanding how moral and spiritual truths can manifest beyond the confines of biblical revelation. While figures such as Isaac, Joseph, and Melchizedek foreshadow Christ's obedience, redemptive leadership, and self-sacrifice, the philosophical life of Socrates suggests that these principles can also emerge independently of the covenantal framework.

Socrates' unwavering commitment to truth and his willingness to descend into the cave and accept death rather than betray truth demonstrate a pattern of self-sacrificial moral guidance that foreshadows the life of Christ. By examining Socrates as a proto-Christ, particularly through his ethical teachings, his trials, and the allegory of the cave, this essay explores how elements of *agapic* love and moral leadership—central to the Christian vision of Christ—appear in the life and thought of Socrates, offering a bridge between two of history's most influential figures.

Proto-Christ and Their Significance

While most examples of proto-Christ figures appear within the Abrahamic covenantal line, Scripture provides at least one figure who predates and stands outside this covenant: Melchizedek. This example demonstrates that God can reveal the eternal truths embodied in Christ's life even through individuals outside the established covenantal framework.

Among the Patriarchs and Prophets

The Hebrew Scriptures feature several examples of patriarchs and prophets whose lives and actions foreshadow aspects of Christ's mission and character. Among the patriarchs, Isaac stands out as a striking example. When he willingly submitted to Abraham's near-sacrifice (Genesis 22:1–19), he exemplified complete obedience to God's will, even unto death. In the Genesis narrative, Isaac neither resists nor questions the act; he fulfills his role with calm submission and trust. This readiness to endure suffering at the hands of another mirrors Christ's own cruciform obedience, submitting fully to God's divine plan despite its immense cost. Viewed in this light, Isaac's story prefigures Christ's sacrificial death: both exemplify faithfulness, obedience, and unwavering trust in God's divine plan.

Another example is Joseph, who, like Christ, foregoes vengeance when subjected to abuse and betrayal. Joseph's brothers treat him unjustly, selling him into slavery, yet he ultimately acts selflessly to save many, including

those who wronged him.¹ During the famine, Egypt alone possessed sufficient grain, and Joseph's wisdom provided sustenance not only for his own family but also for surrounding peoples who depended on Egypt for survival. His suffering and later redemptive leadership prefigure Christ's merciful provision of salvation to all. As Joseph offered earthly bread to sustain many, Christ offered living bread unto eternal life.²

Scripture offers numerous additional examples. Moses' willing intercession and leadership, even at personal risk,³ prefigure Christ's role as mediator and shepherd. In the book of Isaiah, the Suffering Servant is depicted as innocent, obedient, and bearing suffering on behalf of others.⁴ Christian tradition understands this figure as a direct foreshadowing of Christ, with some interpretations treating the Suffering Servant as an archetypal proto-Christ.⁵

Melchizedek

The concept of a proto-Christ extends beyond the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, with Melchizedek standing out as an example. Introduced as the king of Salem and priest of God most high, Melchizedek blesses Abram and receives tithes from him, holding the combination of king and priest.⁶ What makes him significant is that his priesthood is not based on Levitical lineage or hereditary succession, prefiguring Jesus'

¹ Genesis 37-50.

² John 6:51.

³ See, e.g., Exodus 32:31-32 ("Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written'" (NKJV)).

⁴ Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

⁵ See, e.g., Craig Bartholomew and Joel B. Green (eds.), *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT)), Eerdmans (Grand Rapids: 2000), p. 637.

⁶ Genesis 14:18-20.

eternal priesthood, which is similarly divinely appointed rather than inherited.⁷

Melchizedek's account suggests that the figure of Christ is not confined to the Abrahamic line of patriarchs and prophets. Appearing as both priest and king apart from the Levitical order and prior to the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant, Melchizedek demonstrates that God's presence and purposes are not limited to a single genealogy or covenant. In this way, he points to a broader theological principle: the divine example embodied in Christ may be disclosed beyond any particular lineage or covenantal system.

Socrates as Proto-Christ

Overview

As demonstrated in the life of Melchizedek, God can manifest elements of His truth beyond the system of Abrahamic covenantal revelation. Christ's divine example may be prefigured among those outside the covenant, including the Gentiles. One prominent example among the Gentiles is Socrates, whose commitment to truth and obedience to what he understood as divine duty demonstrates how such principles can be recognized even outside the biblical tradition. His life, mission, and death suggest that he prefigures certain aspects of Christ's role as a self-sacrificing teacher of eternal and universal truth.

Challenging Conventional Norms

Both Socrates and Jesus challenged conventional norms and, in doing so, provoked hostility among the ruling authorities. In *The Republic*, Socrates criticized widely accepted norms of Greek society, especially the assumption that justice consists in serving the interests of the powerful. Early in the dialogue, Socrates disputes the widely accepted definition of

⁷ Jesus descended from the tribe of Judah, not from the priestly line of Levi, as Scripture affirms: "For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah" (Hebrews 7:14).

justice proposed by Cephalus and Polemarchus. When Cephalus argued that justice means giving to each what is owed, Socrates challenged this view, suggesting that it would not be just to return a weapon to a friend who has become insane. Polemarchus then argues that “justice is the art which gives good to friends and evil to enemies,”⁸ but Socrates rejects this as well, arguing that harming others makes them worse and therefore cannot be the function of justice. Polemarchus adjusts, stating that justice means helping good friends and harming bad enemies. Socrates then attacks the idea that a just person would ever deliberately harm anyone. Harming living things makes them worse in the relevant respect (for humans, worse in virtue), so if justice is a virtue, it cannot consist in making anyone worse. Socrates thus defeats the “help friends, harm enemies” view, demonstrating that “to injure a friend or any one else is not the act of a just man, but of the opposite, who is the unjust.”⁹

Jesus challenged a similarly prevalent conventional norm at his time. He declared: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”¹⁰ However, Jesus rejected this saying, teaching his disciples instead to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”¹¹ He further instructed his followers to “[d]o good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who spitefully use you.”¹² Paul reinforces Jesus’ teaching with a similar ethic: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”¹³

Socrates and Jesus share a common ethic, where virtue consists in willing good for the other, even one’s enemy, and refraining from returning evil for evil. Socrates and Jesus embraced a radical ethic that confronted deeply ingrained beliefs and creating moral discomfort that ultimately led

⁸ *The Republic of Plato*, 332d.

⁹ *The Republic of Plato*, 335d.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:43 (NKJV).

¹¹ Matthew 5:44 (NKJV).

¹² Luke 6:27-28 (NKJV).

¹³ Romans 12:20–21, quoting Proverbs 25:21–22 (NKJV).

to legal condemnation. Each was a transformative figure whose teachings confronted the customs of their communities, and both were ultimately tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for their principled defiance.

Exposing the False Wisdom of the “Wise”

Both Socrates and Jesus expose the false wisdom of the “wise.” A clear example appears in Book I of *The Republic*, when Socrates debates Thrasymachus, a sophist who confidently claims to know the true nature of justice. Thrasymachus bursts into the discussion, accusing Socrates of refuting others but, whenever asked a question, “would refuse to answer, and try irony or any other shuffle, in order that he might avoid answering.”¹⁴ Thrasymachus dramatically defines justice as “nothing else than the interest of the stronger.”¹⁵ He proclaims that the ruling group makes laws to its own benefit and calls obedience to those laws “just.” Therefore, justice is whatever serves the interests of those in power, and injustice (if you can get away with it) is more profitable. Socrates dismantles his argument by asking whether rulers can make mistakes. If they sometimes make laws not to their own advantage, then justice (obeying the laws) would not always be to the rulers’ advantage. He demonstrates that “justice, according to [Thrasymachus’] argument, is not only obedience to the interest of the stronger but the reverse,”¹⁶ dismantling Thrasymachus’s claim and demonstrating that the confident sophist does not actually possess the wisdom he claims.

Jesus likewise challenged the teachings and practices of those regarded as the “wise” of his day, exposing how they distorted the law by adhering to its letter while neglecting its moral purpose. He proclaimed:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier

¹⁴ *The Republic of Plato*, 337a.

¹⁵ *The Republic of Plato*, 338c.

¹⁶ *The Republic of Plato*, 339d.

matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!¹⁷

By highlighting this contradiction, Jesus revealed that the so-called “wise” religious authorities had misunderstood the true purpose of the law.

In another episode, he confronted the accepted teachers of wisdom, exposing the gap between their reputation for knowledge and their failure to grasp the moral essence of the laws they claimed to uphold. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking the Sabbath by plucking grain to eat. Jesus responded that their interpretation misunderstood the law’s deeper purpose. He cited the example of David, who ate the consecrated bread when in need, and then invoked the words of Hosea to emphasize that mercy and human need take precedence over rigid ritual observance:

But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.¹⁸

Like Socrates, who exposes the sophists’ folly, Jesus exposes the false wisdom of religious teachers by demonstrating that they have mastered the technical rules of the law but failed to understand its underlying moral principle—mercy.

Trials and Convictions

The parallel between Socrates and Jesus is most evident in the accounts of their trials, which reveal similarities in how their societies responded to individuals who challenged prevailing moral norms. Both men were accused of undermining established authority: Socrates was charged with impiety, corrupting youth and not believing “in the gods in whom the city

¹⁷ Matthew 23:23-25 (NKJV).

¹⁸ Matthew 12:7 (NKJV).

believes, but in other new divinities.”¹⁹ Jesus was accused of blasphemy and threatening the religious order of Judea. When the high priest asked Jesus, whether he was “the Christ, the Son of God,” Jesus replied, “It is as you said.” Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy!,” to which the Sanhedrin responded, “He is deserving of death.”²⁰

Both Socrates and Jesus refused to recant their words or abandon their positions, even though doing so would have spared their lives. Socrates accepted his verdict and drank the cup of hemlock, believing that it was better to suffer injustice than to commit it. Because escaping would mean breaking the laws of Athens and committing injustice, Socrates accepted the court’s decision and “raised the cup [of hemlock] to his lips, and very cheerfully and quietly drained it.”²¹

Jesus likewise refused to renounce his mission, accepting instead death by crucifixion. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he confessed to his disciples that “my soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.”²² He then prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”²³ While being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus could have prayed to His Father to “give me more than twelve legions of angels,” but He refused to do so, so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.²⁴

The willingness of both Socrates and Jesus to accept death rather than betray their principles became central to their legacies, inspiring generations of disciplines through their unwavering commitment to truth.

¹⁹ Benjamin Jowett (trans.), *Apology* by Plato, 24b (“Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon have brought an indictment against me, which is, that I corrupt the young, and do not believe in the gods in whom the city believes ...”).

²⁰ Matthew 26:63-66 (NKJV).

²¹ Benjamin Jowett (trans.), *Plato: Six Great Dialogues*, Dover Publications (2007), 117c-d.

²² Mathew 26:38 (NKJV).

²³ Mathew 26:39 (NKJV).

²⁴ Mathew 26:53-54 (NKJV).

Preserving Teachings through Disciples

Another notable parallel between Socrates and Jesus is that both left disciples who preserved their teachings through written accounts, despite neither having written anything themselves. Socrates' philosophy survives primarily through his disciple, Plato, as well as the writings of other direct and indirect students, such as Aristotle. Similarly, the teachings of Christ were recorded by his disciples, Matthew and John, and indirectly through Mark and Luke, who were traditionally thought to be companions of Peter and Paul, respectively. In both cases, the death of the teacher did not extinguish the message; rather, it inspired followers to carry it forward.

Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, Socrates is a proto-Christ whose life foreshadowed the moral and spiritual themes later associated with Christ. Like Christ, Socrates embodied ideals of truth and self-sacrifice that resonate with themes central to the Christian narrative. These qualities offer a bridge between classical philosophy and Christian theology. In this sense, Socrates can be seen as a philosophical precursor whose life anticipated, in a human or natural way, the pattern of self-sacrificial suffering divinely fulfilled by Christ.

Socrates' Induction of Christlike Love

Inherent Constraints to Socrates' Conception of Love

Socrates' conception of love, absent Christian revelation, cannot surpass an earthly conception of love that approximates what Kierkegaard refers to as "preferential love," a form of earthly love is directed toward a specific person or object because of personal inclination, attraction, or beauty. This "preferential love" is "related to passion ... whether it attacks or defends itself,"²⁵ as opposed to Christian neighbor-love, which is universal and

²⁵ David F. Swenson and Lillian M. Swenson (trans.), *Works of Love* by Søren Kierkegaard, Princeton University Press (Princeton, NJ: 1949), p. 37.

commands loving “your neighbor as yourself.”²⁶ In the absence of grace and revelation, Socrates can only articulate a form of love that is based on a kind of desire, arising from lack and directed toward something good or beautiful. In other words, it is based on the qualities of the object of the love, and is specifically conditioned on these qualities rather than on the nature of the possessor of love and his ability to will the good of the other.

In his famous “Ladder of Love,” Socrates articulates a conception of love that begins with love of a single beautiful body at the first rung. As one ascends the ladder, he reaches the unchanging, eternal form of beauty itself. Socrates reports on the teachings of the Mantinean priestess Diotima, who instructs Socrates about the true nature of love (*eros*). Socrates recounts:

He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty ... a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or at another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example, in an animal, or in heaven, or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things.²⁷

The rungs of the ladder of love are objects that attract preferential love: starting with erotic attraction, and proceeding to love of all beautiful bodies, love of beautiful minds, love of laws and institutions, love of knowledge

²⁶ Matthew 22:37-39 (NKJV).

²⁷ Benjamin Jowett (trans.), *Symposium* by Plato, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Hackett Publishing Company (Indianapolis: 1997), pp. 83-84, available at <<https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>>.

and philosophical truths, and, ultimately, love of the unchanging, eternal form of beauty itself:

He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.²⁸

All of these objects may rightly be the focus of preferential love; however, such love does not constitute the higher form of love—namely, the religious love that transcends the rational and ethical spheres and endures irrespective of the qualities of its object, loving unconditionally and without regard to preference or merit.

Attaining this higher form of love requires more than reason, for reason alone cannot bring us to its threshold. It demands revelation—an encounter with the divine love that wills the good of the neighbor regardless of the neighbor's merit, independent of any benefit the lover might receive, and marked by a readiness to endure self-sacrifice in serving the neighbor.

The Descent into the Cave

Overview

This is not to suggest that one does not find this divine form of neighborly love in the teachings of Socrates. On the contrary, one finds it not only in his teachings but also in the life he lived and the death he died. Yet Socrates never explicitly expounds such love through his deductive or inductive methods. Such love can be grasped only through divine revelation; his dialogues are works of reason and philosophy, not of religion

²⁸ Benjamin Jowett (trans.), *Symposium* by Plato, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Hackett Publishing Company (Indianapolis: 1997), p. 84.

grounded in faith and revelation. Accordingly, while he may embody or approximate this form of love in his life and thought, he does not arrive at it through reason. Therefore, the conception of neighbor love found in his dialogues, embodied in the figure of the philosopher-king who descends back into the cave, is never given any coherent, rational explanation.

In the allegory of the cave, Socrates describes a prisoner who is freed and forced to turn toward the light, first in pain and confusion. This represents the philosopher's education and gradual understanding. The journey upward symbolizes the soul's ascent from opinion to knowledge, from the world of appearances to the world of forms, where the philosopher learns to see true reality, not mere shadows. Socrates emphasizes that the philosopher-king, having grasped the Good, must return to the cave, though the return will be both difficult and dangerous for the philosopher-king. Socrates insists that it must not be allowed that "they remain in the upper world"; rather, "they must be made to descend again among the prisoners in the den, and partake of their labours and honours, whether they are worth having or not."²⁹

In this idealized state, the rulers go back into the cave for the good of the citizenry. They are not motivated by a lust for power or a desire to seize control. Rather, in the idealized state, the rulers are those who "are most reluctant to govern."³⁰ Socrates insists that the philosopher-king cannot remain in the sunlight (the realm of knowledge) solely for personal benefit; justice requires that he return to the cave. Yet when he descends into the cave, those who remain may resist or even resent the philosopher. Thus, the philosopher experiences suffering not only in his own ascent to knowledge, where seeing the light will cause "a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see,"³¹ but

²⁹ *The Republic of Plato*, 519d.

³⁰ *The Republic of Plato*, 520d.

³¹ *The Republic of Plato*, 515e.

also in the responsibility of guiding and liberating others still imprisoned, who may subject him to physical danger and reputational disrepute.

The Descent Cannot be Accounted for by *Eros* or Justice

If relying solely on reason, we cannot adequately explain why the philosopher-king, once liberated, chooses to descend back into the cave. His actions cannot be accounted for by rational calculation or by ordinary *eros*, the word for love that Plato invokes in *The Republic* and *The Symposium*. Even Socrates' conception of justice falls short: if justice is merely the proper ordering of society, in which each person performs their own function, then justice would seem satisfied if the philosopher-king remains basking in the sunlight while the other classes remain in darkness. Socrates proclaims to Adeimantus:

You remember the original principle which we were always laying down at the foundation of the State, that one man should practise one thing only, the thing to which his nature was best adapted;—now justice is this principle or a part of it ...

Further, we affirmed that justice was doing one's own business, and not being a busybody; we said so again and again, and many others have said the same to us.³²

Where each citizen attends solely to his own affairs, there is no apparent need for the philosopher-king to intervene in the dissemination of knowledge. Indeed, a system in which knowledge is reserved for the ruler while the rest remain in ignorance is sufficient to maintain a properly ordered justice, which consists in “doing one's own work and not interfering with others.”³³

The Descent Cannot be Accounted for by Compulsion

Socrates reaches the limits of his explanation; he recognizes that the philosopher-king, in a rightly ordered society, must and will return to the cave to liberate others, yet he offers no rational account of why this is so. Unable to articulate why the philosopher-king should willingly bear the

³² *The Republic of Plato*, 433b.

³³ *The Republic of Plato*, 433a.

cross of liberating others, Socrates resorts to a compulsion argument: the philosopher-king is to be “compelled” to return. Accordingly, he asserts that “there will be no injustice in compelling our philosophers to have a care and providence of others”³⁴ and that they shall be “compel[ed] to be guardians.”³⁵

The compulsion explanation falters in light of the example set by Socrates’ own life. As a man who deduced truth and yet returned to the cave to guide others through his dialogues, Socrates embodies the ideal philosopher-king, one who did not merely arrive at truth, but who also returned to the cave to liberate others. His descent into the cave to liberate others did not merely cost him comfort and convenience—it came at cost of his life. Yet Socrates, fully committed pursuing truth, no matter where it led, willingly embraced this sacrifice. No guardian or higher authority compelled him to do so; he chose his path freely, demonstrating that the philosopher-king’s execution of duty is performed without external coercion.

The Descent Can Only be Accounted for by Christian *Agape*

If not for eros, justice, or compulsion, why, then, does the philosopher-king descend into the cave? This act of self-sacrifice, which cannot be adequately explained on the plane of human reason and philosophy, can only be understood through the prism of Christian *agape*: the philosopher-king’s return is motivated by a higher, selfless form of love—the *agapic* willing of the good of others, unconditionally and without regard for personal benefit, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. In this way, Socrates’ teaching—and his own life, willingly accepting death to serve as a moral beacon for his disciples—prefigures what Christ would exemplify on Golgotha. This casts Socrates as a proto-Christ existing outside the Levitical line and covenantal framework, much like Melchizedek.

In returning to the cave, Socrates anticipates Christ’s descent into Hades: a voluntary movement into suffering, undertaken not for his own

³⁴ *The Republic of Plato*, 520a.

³⁵ *The Republic of Plato*, 521b.

interests but to liberate those bound by sinful illusion. This descent into the cave mirrors Christ's journey into Hades, undertaken to liberate those imprisoned, gaining nothing for Himself, but acting solely out of perfect, selfless love. Though outside the covenantal framework of the Old Testament, Socrates seems to intuit these truths, laying a moral and spiritual groundwork that would later find full expression in the life and mission of Jesus. The allegory of the cave suggests that, although Socrates never explicitly formulated the concept of Christian *agape*, he grasped something akin to it in his account of the just ordering of society. Lacking the conceptual vocabulary later developed in Christian thought, he nevertheless gestures toward this form of self-giving love through the philosopher-king's descent into the cave.

Socrates' Path to Understanding Agape

This explanation raises an important question: if Socrates lived before Christ and outside the Old Testament covenant—which taught the Hebrew equivalent of *agape*, *hesed* (חֶסֶד)—where did Socrates acquire an understanding of Christian *agape*? The most likely answer is direct revelation. God has revealed Himself to individuals across time and space, without limitation. For example, Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, powerfully striking him with a heavenly light and speaking, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,”³⁶ transforming Paul's life and altering the course of Christianity. Augustine, after a lifetime of seeking truth in secular philosophy, experienced a profound vision at Ostia in which he perceived Christ's presence, marking his spiritual transformation.³⁷ Similarly, while

³⁶ Acts 9:3-6 (NKJV).

³⁷ Henry Chadwick (trans.), *Saint Augustine Confessions*, Oxford University Press (2009), IX.10-11.

preparing for battle, Constantine saw a radiant cross and heard a voice instructing him, “In this sign, conquer.”³⁸

Scripture also offers examples of individuals who came to faith in God without experiencing such dramatic encounters with God. Rahab, a Canaanite woman in Jericho, recognized that the Israelite spies were emissaries of the one true God and protected them, an act credited to her as an expression of faith.³⁹ Ruth, a Moabite woman, came to believe in the God of Israel, famously declaring to her mother-in-law Naomi, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”⁴⁰ When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she observed his wealth, the splendor of his palace, and the blessings of his well-ordered kingdom. She attributed these not to Solomon’s personal wisdom or skill but to the God of Israel, proclaiming,

“Blessed be the Lord your God, who delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel forever, He has made you king, to do justice and righteousness.”⁴¹

Perhaps, in a manner unrecorded and beyond human comprehension, God revealed Himself to Socrates the way He revealed himself to Saul, Augustine, and many others, and imparted knowledge of the highest form of love: the *agapic* love that wills the good of others unconditionally, even at personal cost and unto death. This revelation would explain why the philosopher-king, having attained enlightenment, does not remain in the realm of universals, basking in truth, but instead descends back into the cave.

Socrates’ failure to provide a rational explanation for this supreme virtue is unsurprising: human reason alone cannot account for it. Such love is a reflection of God’s perfect and timeless nature and can only be

³⁸ Ernest C. Richardson (trans.), Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, Dalcassian Publishing (2023), Book I, Chapters 28-29.

³⁹ Hebrews 11:31; Joshua 2:1-21 (NKJV).

⁴⁰ Ruth 1:16 (NKJV).

⁴¹ 1 Kings 10:9 (NKJV).

apprehended through faith. In *The Republic*, Socrates brings the reader to the threshold of this truth but does not construct the bridge. He presents the reality of the descent but leaves it for the reader to choose whether to embrace it. To accept this highest calling—the return into the cave—demands not reasoning alone but an exercise of faith.

Conclusion

Socrates exemplifies a proto-Christ whose life anticipates key aspects of the moral and spiritual trajectory later fulfilled in the life of Jesus. His relentless pursuit of truth, challenge to societal complacency, and ultimate acceptance of death reveal a form of self-sacrificial commitment that mirrors Christ's own mission. In the allegory of the cave, the philosopher-king's redemptive return to the cave parallels Christ's own descent into Hades for the liberation of souls held in bondage to ignorance and sin. Both figures willingly endure personal suffering to bring enlightenment and salvation to others, at enormous personal cost. Although Socrates' understanding of love remained bounded by human reason, his life gestures toward the higher, *agapic* love embodied by the return to the cave—a love that self-sacrificially wills the good of others. Through his teachings and life, Socrates demonstrated that divine truths can manifest even outside of scriptural tradition. In this way, Socrates stands as a philosophical precursor to Christ, illuminating the ethical and religious principles that Christ would later fulfill on Golgotha.