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Reason and Necessity: The Descent of the Philosopher Kings

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Reason and Necessity: the Descent of the Philosopher-Kings

One of the reasons why one might find it worthwhile to study philosophers of late antiquity is the fact that they often have illuminating things to say about Plato and Aristotle. Plotinus, in particular, was a diligent and insightful reader of those great masters. Michael Frede was certainly of that view, and when he wrote that "[o]ne can learn much more from Plotinus about Aristotle than from most modern accounts of the Stagirite", he would not have objected, I presume, to the claim that Plotinus is also extremely helpful for the study of Plato.¹ In this spirit I wish to discuss a problem that has occupied modern Plato scholars for a long time and I will present a Plotinian answer to that problem. The problem concerns the descent of the philosopher kings in Plato's *Republic*.

I

When Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus construct in words the just city-state, it soon becomes apparent that this state has to be ruled by people who do not seek office, who are even positively disinclined to rule. Already in book I Socrates claims that "if there should be a city of good men only, immunity from office-holding would be as eagerly contended for as office is now..." (347D).² It is repeated in a crucial passage in book VII: "For the fact is, dear friend, said I, if you can discover a better way of life than office-holding for your future rulers, a well-governed city becomes a possibility" (520E-521A). Paradoxically, then, it is a necessary condition for the just and well-governed city to be ruled by people who do not want to rule. To ensure this, there must exist a way of life that is better than ruling for the future rulers. At this stage of the *Republic*, this better way has already been found. For the future rulers have been identified as *philosophers*, by which Plato here means people who have left the Cave and spend their time on the contemplation of Forms, most importantly for our

I should like to thank Don Morrison, Wolfgang Mann, and Peter Turner for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ M. Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford, 1987), xxi.

² Translations are Shorey's. Where I deviate from Shorey, I give the Greek in brackets.

purposes the Form of the Just, which they see, as they do all other Forms, in the light of the Form of the Good. And they love it: Socrates tells us that the contemplating philosophers believe that “while still living they have been transported to the Islands of the Blest” (519C), a wonderful privilege which one usually is granted only after death (and, of course, it is granted only to a blessed few).³ They thus greatly delight in their contemplative lives and rightly consider themselves happy and their lives blissful—and no doubt better than that of any ruler. This gives rise to the problem I am going to discuss: on the one hand, the city needs, as rulers, philosophers. But on the other hand, the rulers-to-be do not want to rule. From the point of view of the city it is clear, given the argument of the *Republic*, that this sort of ruler is needed. However, *prima facie* it is not at all clear what could make the philosophers descend back into the Cave. Why abandon (at least for extended periods of time) their blissful lives of contemplation and engage in the toilsome works of ruling? What could possibly motivate the philosophers to return to the Cave?

This is one problem. But what is worse, there is a second, closely related, problem: in book II Socrates has been challenged by Glaucon to resume the discussion of book I and to show that justice is always preferable to injustice. A related claim recurs several times during their discussion: it has to be shown that the just are happier than the unjust (352D).⁴ Let us concede that it would be just of the philosophers to descend and that it would be unjust of them to remain on what seems to them to be the Islands of the Blessed.⁵ Now even if we find an answer to the first question and detect some sort of motivation for them to descend, the following question still needs an answer: by descending, the future rulers seem to sacrifice

³ Already according to Pindar only people who have kept “their souls free from all unjust deeds” (Pi. *Ol.* 2, 69-70) are allowed to migrate to the Island of the Blessed. Hades awaits the rest of us.

⁴ See also 427D, 445A, 612B.

⁵ It is just for the philosophers to descend because they owe it to the city. I shall come back to this claim below. However, I wish to emphasize at the outset that throughout this paper I shall simply take it for granted *that* this is a just demand and shall not be concerned with the question of why the demand is just or whether this claim is justified at all.

their happiness (or part thereof). Thus, if the philosophers do what is just, namely rule the fine city of Kallipolis (as it is playfully called at 527C), then they are not (maximally) happy, but if they continue enjoying the bliss of contemplation (and thus are maximally happy) and thereby ignore what they owe to the city, they are not just. So it still seems possible that under these circumstances at least some unjust people (i.e. those who continue their contemplation and ignore what they owe to the city) are happier than the just (who do not ignore what they owe to the city and for this reason take on the burden of ruling).⁶ But if so, then Socrates has not fulfilled his promise to show that the just are always happier than the unjust: those who do not descend and continue their blissful activity of contemplation despite being called to rule, are unjust but, or so it seems, happier than their fellow contemplators who follow the call of duty and sacrifice (part of) their own happiness in order to do what is just.⁷

One might try to dissolve the problems by claiming that acting justly in the Cave is actually a necessary constitutive part of the happiness of the philosopher kings, in the sense that it is an activity whose exercise (not only instrumentally, but *per se*) makes a philosopher king happy and without which they would not be happy.⁸ If so, then the problems would not even occur, and it would be easy to see why the philosopher-kings rule: they strive for happiness and acting justly would make them happy. However, such an account cannot explain why the philosopher kings do not *want* to descend. As I claimed above they are positively disinclined to. Their disinclination does not only become apparent from the fact

⁶ In phrasing the problem in this way, I presuppose that a person who acts unjustly, is unjust and that being just is incompatible with acting unjustly.

⁷ In thinking about these problems, I have found particularly helpful R. Kraut, 'Return to the Cave: *Republic* 519-521' ['Return'], in J. J. Cleary (ed.), *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 7 (1991), 43-62; T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory. The Early and Middle Dialogues [Moral]* (Oxford, 1977); N. White, 'The Ruler's Choice' ['Choice'], *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 68 (1986), 22-46; J. M. Cooper, 'The Psychology of Justice in Plato' ['Justice'], *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977), 151-7 and E. Brown, 'Justice and Compulsion for Plato's Philosopher-Rulers' ['Compulsion'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 20 (2000), 1-17. I shall not be able to do justice to all those valuable contributions.

⁸ T. A. Mahoney, 'Do Plato's philosopher-rulers sacrifice self-interest to justice?', *Phronesis*, 37 (1992), 265-82.

that they prefer the contemplative life to the practical life (and the claim that the rulers of the just city do not want to rule is a claim crucial for the project of the *Republic*), but it is also explicitly stated by Socrates in the passage partly quoted above: "... they will not willingly (ἐκόντες)⁹ engage in action, believing that while still living they have been transported to the Islands of the Blest" (519C).¹⁰ If engaging in (just) action was part of the philosopher's happiness in the way described then it would be hard to see why they would not willingly engage in (just) action.

Another strategy might be to make the weaker claim that the philosopher kings rule only because this is a necessary condition for their contemplative lives, and hence, for their happiness, without making the assumption that ruling itself is something that makes them happy. Reeve is perhaps the most famous proponent of this strategy.¹¹ He takes into account the philosopher kings' unwillingness to rule and believes that they rule "because doing so is the best means to their own happiness, that is, to the stable acquisition of as much of the pleasure of learning and knowing the truth as possible throughout life" (p. 95). It is the best means because "if they do not rule, the Third Polis will be torn apart by civil war. And without that polis, even the philosophers cannot be reliably happy throughout life" (p. 202). The philosopher's attitude to ruling, according to Reeve's reading, is thus purely instrumental. They do it because their ruling ensures that they can spend at least part of their time (and more time than in any competing scenario) on contemplation (i.e. on the activity they are really interested in).

⁹ We should not read ἐκὼν here in Aristotle's technical sense (which is Aristotle's innovation). Plato rather uses it, I suggest, in the sense in which it is used in non-philosophical Greek where it indicates an attitude of desire and where it often is opposed to circumstances of ἀνάγκη (cf. *R.* 360C; *Prt.* 346B; *Phdr.* 240C). For the use of ἐκὼν in pre-Platonic Greek see G. Rickert, *EKΩN and AKΩN in Early Greek Thought* (Atlanta, 1989).

¹⁰ For emphasizing the importance of this, I am much indebted to Eric Brown. See Brown, 'Compulsion', 2.

¹¹ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings. The Argument of Plato's Republic* (Princeton, 1988).

One forceful objection against Reeve's view has been made by Kraut, who points out that there is a gap between the reasons Reeve gives for the descent and those provided in the text.¹² For the philosopher kings learn from Socrates that, when they are told to go down (520C), it is a just thing asked of just people. It is just, because, as Socrates tells the philosopher kings, "you have received a better and more complete education than the others" (520C). This education has been provided by the city and, as Kraut phrases it: "it is just that they should repay this debt by using that education for the benefit of the city."¹³

For our purposes it is important to note that if we follow the above strategy there is either no intrinsic connection between contemplation and action, or the Forms have two quite distinct functions. First, they are the objects of contemplation. In so far as they are objects of contemplation and thus, as we shall see, also objects of rational desire, it does not matter that they are such things as the Good, the Just etc., i.e. that they are what one might call normative entities. The philosophers could just as well contemplate mathematics or any other subject which happens to arouse their intellectual curiosity. Second, the Forms have instrumental value in that they allow the philosopher kings to organize the city in such a way as to maximize the time they can spend on contemplation. For their instrumental value, it might well be crucial that the Forms are normative entities, if it is the understanding of those entities that makes the ruling of the perfect city most beneficial to the rulers. But the intrinsic value of the Forms, what makes them attractive to contemplate, is on this reading only accidentally related to their instrumental value. It just so happens that the understanding of what the philosopher kings deeply desire to contemplate is also useful (and perhaps necessary) to rule the city.

II

¹² Kraut, 'Return', 50-51. For a critique see also White, 'Choice', 25.

¹³ Kraut, 'Return', 51.

At least two important accounts of our problem see an intrinsic link between the contemplation of Forms and the action based on that contemplation. Irwin, in his classic *Plato's Moral Theory*, explains that there need be no conflict between the contemplative view (“some of the rational part’s desires will be desires to use reason, especially in philosophical knowledge and contemplation”) and the practical view (“the philosopher will want to express his knowledge of Justice, Beauty, and the other moral Forms in actions which embody them”).¹⁴ He explains that the philosopher who values theoretical reasoning “will also have reason to value other activities expressing his view of the best activities for all his life, and they will include more than philosophical thought.”¹⁵ Irwin takes Plato to be assuming that the knowledge of the Forms creates a desire to express one’s knowledge in actions, and refers to the *Symposium* and the description there of the work of teachers and legislators who desire to propagate virtue.

Kraut’s view is in crucial ways similar. His core idea is that “the Forms are arranged in a systematic order and that the philosopher’s understanding of this order will inspire in her a desire to imitate them.”¹⁶ He finds this idea in the following passage from the *Republic*: the philosopher, we are told at 500BC, “has no leisure to turn his eyes downward upon the petty affairs of men... but he fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal and unchanging order, and seeing that they neither wrong nor are wronged by one another, but all abide in harmony as reason bids, he will endeavor to imitate them and, as far as may be, to fashion himself to them. Or do you think it possible not to imitate the things to which anyone attaches himself with admiration? Impossible, he said” (500C). Now this passage only shows that philosophers will imitate the Forms in making themselves as similar as possible to the harmonious world of Forms. It does not show, however, that the philosopher desires to shape the world or to rule the city accordingly. But Socrates continues as follows: “If, then, I said, some necessity arises

¹⁴ Irwin, *Moral*, 236-7. See also T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), 313-6.

¹⁵ Irwin, *Moral*, 237.

¹⁶ Kraut, ‘Return’, 52.

for him (τις αὐτῷ ἀνάγκη γένηται) to practice impressing onto the customs of human beings (εἰς ἀνθρώπων ἥθη τιθέναι) in public and private the patterns that he visions there, and not merely to mould and fashion himself, do you think he will prove a poor craftsman of sobriety and justice and all forms of ordinary civic virtue? By no means, he said.”

If we apply the basic idea of this passage to our problem, then it appears that the philosophers will descend in order to shape and rule the city. For the ruling and shaping of the city is, I take it, the public part of their realizing in the Cave what they have seen outside of the Cave. While this passage indeed shows that action in the Cave is in some way or other a consequence of the contemplation of Forms, it does not tell us in what way precisely practical activity depends on contemplation. In particular, it does not tell us that the philosopher kings *desire* to practice impressing onto the customs of human beings the patterns that they envision there.

Moreover, it is, I think, of great importance that according to this passage the claim that philosophers rule in the light of what they have seen outside of the Cave is implied by the consequent of a conditional whose antecedent reads: “if some necessity arises for him”. Thus, instead of saying that contemplation inspires a *desire* in the philosopher to imitate the Forms, it only says that this is what the philosopher is going to do, *if some necessity arises for him*. This is a crucial condition to which I shall return.

There is no passage in the *Republic* telling us that the philosophers have a *desire* to descend.¹⁷ It is true that it is a natural way to take the link between contemplation and action so as to avoid the apparent inconsistency so much discussed in the literature. However, if we can find an interpretation that (i) preserves the strong link between contemplation and action suggested in the passage just discussed, (ii) does so without assuming that the philosopher kings *desire* to descend and (iii) takes into account the necessity mentioned, this interpretation

¹⁷ Brown, ‘Compulsion’.

would, I think, be preferable. For the claim that they desire to descend makes it difficult to understand why they are disinclined to do so.

III

Let us look more closely at the desires of the soul. In book IX we find a discussion of different kinds of desire and pleasure. We learn that each of the three parts of the soul has its own kind of desire and its own kind of pleasure (580D).¹⁸ First Socrates reminds the reader of the three soul parts and characterizes the rational soul part as that with which a human being learns. Spirit is characterized as that with which they feel anger. The third and lowest part is more difficult to characterize, we are told, due to its manifold forms. But in the end it is called ‘money-loving part’ (because money serves to gratify appetites) and ‘appetite’.¹⁹ Now while appetite desires food, drink, sex and the like (580E), spirit desires predominance and victory and a good repute (581A).

Not only the non-rational soul parts have desires—reason has desires too.²⁰ The rational soul part is called lover of learning (φιλομαθής) and lover of wisdom (φιλόσοφον) because “it is obvious to everyone that *all the endeavor* of the part by which we learn is *ever* (ἀεί) towards knowledge of the truth of things” (581B). This is reason’s desire, a desire for knowledge and thus a desire that is satisfied when the philosopher has left the Cave and contemplates the Forms. This also perfectly fits the description of the philosopher in book V,

¹⁸ R. Patterson, ‘Plato on Philosophic Character’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 25 (1987), 325-50.

¹⁹ As was already pointed out by H. W. B. Joseph, *Essays in Ancient & Modern Philosophy [Essays]* (Oxford, 1935), 50-52, Plato uses ἐπιθυμία both in the narrower sense that it is customary to translate as *appetite*, and in the wider sense of desire. All three soul parts have their own desires but only the desire of the appetitive part is appetite.

²⁰ See Joseph, *Essays*, 50-52; 166-168 but also J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* (Oxford, 1981), 133-4; J. M. Cooper, ‘Plato’s Theory of Human Motivation’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 1 (1984), 5; M. Frede, ‘Introduction’, in (id.) and G. Striker (eds.), *Rationality in Greek Thought* (Oxford, 1996), 1-28; H. Lorenz, *The Brute Within. Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle [Brute]* (Oxford, 2006). Hume’s claim that reason is motivationally inert is foreign to Plato (Lorenz, *Brute*, 32-3). This can be seen, for example, in the discussion of the tripartition of the soul in book IV where reason is introduced as that part of the soul which sometimes draws back a thirsty man and prevents him from drinking (439AB).

where he is said to be the kind of person who longs for wisdom (σοφίας ἐπιθυμητής) (475B), and is distinguished from men of action (πρακτικοὶ 476B)—and it is most vividly depicted in book VI: “Will it not be a fair plea in his defense to say that it was the nature of the real lover of knowledge to strive emulously for true being and that he would not linger over many particulars that are opined to be real, but would hold on his way, and the edge of his passion would not be blunted nor would his desire fail till he came into touch with the nature of each thing in itself by that part of his soul to which it belongs to lay hold on that kind of reality—the part akin to it, namely—and through that approaching it, and consorting with reality really, he would beget understanding (νοῦς) and truth, attain to knowledge and *truly live* and grow, and so find surcease from his travail of soul, but not before? No plea could be fairer” (490B).²¹ Note that Socrates calls this *the true life* of the philosopher. It is a life consisting of the best activity of which a human being is capable: the contemplation of Forms.²²

The true life also provides the philosopher with the greatest pleasures. In book IX the pleasures of the philosopher are compared with those of the money-lover and those of the honor-lover: “And what, said I, are we to suppose the philosopher thinks of the other pleasures compared with the delight of knowing the truth, what it is like (ὅπη ἔχει), and being always occupied with that while he learns? Will he not think them far removed from true pleasure and call them literally the pleasures of necessity since he would have no use for them if there was no necessity? We may be sure of that, he said” (581E). These passages explain perfectly well why the philosopher is disinclined to descend, and why she believes herself to have been transported to the Islands of the Blessed while still alive. Glaucon is thus not surprised when Socrates tells him “that those who have attained to this height are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men, but their souls *ever* (ἀεί) feel the upward urge and the yearning for that sojourn above” (517C). For when the philosopher contemplates the

²¹ See also 475E.

²² See also 526E.

Forms, her utmost desire is fulfilled, she is in the most pleasant state a human being can be in. Indeed, this is, as we have seen, the true life of the philosopher—it is hard to see where happiness could reside if not here (cf. 526E).

In the above passages there is no mention of any pleasures of ruling or any pleasures of acting justly in the Cave; nor is there any mention of corresponding desires. Non-rational desires are directed towards food, sex, a good reputation, etc.; and their satisfaction will provide human beings with some pleasure. Rational desires are directed towards knowledge of the truth, the satisfaction of which will be even more pleasant. If acting justly as such is neither desirable nor pleasant, it is hard to see how it could be constitutive of the happiness of a happy life; it becomes clear, however, why the philosophers are unwilling to descend: they prefer acting in ways that make them happy rather than in ways that do not make them happy. Of course, this does not imply that descending makes them *unhappy*. It only means that descending, instead of positively contributing to their happiness, makes them less happy than they would be if they remained outside of the Cave. If this is correct, then our initial questions become all the more pressing: what is it that makes them descend? Do they choose to sacrifice their happiness when they descend? The crucial notion for this discussion will be that of necessity.

IV

As in particular Brown has emphasized, Socrates, in his discussion of the descent of the philosopher kings, invokes the notion of necessity remarkably often.²³ I have already mentioned 520C, where Socrates tells the future rulers: “down you must go!” A little earlier, Socrates explains that the philosopher-rulers are not allowed to remain outside of the Cave: “we must not allow what is now permitted.—What is that?—That they should linger there, I said, and refuse to go down again...” (519D). Socrates also explains that he and his interlocutors, as founders, compel (προσαναγκάζειν) them to take charge of the other citizens

²³ See Brown, ‘Compulsion’.

and be their guardians (520A). One function of the use of the notion of necessity in this context is the one mentioned earlier: it underlines the fact that the philosophers do not want to descend. But this notion is also, I think, the key to answering our two main questions. In order to see this, however, we have to try to get a clearer understanding of what kind of necessity is invoked.

It is sometimes the case that, given the circumstances and given the kind of person one is, there is only one way to act. For example, if the circumstances are such that a just person must act in one particular way, since, were she to act otherwise (or not to act at all), she would act unjustly (or her not acting would be unjust), then the just person will act justly. In such circumstances, a certain necessity arises to act in that specific way. The question that I wish to consider now is whether the necessity involved in cases like this is external to the agent (e.g. to be found in the circumstances) or internal. I shall argue that it is internal but will first discuss an approach which considers the necessity as something external.²⁴

The philosophers do not want to descend but the city needs them to descend. Given these two facts, we might want to say that the city compels them to descend. This would explain the many occurrences of the notion of necessity, and it would account for the apparent unwillingness of the philosopher kings to descend. Moreover, the first problem mentioned at the outset of this paper would be solved: the philosophers do not want to descend, but they do descend because they are compelled to by the founders, or by the law, which the founders have given to the city.

As a first reaction to this suggestion we might wonder why they obey the law at all. Given that they have all the power in the state, could they not refuse to descend, simply ignoring the law? Certainly no one could force them to descend since they are the people in power. This

²⁴ A solution of this kind has been suggested by Brown, 'Compulsion' and E. Brown, 'Minding the Gap in Plato's *Republic*' ['Gap'], *Philosophical Studies*, 117 (2004), 275-302. For a discussion of compulsion see also D. Sedley, 'Philosophy, the Forms, and the Art of Ruling', in G. R. F. Ferrari (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* (Cambridge, 2007).

worry has been convincingly addressed by Brown: “[A]ny just command the founders give to the philosophers will be obeyed straight-away, without need of any threats. It is as if one is telling a perfectly trained dog to roll over: one need not be holding a rolled-up newspaper in order to produce the desired effect.”²⁵ So the philosopher kings do not have to be forced (who could force them?). Rather, the non-rational spirited soul part of the philosopher-rulers has been trained in such a way as to obey the (just) law without hesitation.²⁶ When the (just) law commands them to descend, they descend. Moreover, reason allows them (and here, of course, they differ from dogs) to understand that the command is just. Even though reason in this picture possesses a certain function, it is crucially *not* reason that necessitates their descent. They are motivated to descend by their spirit and are compelled to do so by the (just) law.

If the philosopher-kings are necessitated to descend by some external compulsion then their lives would have been better had they not been compelled to descend. Now at first sight this might not seem to be a problem. For, in case we had forgotten, Socrates reminds us “that the law is not concerned with the special happiness of any class in the state, but is trying to produce this condition in the city as a whole, harmonizing and adapting the citizens to one another by persuasion and necessity (ἀνάγκη), and requiring them to impart to one another any benefit which they are severally able to bestow upon the community” (519E-520A). So the philosopher-kings cannot justly expect the city to arrange things in such a way as to give them maximal happiness (at the expense of other citizens and of the city as a whole).

However, this does not show that a life of pure contemplation, which they are no longer allowed to enjoy full-time, is not both happier than the life of the philosopher-rulers and available to philosophers who are in a position to ignore the just demand because their spirit is not well trained. Such a philosopher would not be just (he would act unjustly in ignoring the

²⁵ Brown, ‘Compulsion’, 13. For more details see Brown ‘Gap’.

²⁶ Brown, ‘Gap’, 287.

just demand) but he would be happier than any philosopher king—a possibility that must be ruled out if the just life is to be the happiest life. As I shall suggest in a moment, an explanation can be found if we consider the necessity as internal instead of external.

A final remark about ‘being compelled’ (or ‘being necessitated’) (ἀναγκάζεσθαι). It is true that this expression often indicates some external compulsion. However, it need not, as can be seen from theoretical contexts in the *Republic*. Two examples: at 499B Socrates makes a claim under compulsion of truth (τάληθοῦς ἠναγκασμένοι). At 505C some people are compelled to admit (ἀναγκάζονται ὁμολογεῖν) that there are bad pleasures. In both cases, the necessity arises because some rational beings have been thinking about and discussing something, and have rationally convinced themselves that some claims hold true. This shows that ‘being compelled’ (ἀναγκάζεσθαι) and cognate expressions do not always indicate an external compulsion.

It is now time to sum up the discussion so far and to see where we stand. What we would like to have is an interpretation according to which the philosopher kings do not desire to descend: all their rational craving is directed towards the Forms and they are happiest when contemplating. Because descending diminishes their happiness, they do not want to descend, although their descent is, in some sense, necessary. At least one way in which it is necessary is for the realization of the ideal city-state. Yet their descent is not only necessary; it is also a demand of justice. This is crucially emphasized by Socrates in answering a worry aired by Glaucon. Glaucon asks: “Do you mean to say that we must do them this wrong, and compel them to live an inferior life when a better life is possible for them (δυνατὸν αὐτοῖς ὄν ἄμεινον)?” (519D). Socrates and Glaucon conclude that they will do them no wrong since they command what is just to just people (520E).²⁷ What we would like to have, however, goes beyond this. For we would like to have an account which not only shows that the philosopher kings are done no wrong when they are required to descend, but also explains

²⁷ Δίκαια γὰρ δὴ δικαίοις ἐπιτάξομεν.

that, despite their descent, their just lives are still happier than their lives would be, were they to ignore the just demand.

V

Platonists in late antiquity faced the very same problem although couched in different terms. It is true that political philosophy was often not foremost on their minds²⁸ and our problem, as they saw it, is far removed from any political consideration. The problem—our problem in their terms—was the question of why the soul, stemming from an intelligible place beyond the heavens,²⁹ descends into the sensible world. Plotinus discusses this problem in particular at *Ennead* IV.8, in a treatise entitled by Porphyry, the editor of Plotinus' writings, *On the descent of the soul into bodies*. Plotinus wonders in that treatise why a thing whose nature belongs to the intelligible world, namely the soul, finds itself embodied in the sensible world. Now just as Plato's philosopher kings have to care for the city and their fellow-citizens, so too the Plotinian soul has to care for a part of the sensible world, most particularly her body (*Enn.* IV.8.2). And just as Plato's philosopher kings must descend, so Plotinian souls “necessarily become amphibious, living by turns the life there and the life here” (the life there being a life of contemplation in the intelligible world beyond the heavens, and the life here a sublunary life of action) (*Enn.* IV.8.4).³⁰ The necessity involved is crucial. Plotinus makes it very clear that this necessity is not an external compulsion or anything that forces the soul to descend: it is a necessity that comes from within (*Enn.* IV.8.5). He also makes it clear that the soul by far prefers not to descend and that her happiness lies in the intelligible, not in the sensible, world.³¹ Acting in the sensible world is, for the soul, a necessity and not something that she

²⁸ But see D. J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis. Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2003).

²⁹ Plato's ὑπερουράνιος τόπος (Phdr. 247C).

³⁰ The claim that the soul is *amphibious* simply means that she is leading two sorts of life – not, of course, a life in water and a life on land. Rather, souls lead a life of contemplation (in the intelligible world) and a life of action (in the sensible world).

³¹ For a more detailed account of this see D. Caluori, 'The Essential Functions of a Plotinian Soul', *Rhizai*, 2 (2005), 75-93.

desires. This can also be seen from a passage in *Enn.* VI.8.5 where Plotinus discusses courage and then emphatically states: “But it is also the same with the other activities done according to virtue, since virtue always must do this or that to cope with what turns up. For certainly if someone gave virtue itself the choice whether it would like in order to be active that there should be wars, that it might be brave, and that there should be injustice that it might determine just things and set things in order ..., it would choose to rest from its practical activities because nothing needed its curative action, as if a physician, for instance Hippocrates, were to wish that nobody needed his skill.”³²

The Plotinian soul descends into the sensible world because she must descend. She has an understanding of the proper order of the world and the power to contribute to this order; and it is due to her understanding of what is good and just that she descends. However, she has as little desire to descend as has Hippocrates, according to Plotinus, to heal. What makes the soul descend is thus neither an external compulsion nor a desire to act, but a necessity that arises from within, from reason: what makes her descend is the ‘must’ of practical necessity.³³

Before I say more about practical necessity, let me first apply this thought to Plato’s philosopher kings. They have been contemplating Forms and acquired a deep understanding of matters such as justice. Moreover, their earlier training assures that their non-rational soul parts are consistently under the control of reason, so that philosopher kings never face any problems along the lines of *akrasia*. Now the moment comes, so to speak, where they have to descend. Socrates tells them: “You we have engendered for yourselves and the rest of the city to be, as it were, king-bees and leaders of the hive. You have received a better and more complete education than the others and you are more capable of sharing both ways of life.”³⁴

³² This chapter can also be read as a commentary on *Ar. EN X.7*.

³³ For the notion of practical necessity see in particular B. Williams, ‘Practical Necessity’ [‘Necessity’], in (id.), *Moral Luck. Philosophical Paper 1973-1980* (Cambridge, 1981), 124-31.

³⁴ They are thus, like Plotinian souls, amphibious, living in turn their contemplative and their active lives.

Down you must go then, each in his turn..." (520BC). Having explained this, Socrates turns to Glaucon and asks: "Will our alumni then disobey us when we tell them this, and will they refuse to share the labors of state each in his turn while permitted to dwell the most of the time with one another in that purer world?" Answer: "Impossible, he said, for we shall be imposing just commands on men who are just. Yet they will assuredly approach office as an unavoidable necessity" (520DE).

The solution is dramatically presented in a conversation between the founders of the city and the philosopher-kings. Yet given the supremely developed rationality of the philosopher-kings, enlightened by their understanding of what is just and fine, they know perfectly well for themselves that the demand on them is just.³⁵ They do not literally need the law or the founders to compel them to do what is just. The necessity of their descent, I submit, rather than having its origin in an external compulsion, springs from reason and understanding. We have already seen that reason, in its practical function, is not only a means for figuring out what to do; it also possesses motivational power. I would now like to add that this motivational power goes beyond rational desire. If reason is fully developed and informed by the Forms, it motivates one to do what is good and just. A just person does what is just precisely because she is just.

One consequence of this claim is that philosopher kings cannot refuse to descend. Suppose, *per impossibile* (as it seems to me), that one of the philosopher kings refuses to descend and says: "well, you all go down but I will stay here. I do not care about the city and although I see that I ought to return, I shall not." Because the understanding of the Just (in a soul whose non-rational soul parts are under control of reason) necessarily motivates one to act justly, it is impossible for a non-akratic person who understands what is just to act unjustly. Hence, a non-akratic person can only act unjustly if she has not understood the Just. She might, for

³⁵ As I said earlier, for the purposes of this paper I am taking for granted that the demand is just and shall discuss neither whether it is indeed so, nor whether Plato has given us sufficient reason to believe that it is.

example, wrongly believe that something unjust is just and act accordingly. Yet such failures of reason are only possible for someone who has not left the Cave.

The Plotinian suggestion developed here thus is the claim that the philosopher kings return to the Cave precisely because they have gained an understanding of the Good, the Just, etc. They must return due to a practical necessity that has its origin in their understanding of such Forms. If one has properly understood those normative entities (and if one's non-rational soul parts are under the control of reason), it is no longer practically possible intentionally to do what is not good.³⁶ Acting badly reveals either that reason is not in control of spirit and appetite, or that one has not properly understood the Good and the Just—and living a life of contemplation, although one owes it to one's home city to return, would be an example of an unjust life. Yet a Platonic contemplator cannot lead a life that is both unjust and non-akratic, because the objects of contemplation are not just any sort of object but those normative entities.

VI

In order to clarify further what I mean by 'practical necessity' it is perhaps worthwhile to contrast it with the notion of duty. This point is related to the question of whether the philosopher kings sacrifice their happiness in order to do what is just.³⁷ I have not been claiming that the philosopher kings recognize a duty to descend and then do what they ought to do, although it would have been practically possible (and more desirable) for them not to descend. If this were the case then they would choose to sacrifice their happiness in order to do what is right, even though it would have been possible for them to choose to refuse to return to the Cave and be happier than they are when they descend. This would still allow for a life that is unjust and happier than a just life.

³⁶ A further reason for doing what is unjust might be an error in applying one's knowledge to a concrete situation.

³⁷ A. A. Krohn, *Der platonische Staat* (Halle, 1876), 161. White, 'Choice' and N. White, 'Plato's Concept of Goodness', in H. H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (Oxford, 2006), 356-72.

The difference between the two accounts is the difference between *ought* and *must*. As Cavell, in his classic discussion of this distinction, says: “‘Ought’, unlike ‘must’, implies that there is an alternative; ‘ought’ implies that you can, if you choose, do otherwise.”³⁸ Another way to explain this distinction might be to say that when I must do something, then I will do it but when I ought to, I might not do it. Williams states that ‘A ought to do X’, by contrast to ‘A must do X’, “has no predictive implications about what A will do.”³⁹ I want to claim that the philosopher kings *must* (not: ought to) return to the Cave, that it is not possible for them to continue their contemplation if this means disregarding the needs of the city (which justly asks them to return) or acting unjustly in some other way. A just person—due to her understanding of Justice—is incapable of (intentionally) doing what is unjust and lacks any motivation to do so.⁴⁰

A contrast that we find in Kant brings out precisely this difference.⁴¹ Kant thinks that not every will is of the same sort, but that we have to distinguish between a holy will and a finite (or pathologically affected) will. The human will is finite and this, in Kant’s view, is crucial for the human condition. What importantly distinguishes the two sorts of will is the fact that a holy will automatically, necessarily, and unfailingly follows reason, and motivates action accordingly, whereas a finite will must constrain itself and is always in danger of not

³⁸ See S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, 1969), 28. See also id., *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979); Williams, ‘Necessity’; R. Wertheimer, *The Significance of Sense. Meaning, Modality, and Morality* (Ithaca and London, 1972).

³⁹ Williams, ‘Necessity’, 128.

⁴⁰ B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity [Shame]* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1993), ch. 4, discusses what he calls the heroic ‘must’ that makes Sophoclean heroes do what they must do. It is an inner, practical necessity. Ajax, for example, sees that there is no other way for him than to commit suicide and expresses this by saying: “Now I am going where my way must go” (Ἐγὼ γὰρ εἶμι' ἐκεῖσ' ὅποι πορευτέον) (S. Aj. 690). Williams, *Shame*, 101, comments: “The necessity that Ajax recognised, was grounded in his own identity... and what mediated between himself and the world was his sense of shame.” For a philosopher king, by contrast, reason, not shame, is crucial for his identity, and by giving priority to reason over shame (shame belonging, in the *Republic*, to spirit), Plato makes reason the (ideally) dominant and identity-forming characteristic of human beings. In doing so, he replaces the heroic ‘must’ by a rational ‘must’.

⁴¹ See A. W. Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca and London, 1970).

motivating in the way it ought to.⁴² Kant introduces duty with a view only to the second sort of will: there are no duties for divine beings (who are endowed with a holy will) precisely because a holy will necessarily motivates in the right way. Only persons with a finite will have to be told what they ought to do. Kant, of course, would not agree that any human being, not even a philosopher king, is endowed with a holy will (in this life, at any rate).⁴³ This is the reason, I believe, why, at the end of his *Toward perpetual peace*, he claims that it is neither to be expected *nor to be hoped for* that philosophers become kings (or kings philosophers). For the possession of power would, in his view, unavoidably corrupt them.⁴⁴ Plato is more optimistic. Platonic philosopher kings are, I submit, in this respect (and I do not want to add any other respect) comparable to divine Kantian beings endowed with a holy will. They are not subject to duty since they always, necessarily, and unfailingly do what they must.⁴⁵ This accounts for the motivation of the philosopher kings' descent and so answers the first question posed at the beginning of this paper.

VII

Let us now see what it implies for the second question and the happiness of the philosopher kings. Do they sacrifice their happiness for justice? Has Socrates fulfilled his promise to show that the just are always happier than the unjust? Let us look again at 519D where Glaucon asks: "Do you mean to say that we must do them this wrong, and compel them to live an inferior life *when a better life is possible for them*?" The answer to this question is, as we have seen, that the philosopher kings will not refuse to descend, because they, being just, are asked

⁴² Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:414 (Ak = Akademieausgabe).

⁴³ "It is impossible for [a holy being] to will something which is contrary to moral laws..." By contrast to the holy being, "every creature... also has inclinations which do not always agree with morality. Thus the human being can never be holy" (Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Ak 28:1075).

⁴⁴ Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Ak 8:369. See H. Karpp, 'Die Philosophenkönige bei Platon und bei Kant', *Gymnasium*, 60 (1953), 334-8.

⁴⁵ This does not at all imply that they are not free. In one of Michael Frede's last articles, he argues that there is only one proponent of a libertarian view of freedom in antiquity, Alexander of Aphrodisias. See M. Frede, 'The ἐφ' ἑμῖν in Ancient Philosophy', *ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ*, 37 (2007), 110-23.

to do what is just (520E). Their decision to descend is grounded in their being just and in the fact that it is just to descend. It is not possible for them, as I tried to show above, to remain outside of the Cave. If this is correct, then, as a consequence, a better life is *not* possible for them. True, they would prefer to remain outside of the Cave, but this is impossible. So they descend without enthusiasm.

Their limited happiness is the greatest amount of happiness they can possibly have.⁴⁶ As Socrates explains already in book IV: “Don’t expect us, quaint friend, to paint the eyes so fine that they will not be like eyes at all ... And so in the present case you must not require us to attach to the guardians a happiness that will make them anything but guardians” (420DE). So the philosopher kings are as happy as it is possible for them, as philosopher kings, to be. A life of pure contemplation would be more attractive and happier, even divine. But it is, for them (and *a fortiori* for the other citizens), impossible to have—impossible in the sense explained above.⁴⁷ If this is true, the philosopher-rulers do not sacrifice their happiness.

There is still a tragic touch to the lot of the philosopher kings: they lose what they have been longing for, when, and because, they have finally acquired it: it is due to their having seen the Forms that they must return back into the Cave. This is, however, only mildly tragic. For each philosopher-ruler, in her turn, devotes “the greater part of their time to the study of philosophy” (540B). Only when the turn comes to them, they toil “in the service of the state and [hold] office for the city’s sake, regarding the task not as a fine thing but a necessity” (*ibid.*). Thus, they can still spend most of their time outside of the Cave and thus in happy contemplation. Because they lead these two kinds of life, they lead just lives of action which

⁴⁶ See also Cooper, ‘Justice’.

⁴⁷ The philosophers who grow up spontaneously at 520B (and do not owe any city anything) differ from the philosopher kings in that they do not have to rule a city, so that, perhaps, an even happier life is possible for them. This is perfectly compatible with the account presented in this paper since their lives are just lives too. Yet note that although not all necessities arise for every philosopher, even philosophers who do not have to rule will nevertheless (being human) be confronted with many necessities.

are still as happy as it is possible. Acting justly is a necessity—but the just life is nevertheless the happiest life possible for a human being.

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