



# Plato, Dickens, and the Soul: Examining the Role of Justice on the Path to Liberation

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*Abstract:* This paper examines how Ebenezer Scrooge's journey in *A Christmas Carol* reveals different elements of his character, and how this revelation resonates with Plato's discussion of the soul in *Republic*. Specifically, the apparent change that Scrooge undergoes over the course of the novel, this paper argues, serves as a useful illustration of Plato's core arguments about the soul in three ways. First, Scrooge's apparent change over time illustrates Plato's argument that having the soul's different parts in proper order is what constitutes justice for individuals, with particular emphasis on the relationship between two parts in particular, namely, appetite and reason. Second, the profound change that Scrooge undergoes after his journey with the three ghosts affirms the main point of the ring of Gyges debate by demonstrating how the best part of his character, reason, is essentially liberated from the worst part of his character, appetite. Third, the way that the three ghosts lead Scrooge to associate his actions with the painful reality of his past, present, and apparent future serves as a unique way to postulate that, as Plato's myth of Er suggests, hardship can help someone forge a truly just soul that is liberated from the tyranny of unbridled appetite. Ultimately, this line of inquiry demonstrates that *A Christmas Carol* indirectly delves into philosophical questions that date back to ancient times about what constitutes a just soul and the benefits thereof, and also demonstrates how *Republic* holds continuing and wide-ranging relevance for examining the nature of the self in the industrial age and beyond.

## Introduction

No novel is more closely associated with Yuletide in the Anglo-American tradition than *A Christmas Carol*. The way that Ebenezer Scrooge transitions

from the archetypal cantankerous wealthy miser to a bastion of generosity and compassion has become a central feature of what is commonly called ‘the meaning’ of Christmas. This radical change not only affords Charles Dickens the opportunity to connect Christmas with the theme of Christian charity, but it also allows him to imbue his novel with additional messaging that transcends its overtly seasonal heartwarming message. Most obviously, his novel offers powerful commentary on the harsh reality of life for the working class during the industrial revolution.<sup>1</sup> Yet another theme, though perhaps not as readily evident, lies at the root of his novel: the benefits of having a just soul. Scrooge’s journey through time reveals different parts of his character and leads to a profound transformation that seems to resonate with this theme of the benefits of having a just soul, which is a notion found in a work to which novels by Dickens seldom relate: Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>2</sup>

In order to explore the manifestation of this theme in *A Christmas Carol* and in *Republic*, this paper examines Scrooge’s journey with the three ghosts and Plato’s discussion of the just soul, and proposes that the former resonates with the latter in three ways. First, Scrooge’s apparent change over time illustrates Plato’s argument that having the soul’s different parts in proper order is what constitutes justice for an individual, with particular emphasis on the importance of reason having primacy over appetite. Second, Scrooge’s profound change at the end of the novel affirms the main point from the ring of Gyges debate about the benefits of having a just soul, insofar as the best part of his soul, reason, essentially ends up being liberated from the worst part of his soul, appetite. Third, the way that the three ghosts lead Scrooge to associate his actions with the painful reality of his past, present, and apparent future offers a unique way to visualize how, in line with Plato’s myth of Er, hardship can help forge a soul that is truly just—thereby offering genuine liberation from the tyranny of unbridled appetite.

### **Plato’s Notion of a Just Soul and Scrooge’s Change Over Time**

To understand what constitutes a just soul, Plato has his lead character in *Republic*, Socrates, conceptualize an imaginary city, which he calls Callipolis. Socrates outlines three classes that make up the social composition of this imaginary city. First, the guardians effectively serve as the city’s ruling class, and

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Johnson, “The Christmas Carol and the Economic Man,” *The American Scholar* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1951-52): 91-98.

<sup>2</sup> For more about Platonic imagery in other works by Charles Dickens, namely *Dombey* and *Bleak House*, see: Mark Hennelly, Jr., “Dickens’s Daniel-Plato Complex: *Dombey* and *Bleak House*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 39 (2008): 97-126.

so they should have a love of wisdom in order to rule properly.<sup>3</sup> The second class is made up of auxiliaries, who are effectively soldiers, and so they should have courage in order to defend the city against enemies. The rest of the city's inhabitants make up the third class: "the rest of the citizens."<sup>4</sup> Unlike the two previous classes, the ordinary people do not exhibit a specific virtue like wisdom or courage, but rather, the ideal for them is to specialize in a particular craft and otherwise defer to the judgment of the guardians. The basic desires of ordinary people, Socrates argues, must be restrained by the wisdom of the guardians, and when this happens, the ordinary people will exhibit the virtue of moderation.<sup>5</sup> Justice in this ideal city, then, is each class doing what it naturally does best without interfering in what the other classes are doing.

The purpose of envisioning this imaginary city is to show how each social class parallels a specific part of the soul.<sup>6</sup> A person has a just soul, then, when he or she has wisdom predicated on reason being in charge of decision-making, has courage predicated on spirit being in charge of confronting challenges, and has moderation predicated on appetite deferring to reason. It is what people do within themselves that constitutes justice in individuals, and so it is important that people not allow one part of the soul to interfere with the other parts.<sup>7</sup> This stratification of the soul's characteristics forms the basis of Plato's definition of justice in *Republic*, with particular emphasis on the relationship between appetite and reason. In effect, reason should be responsible for making decisions in the same way that the guardians should serve as rulers, while appetite should defer to reason in the same way that the ordinary people in the city defer to the guardians.

Plato's emphasis on having reason restrain appetite is rooted in his argument that there exists a perfect "form" of goodness and that what people consider good in the world is merely an imperfect approximation of this form. All people pursue what they think is good, but the relationship between reason and appetite in a person's soul affects his or her views about what constitutes goodness.<sup>8</sup> When appetite rules a person's soul, for instance, he or she will be motivated by greed, under the belief that things like wealth and power constitute goodness. The kind of person who is guided by reason, on the other hand, will be able to recognize the true form of goodness, and live accordingly. Plato thus

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, trans. Chris Emlyn Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013): 376c.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 423d.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 431d.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Solmsen, "Plato and the Concept of the Soul (Psyche): Some Historical Perspectives," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 3 (July – Sept. 1983): 31-49.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 441e.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 505e.

argues that those who place reason above appetite are the only ones who can grasp the true meaning of what is good, whereas those who place appetite above reason pursue things that they merely believe are good.<sup>9</sup> Plato does not precisely define what the true form of goodness actually is, but instead suggests that striving to understand what constitutes true goodness will make it possible for someone to lead a fulfilling life based on knowledge of things as they really are, as opposed to a troubled life based on erroneous beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

Plato's focus on the relationship between appetite and reason can serve as an apt interpretive lens for understanding Scrooge's character in *A Christmas Carol*. It initially seems as though there is nothing more to Scrooge's soul than appetite. However, Scrooge's displays of emotion while with the Ghost of Christmas Past and while with the Ghost of Christmas Present reveal that his soul is not simply pure appetite, but rather, is the product of appetite exercising such a tight grip over reason so as to relegate it to a completely subservient role. In terminology that seems to strikingly benefit Plato's argument in *Republic*, the young woman from Scrooge's past states: "I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you."<sup>11</sup> It thus appears as though reason once governed Scrooge's soul, according to the young woman from his past, and so he once had "nobler aspirations," likely in line with what Plato would characterize as relating to the true form of goodness. Over time, though, appetite started to govern his soul, and so Scrooge began to pursue what he merely believes constitutes goodness, namely wealth.

### **The Ring of Gyges and Scrooge's Misplaced Sense of Satisfaction**

Plato has another character, Glaucon, challenge Socrates by arguing that it is better to be unjust, while still managing to appear just to other people. To make his case, Glaucon recounts the tale of the ring of Gyges to demonstrate how having an unjust soul can prove more advantageous than having a just soul. According to this tale, an ordinary shepherd happens upon a chasm that had recently opened up following a heavy rainstorm. The shepherd enters the chasm and finds a tomb, in which lies a corpse bearing a golden ring. The shepherd takes the golden ring and soon discovers that the ring has the power to make its wearer invisible. He begins to use the ring's power for his own selfish gains, and ultimately kills the king and installs himself as monarch. Anyone in possession of such a ring, Glaucon argues, would use its power in a similar fashion since there would be no need to fear repercussions or penalties. "Nobody, it could be supposed," Glaucon argues, "could have such an iron will as to stick to justice

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 581b.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 505a.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol," in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 110.

and have the strength to resist” its power.<sup>12</sup> In essence, Glaucon argues that people act in accordance with the concept of justice merely due to social constraints, and so anyone who believes that there is no one around to punish his or her transgressions will break the law and ignore the rules.

Glaucon’s argument seems hard to refute, given that such a ring could indeed easily bring someone great wealth and power, and enable its wearer to commit injustices while still maintaining an outward appearance of being just.<sup>13</sup> Plato has his character Socrates stand firm and insist that even though people could enrich themselves by using such a ring corruptly while outwardly appearing just, they would nevertheless end up worse off in comparison with a truly just person. The reason for this again comes down to the relationship between reason and appetite. A truly just person, as opposed to an unjust person who only appears just to others, has a properly ordered soul whose parts are “temperate and harmonious.”<sup>14</sup> This means that even though the just person misses out on the material benefits that would come from using the magic ring for selfish purposes, having reason guide his or her decision-making effectively amounts to self-mastery.<sup>15</sup> An unjust person, on the other hand, would in effect be a servant to appetite. Socrates therefore argues that it is senseless to think that ill-gotten material gains are beneficial if it means that someone “subjects the best part of himself to the most wicked.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a person whose soul is controlled by appetite will always want more, and thus never be satisfied, whereas a person whose soul is properly ordered and thus governed by reason will have all of its parts satisfied.

Scrooge serves as an ideal example of a wealthy person with an unjust soul being worse off than a person of relatively limited wealth with a just soul. This contrast is especially pronounced when comparing Scrooge with his nephew. Fred is clearly not as wealthy as Scrooge, yet appears to have a joyous time as he engages in games and laughter while surrounded by friends and loved ones. Partially in defense of his uncle, Fred observes: “His wealth is of no use to him. He don’t do any good with it. He don’t make himself comfortable with it.”<sup>17</sup> As Fred explains, he cannot be angry with Scrooge: “Who suffers by his ill whims! Himself, always.”<sup>18</sup> His uncle’s living conditions validate Fred’s argument, for Scrooge’s dwelling is described as a “gloomy set of rooms,” situated in a building that is “old enough now, and dreary enough, for nobody lived in it but Scrooge, the other rooms being all let out as offices.”<sup>19</sup> Home alone after work, eating his meager meal, Scrooge seemingly pinches every penny: “It was a very low fire indeed ... he was obliged to sit close to it, and brood over it, before he could

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<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 360c.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence W. Beals, “On Appearing Just and Being Unjust,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 19 (Sept. 1952): 607-614.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 443d.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 443d.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 589d.

<sup>17</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 136.

<sup>18</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 137.

<sup>19</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 81.

extract the least sensation of warmth from such a handful of fuel.”<sup>20</sup> In this way, then, Scrooge appears to validate the argument in *Republic* that a man governed by appetite, even if he acquires great wealth, can be worse off than a poorer man with a just soul. Scrooge appears to have allowed the worst part of himself to enslave the best part, and it appears that despite clearly possessing far more money than he needs, his desire for wealth is so insatiable that he cannot bring himself to spend on even relatively minor comforts to improve the quality of his own life.

### The Myth of Er and Scrooge’s Journey

Plato’s character Socrates argues that even if the just suffer at first, and the unjust profit from their reprehensible actions initially, in the long run it is the just who will end up better off. The unjust are like sprinters who take off quickly and then end up struggling to finish the race, Socrates argues, while the just are like “those who are truly runners” who run steadily and win the race, and the accompanying prizes.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to clarify that even though the unjust may be able to act nefariously in their youth without repercussions, they will eventually reveal themselves for what they really are and will end up being miserable, whereas the just, who may suffer early on in life, will end up enjoying success in the end.<sup>22</sup> To make his point, Socrates brings up a story about a soldier named Er. After getting killed in battle, Er moves on to the afterlife and witnesses what happens to the soul following a person’s death, and then returns to the world of the living to recount what he has seen. Er describes a meadow with a passage that leads up to the sky, where those who acted justly in life ascend and enjoy a wonderful experience, and a passage that leads to an underground realm, where those who acted unjustly in life descend and experience immense suffering. Each person, whether from the sky or from the underground, eventually returns to the meadow and then each takes a turn choosing a new life from among a wide range of options.

This process of each person choosing a new life offers an interesting way to think about the benefits of having a just soul.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, it seems to twist the reward process: many who had ostensibly led a just life, evidenced by the fact that they were sent up to the sky, ended up living miserably after reincarnation, while many who had led an unjust life, evidenced by the fact that they were sent underground, often ended up better off after reincarnation. This is obviously perplexing, for it seems as though the just do not end up better off than the unjust. One example in particular, however, helps clarify that the just do indeed usually end up better off. Er recalls that a man who returned from the sky hastily selected a life that seemed desirable, yet the life he selected ended up

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<sup>20</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 84.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 613c.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 613d.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Halliwell, “The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul: Interpreting the Myth of Er,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 445-473.

being calamitous. Commenting on this man's failure to think carefully before making such an important decision, Socrates notes that this man "in his previous life had been living under a well-run constitution, where he shared in virtue out of habit, without philosophy."<sup>24</sup> This means that to simply avoid committing injustice is not the same as having a soul that is truly just. Having a truly just soul means actually making a conscious choice to reject injustice, and as a comment earlier in *Republic* makes clear: justice has nothing "to do with a person's external activities, but the internal ones."<sup>25</sup>

The lesson from the myth of Er also appears to address Glaucon's claim from the ring of Gyges debate, namely, that living unjustly while appearing to be a just person offers the greatest benefits. The moment of choice in the meadow seems to serve as the ultimate test of a person's soul, and so those who in life managed to appear just to others despite actually being unjust will surely exhibit character traits that lead them to choose poorly. Those who are truly just, on the other hand, will likely exhibit character traits that lead them to choose wisely. This means that even though injustice in life may often go unpunished, and even though those who choose to live justly may end up disadvantaged initially, they essentially get what they deserve in the next life. Socrates concludes that the only people who are almost certain to always end up choosing a happy life, and consistently end up ascending to the sky for a rewarding experience in between lives, are those who continually engage in "sound philosophy."<sup>26</sup>

The myth of Er clearly resonates with Scrooge's journey through time with the three ghosts. Much like the arduous journey that the unjust must endure underground, Scrooge appears to experience considerable emotional hardship over the course of his journey. Revisiting the past, Scrooge must endure the torment that comes with facing his regrets. In the present, he must endure the anguish of coming to grips with the sorrow that he has caused those who still manage to care about him despite his unrelenting callousness. Finally, in the future he must endure the dread of what awaits a man who is so uncaring and so devoid of charitableness. Another parallel between the myth of Er and Scrooge's journey lies in the moment of choice at the end of the meadow and Scrooge's moment of reckoning when he sees his tombstone. Although it appears that determining whether or not a person has a truly just soul occurs when either being sent up to the sky or being sent down to the underground, this determination is actually only made upon reaching the end of the meadow. Similarly, it appears as though Scrooge's soul is properly reordered quite early on, but it then becomes clear that he must continue his journey with the spirits until the very end before he can truly reorder his soul.

A good example of this apparent early shift arises while revisiting his youth with the Ghost of Christmas Past. Scrooge displays "a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened and excited face; would

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<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 619d.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 1-5*, 443d.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Republic: Books 6-10*, 619e.

have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.”<sup>27</sup> Scrooge even expresses regret over his behavior during a recent encounter: “There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something.”<sup>28</sup> Although Scrooge’s display of emotion while in the presence of the first two ghosts suggests that he has reordered his soul, his visit to the future with the final ghost makes it clear that his spiritual journey is incomplete. He watches in horror as the charwoman, the laundress, and the undertaker cackle and laugh while sorting through a stingy dead man’s belongings. Clearly upset by this, Scrooge pleads: “If there is any person in the town, who feels emotion caused by this man’s death ... show that person to me, Spirit, I beseech you!”<sup>29</sup> The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come then takes Scrooge to observe a poor couple expressing delight over this man’s death, for they now have more time to raise the money needed to repay their loan.<sup>30</sup> Astoundingly, Scrooge fails to recognize the obvious, that the dead man no one mourns is his future self.

Scrooge has thus come to recognize the suffering of others, and has even come to express genuine concern for others, but it seems as though he has not yet grasped just how justifiably contemptible he is in the eyes of others. Scrooge at this point is like those in the myth of Er who have simply avoided acting unjustly. One final step remains before he can truly attain a just soul: “The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One ... Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.”<sup>31</sup> He finally recognizes that the reviled dead man is his future self, and that his actions in life merit this lonesome outcome. In finally realizing this, he seemingly moves from expressing a desire to merely do good, to a desire to also condemn the behavior that had come to define his present life—he now not only seeks to act justly, but to also actively reject injustice. It is at this moment that Scrooge truly elevates reason in his soul, and thereby ensures that he will no longer suffer the oppression that comes with being guided by the dictates of appetite.

## Conclusion

As his journey nears completion, Scrooge exclaims despondently to the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come: “I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse.”<sup>32</sup> He ultimately sheds his unseemly parsimonious tendencies and instead adopts a level of generosity befitting a man of his means. When he sends the boy to go buy the prize turkey in town, he offers generous compensation: “Come back with the man, and I’ll give you a schilling.

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<sup>27</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 102.

<sup>28</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 103.

<sup>29</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 155.

<sup>30</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 157.

<sup>31</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 161.

<sup>32</sup> Dickens, “A Christmas Carol,” 161.



Come back with him in less than five minutes, and I'll give you half-a-crown."<sup>33</sup> He also makes what is clearly a stunningly large donation to charity, stating to the portly gentleman who is raising money for the poor: "A great many back-payments are included in it, I assure you."<sup>34</sup> With regard to Bob Cratchit, Scrooge declares that he will raise his dutiful worker's salary and will "endeavour to assist" his struggling family. On the surface, then, it appears that Scrooge in the end has undergone a complete transformation and has thereby indeed become a different man. A closer look, however, reveals that Scrooge is still the same man. Most notably, Scrooge remains in business, as opposed to, for instance, becoming a monk who relinquishes all of his assets. Scrooge instead now seeks to balance the desire to accumulate wealth with the desire to make good use of his riches. The profound change that Scrooge experiences thus seems to resonate with Plato's notion of the just soul, insofar as he has seemingly restructured his soul so that reason now governs appetite rather than the other way around. In other words, the individual parts of his soul have not changed, but the relationship between them has.

Scrooge's disposition after rearranging his soul strikes a chord with the argument in *Republic* about the benefits of having a just soul. Rather than being a servant to appetite, and subject to the misery that comes with such an arrangement, Scrooge now allows reason to guide his actions, and in so doing goes on to experience joy and happiness on a level that he previously could not even envision. The best part of himself is liberated from the worst part of himself, and so in effect, reversing the relationship between reason and appetite offers liberation from the tyranny of unbridled appetite. None of this would have been possible of course were it not for his journey with the three ghosts. It is largely the emotional turmoil that Scrooge experiences during this journey that leads him to restructure the relationship between reason and appetite in his soul. Similar to the moment of choice outlined in the myth of Er, the rearrangement of his soul—and by extension his path to liberation—is not truly complete until after he learns to not only do good, but to also condemn the traits that hinder his ability to do good. Ultimately, examining the resonance between Scrooge's journey and Plato's discussion of the just soul highlights how *A Christmas Carol* transcends its overtly moral and seasonal message by offering a unique way of thinking about key philosophical issues that date back to ancient times and remain relevant to this day, and simultaneously highlights the wide-ranging and continuing relevance of *Republic* for inquiries into the nature of the self in the industrial age and beyond.

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<sup>33</sup> Dickens, "A Christmas Carol," 167.

<sup>34</sup> Dickens, "A Christmas Carol," 169.

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