In the *Republic* Plato provides an account of what social justice is, built on top of an account of how cities function best. And he uses this account as a foundation for further conclusions about how cities and individuals should manage themselves. But is this account worthy philosophy, or is it simply an eloquently constructed opinion? Certainly Plato establishes his claims via arguments that appear coherent, and so we may assume that if his arguments are good ones then indeed these conclusions about justice are trustworthy. But Plato himself wouldn’t endorse an investigation on that basis alone; for Plato true knowledge only comes through a method called the dialectic, anything else falls short, and is, at best, between reason and opinion, resting on hypotheses that are themselves untested. This presents us with three possibilities about the account of justice as found in the city\(^1\) developed in the *Republic*. It may not developed via the dialectic, in which case it is not true knowledge. Or Plato himself may have knowledge about it because of his use of the dialectic, but, if we simply absorb the argument, which is not the dialectic, we will still lack true knowledge about justice, and thus we must exercise the dialectic on our own to know that the account of justice presented is the correct one. Or, finally, Plato’s development of the account of justice may actually be an example of the dialectic, such that by following that development we obtain knowledge about justice. I claim that if we look at what Plato had to say about the dialectic in the *Republic*, and if we make some

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\(^1\) In this paper I confined myself to investigating Plato’s account of justice as found in the city and whether it can be understood as an example of the dialectic simply because it is a manageable task. It is my intuition that the entire *Republic* could be given a dialectical interpretation or could be understood as following from facts established dialectically, although testing that intuition is to large of a task for the present moment.
modest assumptions about the details that he is silent on, following Benson’s “Plato’s Method of Dialectic”, then I think we can indeed interpret the development of the account of justice as an example of the dialectic, although an incomplete use of it.

As I have presented the three possibilities it may seem that the first two are inconsistent with treating the Republic as serious philosophy, because what we want is knowledge about justice, not something less. Thus finding a dialectical interpretation of the Republic would seem to be the only way to escape this apparent problem. But maybe this is only a pseudo-problem. Perhaps the real problem is simply that we are imposing our customary understanding of what knowledge is onto Plato, when he really means something different by the term. Consider what Plato has to say with respect to the four divisions of thought:

Are you satisfied then, said I, as before to call the first division science, the second understanding, the third belief, and the fourth conjecture of picture-thought – and the last two collectively opinion, and the first two intellection, and this relation being expressed in the proportion: as essence is to generation, so is intellection to opinion, and as intellection is to opinion so is science to belief, and understanding to image-thinking or surmise? (534a)

Obviously this by itself doesn’t say anything about what the products of the dialectic are, and we might think that true knowledge encompasses both science and understanding, or that we can arrive at a science without dialectic. But later Plato has this to say about the dialectic:

But all the other arts … which we said did in some sort lay hold on reality – geometry and the studies that accompany it – are, as we see, dreaming about being, but the clear waking vision of it is impossible for them as long as they leave the assumptions which they employ undisturbed and cannot give any account of them. For where the starting-point is something that the reasoner does not know, and the conclusion and all
that intervenes is a tissue of things that are not really known, what possibility is there that asset in such cases can ever be converted to the true knowledge of science? None (533b-c)

It is the first then, science, which is true knowledge, and it is the dialectic, which Plato claims does strive towards the starting-point, by which we can reach it. But even without the dialectic we can still arrive at the second division, understanding, and understanding seems to have its own value, at least as we commonly understand the term. Thus we might argue that Plato isn’t required to use the dialectic in his investigation of justice because he might seek only to produce an understanding of justice, which could be valuable even if it isn’t the true knowledge of science. However, there is a problem with such an interpretation of what Plato is doing, which is that it conflicts with what he has to say about the value of the dialectic. In his own words:

And do you also not give the name dialectician to the man who is able to exact an account of the essence of each thing? And will you not say that the one who is unable to do this, in so far as he in incapable of rendering an account to himself and others, does not possess full reason and intelligence about the matter? (534b)

If, contrary to this, understanding is good enough then it isn’t clear why the dialectic is needed in the first place. Or, if understanding is insufficient, as Plato seems to be implying, then it must be that either Plato himself hasn’t arrived at knowledge about justice through the dialectic yet, in which case it would be strange for him to write down his insufficient understanding, or if he has knowledge about justice there must be some reason why he is unwilling or unable to lead us through the dialectic to that knowledge with him. Solving this mystery will require us to attempt to understand the dialectic, allowing us to either understand the account of justice as an example of the dialectic, or to understand how we can legitimately do without it in this case.
In the *Republic* the first discussion of how the dialectic proceeds is found when Plato is describing the divided line in the following passage:

…there is one section of it which the soul is compelled to investigate by (a1) treating as images the things imitated in the former division and (a2) by means of assumptions (a3) from which it proceeds not to a first principle but down to conclusions, while there is another section in which (b1) it advances from its assumption (b2) to a beginning or principle which transcends assumption, and in which (b3) it makes no use of the images employed by the other section, relying on ideas only and progressing systematically through ideas. (510b)

I have added labels to this passage, following Benson, in order to make clearer how exactly investigations proceed in the two sections and how they differ from each other. The first of these methods leads us to understanding and the second, the dialectic, leads us to knowledge. But, despite their differences, they share a common starting point, as both methods begin with hypotheses (a2)/(b1), although they proceed from them to different conclusions. In the first section, however, the hypotheses, we may assume, treat as images the sensible things (a1), and proceed down to conclusions (a3). But in the dialectic the hypotheses are in terms only of ideas (b3), and from them we proceed upwards to a first principle (b2). However, when it comes to dialectic this must be only half the story; at least we are warranted in assuming so for reasons of charity. Simply ascending to the first principle does no good by itself\(^2\). And, moreover, we would only have to use the dialectic on a single occasion since, once obtained, further ascents to the same first principle would be redundant. It seems reasonable then to interpret the ascent of the dialectic as coming with an implicit descent, such that the higher principles shed light on the

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\(^2\) Or, if it is held to be, the dialectic would seemingly cease to be a philosophical method and become a kind of mysticism or bad religion, where the ascent is supposed to lead to “enlightenment”, which is considered valuable in its own right, despite not leading us to any other knowledge or having any practical value whatsoever.
hypotheses from which we climbed up to them. Thus by going up to the first principle we are also able to come back down, and as we come back down we proceed from the unhypothetical principle in a way that frees us from the possibility of error, such that the true hypotheses that played a role in our ascent are confirmed while the defective ones are repaired. There is even some textual evidence for this view, since later Plato remarks that “Is not dialectics the only process of inquiry that advances in this manner, doing away with hypotheses, up to the first principle itself in order to find confirmation there?” (533d) Both the claim that we find confirmation in the first principle and that we do away with hypotheses (I suppose by confirming them and thus making them unhypothetical) imply that there is a descent from the first principle. Positing the existence of a descent along with an ascent also has the advantage of explaining why we might use the dialectic more than once, namely because how to use the descent from the first principle to confirm or refute specific hypotheses may not be obvious without first ascending from them.

Since the dialectic begins with hypotheses it is probably best to attempt to understand it by starting with them, with what is called the method of hypothesis. Benson describes the method of hypothesis primarily through an analogy with geometry. In the Meno (86e-87b) the geometers are described as using the method of hypothesis by supposing that an area has some property, and drawing out from that assumption conclusions about whether some figure can be inscribed in it or not. By then attempting to inscribe the figure the geometrical hypothesis is tested. The method of hypothesis would thus seem to be, in general, to identify a hypothesis from which the truths about the matter under consideration follow, and then to draw out the consequences of that hypothesis to see whether any contradictions follow from it, in order to test it. But how to apply this method of hypothesis to philosophical questions is not as obvious from
the geometrical analogy alone. It is not hard to imagine how we might devise a philosophical hypothesis or draw out its consequences, but it is far from obvious how those consequences should be tested. To understand the method in hypothesis in philosophy perhaps we can turn to Benson’s description the investigation conducted in the *Meno*, concerning whether virtue is teachable, as an example of it. He claims that Plato is testing the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge, and thus teachable, and that from the hypothesis he arrives at the conclusion that if virtue is knowledge and teachable then there should be people who teach it and people who learn it (89d), which would be an implication of the hypothesis that we might test. But, Plato observes (in 893-96d), there are no teachers and learners of virtue. Thus the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge is refuted, and thus our original question is answered negatively, virtue is not teachable. And in this way, according to Benson, the consequences of the hypothesis are tested through their consistency with other background beliefs and information. But if that is how the method of hypothesis always proceeds then it seems to beg the question almost as a matter of necessity. Because to test the hypothesis that was supposed to shed light on whether virtue can be taught we were forced to determine whether virtue can be and is taught in order to test our hypothesis, which seems to imply that we can’t use the method of hypothesis to answer our questions about virtue until we have effectively already answered the very same questions.

However, it is quite possible these apparent difficulties only arise because we are lost in a complicated and somewhat controversial example of the method of hypothesis at work. We might defend Benson’s assertion that philosophical hypothesis are to be tested by appeal to background beliefs and information by appeal to a much simpler example of the method of hypothesis at work philosophically in the *Republic* at 331c. There Plato considers the hypothesis, put forward by Cephalus, that paying back what one has received is just. But clearly,
Plato says, we should not return weapons to a mad man, as the hypothesis implies. Thus the hypothesis about justice must be rejected, because our background beliefs and information that inform us that in this case returning those weapons is unjust. This miniature example does not suffer from any of the problems that plagued the method of hypothesis in the *Meno*, and thus provides a reasonable model of what the method of hypothesis looks like in philosophy, buttressing Benson’s claims.

Unfortunately it is less clear how the ascent to the first principle from these hypotheses, the core of the dialectic, is supposed to work. We do know, however, that the dialectic can give us an account of our hypotheses (533b), and that with the dialectic we do away with our hypotheses and find confirmation in the first principle (533d), as has already been mentioned. Together these two claims strongly suggest that the dialectic leads us to further hypotheses which entail those that have previously lain undisturbed, and that from those hypothesis we ascend still higher, until eventually we reach an unhypothetical principle, and which point we can conclude our investigation. There is some textual confirmation for this interpretation of the dialectic in the *Phaedo*, although the remarks there are not explicitly connected to the dialectic.

And when you must give an account of your hypothesis itself you will proceed in the same way: you will assume another hypothesis, the one which seems to you best of the higher ones until you come to something acceptable, but you will not jumble the two as the debaters do by discussing the hypothesis and its consequences at the same time, if you wish to discover the truth. (101d-e)

Here then we have an explanation of how to give an account of a hypothesis, and thus of how to confirm it. Admittedly these statements are made in the context of discussing the method of hypothesis, but certainly that doesn’t rule it out as describing the dialectical ascent, since the
dialectic builds upon the method of hypothesis. Furthermore, Plato has asserted that the dialectic is the only inquiry that does away with hypothesis (533d). Since this way of defending the hypothesis, by finding a higher hypothesis that entails it, does destroy the original hypothesis as a hypothesis by turning it into a conclusion we must therefore assume that it is part of the dialectic. However, this understanding of the dialectic is not without its own problems. One of them, as Benson points out, is that our higher hypotheses do not seem, by themselves, to entail or to make certain the lower hypotheses that we proceeded to ascend from. In reconstructing these arguments it often seems that additional assumptions need to be made if the higher hypothesis is really to confirm the lower. If this is indeed how the dialectic works then we seem to proceed upwards not to a single unhypothetical principle, but to a great number of them. A second problem is that the terms in any conclusion must be present in the premises from which it follows, if the descent is really a matter of logical entailment. And, if this is indeed the case, then it is not clear how these more abstract hypotheses converge, so that they become fewer and fewer in number until we are left only with a single one, because then the first principle would be required to contain all terms within it. Not only would this make it too complex to grasp with the human mind, but it would hardly be unhypothetical. Benson is silent about how to resolve these problems, but I don’t think we can pass over them so easily. Our goal is to see if the way Plato develops his account of justice can be understood as an example of the dialectic, and clearly that will be an impossible task unless we have some idea of how the dialectical ascent works. If we leave these problems unsolved then even legitimate examples of the dialectic may end up looking like mere deductive arguments to us. To see how these problems might be overcome consider how geometry proceeds. The fundamental axioms of geometry, those that would be highest under this characterization since they entail all the other geometrical truths, contain only
assertions about points and lines. And thus, strictly speaking, all the claims derived from them can only be about points and lines. But some geometrical claims do involve terms such as “square” and “triangle”. And it is not the case that these terms have somehow been illegitimately slipped in, rather they are defined stipulatively in terms of points and lines, such that claims about them are really just claims about points and lines dressed up in other terminology. If these are the correct definitions for squares and triangles it is not because we derived them from principles about what it takes to be a square. Rather, by considering the more fundamental elements, the points and the lines, we were simply able to see what made for a good definition. The dialectician might proceed in a similar manner, by working with the more abstract hypotheses they are simply able to see what makes for a good definition (which fits with Plato’s claim at 510b that the dialectic proceeds only through ideas, and thus does not arrive at definitions by generalizing from a large number of examples), and thereby introduces new terms by correct stipulate definitions, but at the same time don’t introduce anything new; they are not themselves hypotheses in need of defense.

Although lacking many details, because Plato speaks so little about the dialectic, this understanding of it is sufficient to inspect the account of social justice in Republic and to see whether it can be understood as an example of the dialectic, whether more concrete hypotheses are defended by more abstract ones with the aid of definitions. His development of that theory begins in 427e after he has finished describing what kind of city would best serve our needs. Plato begins by asserting “I think our city, if it has been rightly founded, is good in the full sense of the word.” (427e) And, on the basis of that, “Clearly, then, it will be wise, brave, sober, and just.” (427e) Given that these claims are not preceded by any other claims from which they can legitimately be construed as following they must constitute a hypothesis. We could take them to
be completely independent of what has gone before, but we are also free to understand the transition from the description of the city that best meets our needs to these claims to be a dialectical move. The hypothesis preceding these can be taken to be that the city Plato has just finished describing does in fact meet our needs, and that doing so is its function. And we have also, earlier in the Republic, encountered what can be understood as a definition of virtue, that it is what aids proper functioning (352e-353e). Our higher hypothesis to which we have just ascended can thus understood to be: a good (properly functioning) city has the virtues wisdom, courage, sobriety, and justice. When definitions for these virtues are provided this higher hypothesis will then entail the lower hypotheses that the city so described is good and that it meets our needs. But to justify this dialectical move the definitions will have to be laid out so that we can see that the higher hypothesis does indeed entail the lower. And it is here that the dialectical interpretation will clash with other possible interpretations of Plato’s methodology, because if we weren’t using the dialectic the claims about the four virtues of the city would have to be entailed by other principles. Let us turn then to how Plato establishes what wisdom corresponds to in the city. Certainly the way Plato proceeds does not appear to amount to a deduction of what wisdom is. Rather he considers different sciences which might make the city well-advised. For example, he considers carpentry and asks: “Is it then owing to the science of her carpenters that the city is to be called wise and well-advised?” (428b) Clearly the answer is no. And he proceeds in this way until he comes to the science of guardianship, and there the search concludes. “And what term then do you apply to the city because of this knowledge?” ‘Well advised,’ he said ‘and truly wise.”’ (428d) This bears a striking similarity to the way a geometer might develop a definition for what counts as a particular kind of figure, say a parallelogram. They would consider different arrangements of lines with different properties
until they identified those that we clearly recognize as distinguishing the parallelogram from other figures, namely a four-sided figure having parallel opposite sides. But, once arrived at, this definition is not justified by such investigations, it is stipulative. And the same seems to be true of this definition of wisdom, which lends support to the idea that this investigation is an example of the dialectic, since the development of such stipulative definitions is a key part of the descent from higher to lower hypothesis and is essential to testing them by the method of hypothesis.

The investigation of courage seems to proceed in basically the same way, as Plato begins by remarking: “‘Who,’ said I, ‘in calling a city cowardly or brave would fix his eyes on any other part of it than that which defends it and wages war in its behalf?’” (429b) And, again, Plato proceeds until he has found a definition that we are willing to agree simply is being courageous.

Sobriety, the third virtue, follows this pattern as well. Again Plato begins with a kind of common-sense understanding of the term, remarking that “Soberness is a kind of beautiful order and a continence of certain pleasures and appetites, as they say, using the phrase ‘master of himself’ I know not how; and there are other similar expressions that as it were point us to the same trail.” (430e) And, yet again, he proceeds until he has come across the specific features of the city that motivate us to call it sober, at which point he concludes “If then any city deserves to be described as master of its pleasures and desires and self-mastered this one merits that designation.” (431d) I take this pattern then to be well-established, and we would expect the definition of justice to follow it. But, at first glance, Plato seems to proceed in a completely different way to his conclusions about justice, putting forward first the definition and then indicating that there is somewhere he has inferred it from (433b). This may lead some to think that the definition of justice is deduced from other principles, and thus that this investigation is

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3 Unless we assume that Plato was embracing some kind of ordinary language premise, such that the definition that closest reflects what we normally call wisdom must be correct, which would allow the definition of wisdom to follow deductively from that and our intuitions. But this seems contrary to the spirit of Plato.
not an example of the dialectic, or that if it is the dialectic is not as I have described it. However, I think that it is possible to understand that definition of justice as essentially stipulative, as the rest are, and not deduced from more primitive principles, assuming we are willing to take Plato’s remark about inference to refer to the fact that the definition is less intuitive than the others, and that it requires some justification to make it seem intuitive. When we actually get to why Plato infers this must be the definition of justice he remarks that

‘A thing, then, that in its contribution to the excellence of a state vies with and rivals its wisdom, its soberness, its bravery, is this principle of everyone in it doing his own task.’ ‘It is indeed,’ he said. ‘And is not justice the name would have to give to the principle that rivals these as conducing to the virtue of the state?’ (433d)

This seems to make the definition of justice much the same of those given for the other three virtues, definitions that, once provided, can be obviously recognized as capturing why we call something by those names. And Plato goes on to describe other ways in which this definition of justice seems to match up with why we call something just, which further reinforces the idea that he has stipulatively constructed the right definition, even though they do not justify it. Now I admit that all of these definitions could be given deductive interpretations, ones in which they follow from other principles, if we allow linguistic intuitions or the way words are commonly used to be a premise our arguments. But that is true generally for every possible example of the dialectic, we could always take the highest principle and whatever additional definitions are required as premises and construe the argument as a deduction from them. But that would obscure the way the dialectic proceeds, and so I would encourage resisting falling back on such
understandings of Plato’s project until unless we find a reason to reject a dialectical interpretation.

Given that the above constitutes a dialectical interpretation of Plato’s account of justice\(^4\) our work may seem done; if Plato both endorses and uses the dialectic no problems arise. But, while the interpretation given here may seem plausible by itself, Plato makes some remarks later in the *Republic* that, as noted by Benson, seem to undermine the possibility that Plato’s investigation has actually been dialectical. For example, Plato states that

and let me tell you, Glaucon, that in my opinion we shall never apprehend this matter accurately from such methods as we are now employing in this discussion. For there is another longer and harder way that conducts to this. (435d)

And in 504b he makes a similar assertion, that there is a longer road that would make the claims made plain to everyone, and thus that in some way how he has actually proceeded is lacking. Benson takes this as an indication that Plato has been using only a sister method to the dialectic, one that proceeds from hypotheses to conclusions but never up to the unhypothetical first principle. Certainly this is a natural interpretation to give to Plato’s remarks taken in isolation, but I think it is insufficiently motivated by what Plato actually said. As was mentioned previously Plato explicitly rejects anything less than the dialectic as being able to exact an account of justice in 534b, and so if Plato admitted that he didn’t use the dialectic it would apparently amount to a rejection of his own work. One way to escape this apparent contradiction is to take Plato’s remarks about the shortcomings of his endeavor in a restricted scope. Both remarks might be taken to reflect only on the understanding of the soul that is later developed,

\(^4\) Or at least my best attempt at providing one.
and indeed that inquiry can’t be seen as an example of the dialectic, because it proceeds to conclusions on the basis of an isomorphism with the ideal city rather than upwards to first principles on its own. But, regardless of whether we can validly interpret Plato’s remarks in this limited sense, there does seem to be something amiss with the dialectical interpretation I have provided for Plato’s inquiry into the justice of the city. Specifically we seem to be missing an unhypothetical first principle. The dialectic was supposed to be superior because, by reaching the first principle, the conclusions were to be completely confirmed, removing any possible shadow of doubt. And it would stretch credibility to assert that the first principle really is contained within the *Republic*. Given that Plato was certainly aware of this it lends credibility to the assertion that Plato himself did not see the *Republic* as embodying the dialectic, which brings us back to the original problem, namely that it contradicts his assertion that we need the dialectic to know what justice is. But there is a way out of this problem that allows us to both understand Plato as criticizing his own work and to understand it as an example of the dialectic. Just because the argument does not proceed upwards to the first principle doesn’t necessarily mean that it isn’t an example of the dialectic, it might be an incomplete example of the dialectic. Instead of ascending all the way and then coming back down Plato has only scaled part of that summit before returning. So when Plato speaks of a “longer way” we can take him to mean finishing the journey he has started. And this is completely consistent with Plato’s assertion that only the dialectic is really worthy, because, while he hasn’t taken us all the way up, by following Plato we are closer to the top than we would have been otherwise, making the rest of the journey easier. Although we have stopped short of the summit and thus failed to exact a complete and correct account of justice perhaps we have reached some part of that account which is sufficient for Plato’s purposes.
And now our work really is done. It has been demonstrated that, under the understanding of the dialectic developed here, Plato’s account of what justice is in the city can be given a dialectical interpretation. And, most importantly, we can reconcile that interpretation both with Plato’s remarks on the necessity of the dialectic and his comments indicating that in some way what he has done is incomplete. Thus I submit that it is the most charitable interpretation of what Plato was doing, not necessarily of the arguments Plato provides for this theory of social justice by themselves, since those can be given many reasonable interpretations, but in the context of his other doctrines concerning knowledge and philosophical practice.

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