Everyone would surely agree that if a sane man lends weapons to a friend and then asks them back when he is out of his mind, the friend shouldn’t return them, and wouldn’t be acting justly if he did.

Plato, Republic 331c.

In the fall of 2011, just after the termination of Occupy Wall Street, I began speaking in support of those who had pledged to refuse to repay their student loan debt once a million others have also pledged to do so (under the rubric of Occupy Student Debt Campaign,). In the course of giving a number of presentations concerning this campaign I received many queries and criticisms. The queries were most often practical, e.g., “what about co-signers, what will happen to them if I refuse to pay when I become the millionth and first student loan debt refuser?” The criticisms were
also practical, ranging from “why not organize people to refuse all debt?” to “if you refuse to pay student loans debt, wouldn’t the Federal Government stop supporting the student loan program at all and hence you would harm future students?” I was prepared to deal with these practical questions and criticisms on their own terms, with empirical evidence and political argument.

But there was a more problematic criticism that was not so easily answered, since those who voiced it were not just in disagreement with the premise of the campaign--it was justified to refuse to pay a student loan debt-- but they were morally offended by it. Their retorts to my arguments for the Campaign took on an almost metaphysical aura of sanctity when they spoke about the importance of paying debts from loans that were freely entered into, whatever the consequences. Their criticism quickly left the plane of facts and even values and entered into a world of meta-values with the primary one being: one cannot be morally serious unless one pays back one’s debts.

The political problem posed by this moral attitude to debt repayment is that it touched a raw nerve in many student loan debtors who have been ashamed by their inability to pay off their loans. This shame has led many to try to cover up and not talk to others (even family members) about their plight. According to my research concerning previous student loan debt abolition efforts, one of the key reasons they have not been successful has been their inability to overcome debtors’ characteristic shamed silence that is profoundly anti-political because it turns the collective problem of debt repayment into an individual issue to be dealt with one person at a time. Consequently, this moral criticism had to be dealt with directly and decisively if the anti-student debt effort was not to meet a similar fate, since this criticism not only makes it difficult to move the critics, but it has a problematic effect on many debtors who are already vulnerable to the mental blackmail implicit in the “debt moralists” assertions.
In thinking through the conundrum posed by these debt moralists, I realized that, as a philosopher, I was equipped to deal with the philosophical arguments for or against student loan debt repayment. The more I explored the literature the more I realized that the defense of debt refusal has a long philosophical history. It was important to get this literature into the contemporary discourse on debt in response to the rigidity of debt moralism.

If Plato’s *Republic* marks the beginning of political philosophy, then debt payment refusal appears at the beginning of the beginning of political philosophy. Plato, the aristocratic darling of conservative thinkers, actually defends debt payment refusal in the *Republic*. Plato’s concern with debt should not be surprising, since indebtedness leading to debt slavery was the source of civil wars and revolutions throughout ancient Greek history from 600BC on. Solon, the famous Athenian law-giver, aimed to stop the endless turmoil caused by the cycle of debt-enslavement-revolution-debt and the ever reigniting class war between the poor debtors and the creditor plutocrats that was leading Athens to catastrophe. He did so by legislating the end of debt slavery, a move that led to the democratization of the Athenian state, and increasingly the remuneration of citizens for their public work (especially for their participation in the administration of justice and legislation, which required attending general assemblies and being part of juries, like the jury of 800+ that decided Socrates’ trial).

Solon was a politician and even a sage, but he was not a philosopher. Plato was. What did he have to say about debt repayment refusal? Significantly, the discussion of debt at the very beginning of the *Republic*. The first person Socrates interrogates, posing the book’s germinating question “What is justice?”, is Kephalos, a wealthy arms manufacturer -although an immigrant, a member of the Athenian 1% - and owner of the house where the dialogue staged in the *Republic* is supposed to take place. The name “Kephalos” itself is important, for in ancient Greek it meant “head,” and
as such it is a cognate of the word for “capital”.

Kephalos’ answer to Socrates’ question, appropriately enough for a merchant, is: “Speak the truth and pay your debts!” But Socrates easily dismisses this definition, pointing out that if a person borrows some weapons from a friend, but in the interim the friend “goes berserk” and becomes (murderously and/or suicidally) insane, it would not be just for the debtor to return the weapons to the friend...in fact, repaying the debt in this circumstance would be positively unjust, since it would lead to either murder or suicide or both! Thus the conditions of just repayment of a debt do not necessitate an absolute commitment to repayment under any conditions. Universalizing the kernel of Socrates’ rejoinder to Kephalos’ definition, we come to the following maxim: one should refuse to repay a loan when the payment will lead to evil or unjust consequences that far outweigh what fairness would result from its payment.

Plato’s suspicion of Kephalos’ wisdom was the outcome of the Athenians’ long political experience with a class of merchants and landlords who, like Kephalos, insisted that their loans should be repaid even if this should result in debt-slavery and class-based civil war. This may explain why, in Socrates’ response, Plato referred to the loan of a weapon! For creditors in this case appear to be a maddened crowd, with debt repayment being a cause of murder and suicide, especially when ending with the enslavement of fellow citizens.

These issues did not die with the end of the ancient world. Indeed, today’s “debt moralists” offer a response to those who refuser student loan repayment similar to the one that Kephalos made to Socrates’ query. In turn, we too must respond to the categorical imperative of debt moralists in the same way that Socrates responded to Kephalos’ definition of justice, with an emphatic “it depends.”

First, it depends on whether student loans are unjust in and of
themselves qua loans. On this count, the actual mechanisms of student loan debt speak decisively. For a start, student loan debts in the US cannot be discharged through bankruptcy, unlike almost all other loan debts can be. In addition a large percentage of these loans have been contracted under fraudulent conditions, as it was revealed in the course of frequent scandals, court cases and Congressional committees’ investigations. As Robert Meister pointed out in the case of the University of California, UC administrators pledge future student fees largely to be paid for by student loans and grants to support UC’s bond ratings, its capital projects and a variety of equity deals that turn public money to private gain. This territory has been thoroughly explored by previous student loan debt abolition movements and there is still a lot more to learn.

Second, it depends on whether the collective good is served by repayment. Here it is important to understand the function of student debt in the context of the changes that have taken place in university financing since the 1970s. The ever increasing student debt burden (now beyond one trillion dollars) has been the material condition that made the imposition of ever increasing tuition fees in both public and private non-profit universities possible and financed the expansion of for-profit universities. These developments have led to the corporatization and privatization of universities, on the one side, and plunged a whole generation into debt-bondage. There is no doubt, therefore, that restoring a tuition-free university system and avoiding a further polarization of society requires that we end the present student debt system.

Third, it depends on whether the education and knowledge student loans are intended to pay for ought be commodities in the first place. This is where Plato enters again. Plato held a life-long antipathy to “sophists.” This word had a sociological reference—those who sell their knowledge to students—as well an epistemological one—those who are wise. The sophists believed that knowledge was a commodity that could be exchanged for
money. This was their answer to the question that has been at the center of the debate concerning the development of “for-profit” universities and the intensification of corporate efforts to impose intellectual property legal regimes on academic labor. Plato would not approve. His was a notion of knowledge that was neither commodified nor commodifiable. In Plato’s Republic those who know are to live a perfectly communistic life, neither paying for their education nor getting paid for its use. For two thousand years this conception of an academic institution remained the dominant one, and even in these neoliberal times it still has value.

The very status of most universities (that are either public or private but non-profit) and the traditional temporal limitations placed on “intellectual property rights” (e.g., patents give monopoly rights for the sale of an invention for 20 year) indicate that, despite highly organized and well-financed efforts, the commodification of education and knowledge is still not perceived as legitimate. If most universities are not supposed to profit from the education they provide and the knowledge they disseminate, why should ancillary financial institutions profit from them instead?

Student debt refusal, then, is in principle as just as one’s refusal to return a borrowed loaded gun to a maddened friend who intends to murder and then commit suicide with it. It should not be deterred by objections like the following, “Wouldn’t canceling all student loan debt be unfair to all those people who struggled to pay back their student loans?” For as David Graeber retorted in his important book, Debt: The First 5000 Years, this argument is as foolish as saying that it is unfair to a mugging victim that his/her neighbors were not mugged as well! (p. 389) Plato would agree.