

T. M. ROBINSON

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

It has become a truism that most people 'of a certain age' can recall just what they were doing when informed of the news of John Kennedy's assassination and the exact impact the news had upon them. In the same way large numbers of people, including perhaps a good number in this room, seem to be able to recall the impact made upon them when they first made their way through Plato's *Republic*. That impact, often an impact that lasts a lifetime, turns out to be remarkably diverse, and in my paper I plan among other things to examine for a while why this might be the case, and its possible implications in a number of areas of current interest.

I shall start, for those whose memories need a refresher, with a brief account of the drift of the dialogue's conversation. I shall then look more specifically at a number of items mentioned in the dialogue that have over the years proved startling to a lot of readers, paying particular attention to their differing, and on occasion diametrically opposed effect on readers of various political and other persuasions. At that point I shall turn my attention to an investigation of the reasons why this has happened, and indeed continues to happen.

What is it about the form of this book, or its contents, or both, that seems to leave it open to such a variety of interpretations?

I shall then conclude by offering some reasons why, and with what particular approach I think the *Republic* still very much worth reading, illustrating my points with a short dialogue of my own.

So let's begin at the beginning. The dialogue has six interlocutors, two of whom are on the scene for only the opening pages then exit never to return. The third, the otherwise unknown sophist Thrasy-machus, is a vigorous participant for the first of the ten books of the work, and is apart from one gruff comment silent for the rest. The other three, Socrates and two brothers of Plato, Glaucon and Adeimantus, are major participants throughout. The topic for discussion

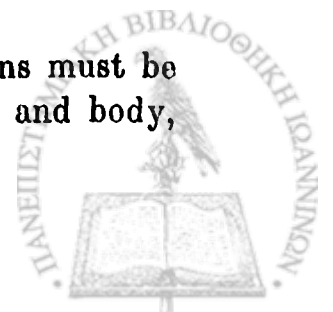


is justice, and it quickly emerges that for Socrates justice is apparently a virtue that is invariably beneficial for us in a basic and lasting way, regardless of possible personal and social consequences that most people would consider appalling and intolerable. Nothing daunted by Thrasymachus's counter-arguments and mockery, Socrates presses on, restating to a puzzled Glaucon and Adeimantus that just activity is invariably both right and in the deepest sense beneficial, regardless of consequences that most people would consider unconscionable, such as a lifetime of subjection to excruciating physical and mental torture, deprivation of all rights, and - perhaps worst of all - the total destruction of that most precious thing, one's good name and reputation *amongst one's family, one's friends, society at large* and even the gods themselves, upon whose appreciation of our goodness turns among other things the quality and happiness of our life or lives beyond.

It is an enormous claim, and the rest of the *Republic* will consist of Socrates's attempt to justify it, first in terms of the macrostructure of the state and then in terms of the microstructure of the individual soul. Surprises begin at once. A natural, if not necessarily historical way for societies to develop, says Socrates, is from a small, relatively uncomplicated state in which each man (read: each male; this is classical Greece) has one and only one job, and that the job for which he is most naturally fitted. It is a society in which basic needs are satisfied with the minimum of commerce and the minimum production and consumption of luxury goods. Socrates calls such a society "healthy"; Glaucon says it sounds too much like Sparta. What he does not question is the notion of a unique natural talent in each person.

In keeping with a tradition of Greek pessimism in these matters, Socrates next describes a society that has declined from the original state of simple self-sufficiency, a state readily recognisable as his vision of the Athens of his day. It is he says an unhealthy city, fat, bloated and luxurious, thanks in large measure to two things: the largescale breakdown of the one-man-one-job principle and the proliferation within its midst of what he calls "imitators", a term whose import will rapidly become clear. Whatever justice is going to turn out to mean for Socrates, this is not the sort of society which instantiates it. Is there any which will?

Yes, says Socrates; but a number of specific conditions must be fulfilled. The first is a sound educational system for soul and body,



but particularly soul. This will involve the erection of an educational environment based on the so-called "mimetic" theory of education, according to which we become what we become as persons through a process of osmosis from a particular educational environment. For the Greeks, most of them non-literate, educational environment meant in effect the *artistic* environment of dramatic festivals, rhapsodic recitations and the like, along with the physical presence at all times of their cities' civic structures, statues and temples, all in a context of the overwhelming natural beauty of the country in which they lived.

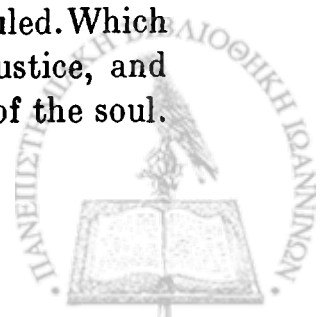
The appropriate artistic environment for a truly good society, says Socrates, will, as far as drama, literature, music and the visual arts are concerned, involve truth in content and beauty in form, on the grounds that our objective is to produce individuals characterised by both beauty of soul and maximal rationality and knowledge. And how, he wonders aloud, can this be achieved if the citizens are surrounded by ugliness in the visual and aural arts and are permanently deceived on vital matters by much that is conveyed in drama and other forms of literature? The result is a set of suggestions that we know astonished the *Republic's* first readers, and have drawn comment ever since.

Much of Homer, for example, to this date the nearest the Greeks had to a bible, will in the Ideal Society be drastically curtailed, on several grounds. First the two poems tell untruths about the gods, who says Socrates are good and only good, cannot deceive, and are in no way anthropomorphic; in fact, he says, there is only one god, as Xenophanes had argued a century earlier. They also portray a world characterized by violence, brutality, and a number of activities that do not fit into Socrates's canon of virtuous action: heroes, for example, occasionally break down in tears. Much of Greek tragedy and comedy will suffer the same fate as Homer, and on similar grounds. As far as music is concerned, too much of it is too soft in its rhythms for Socrates, too likely to produce emotions too effeminate and unwarriorlike for his citizens; this also must be ruthlessly excised from the canon. The list of villainous features of contemporary art-forms goes on and on, and by the end (which takes along time coming; few details are spared) one is left wondering how much of the Greek artistic environment will in fact remain, apart from one or two fables by Aesop, a few heroic odes by Pindar perhaps, and a lot of military marches.



But we must return, as Socrates himself does, to the overall objective of these reforms - the attempt to understand the nature of justice. It is possible, he says, if we can come to a right understanding of the Soul, that rational self which is our most real self, and how both it and the state are in fact tripartite. Starting with the latter first, he argues that his Ideal Society, like any society, will consist of three groupings: the leaders (whom he calls guardians), a soldier-police class (whom he calls auxiliaries), and the rest. Unlike other societies, the members of the three groupings in the Ideal Society will consist of individuals for whom that particular role stems from their perceived unique talent for such a role. This will be guaranteed from the outset, he argues, by a specific device usually translated (and I shall get back to this) the "noble lie", whereby all members of society will be persuaded by a certain myth - the so called myth of the amount of gold, silver or bronze with which our souls are endowed - that one and only one of the three strata or classes of society is their natural place, and one in which they will both best benefit society and achieve their maximum *personal* well-being. This is, he adds, at any rate normally the case; there will prove to be occasional exceptions to the rule, and in view of particular pieces of evidence for this promotions and demotions within the system can be expected. As far as the life of the guardians is concerned (and from this point on the Republic concerns mostly them), it will be communal, Sparta-style; there will be no private property or possession of money, and their education will be characterized by something Socrates seems to admire a lot, total changelessness, the point being that any attempt to change that which has been described as perfection would be by definition change for the worse.

Turning to soul, Socrates then argues that it will, like the state be tripartite, and the three parts he describes as reason, spiritedness (something like will power) and gut desire. Applying to this schema the system of four virtues that we first meet in Pindar - wisdom, justice, self-control and bravery -, he has no difficulty characterising wisdom as the specific virtue of the reasoning part of soul and bravery as the specific virtue of the spirited part. Self-control he has greater difficulty with, eventually locating it in all three parts of soul and characterizing it in anthropomorphic terms as agreement by each of the three parts as to which is to rule and which is to be ruled. Which leaves him with only one virtue to be accounted for, justice, and this he defines as "the doing of its own <job>" by each part of the soul.



So justice turns out to be a state of balance in the soul, and in wider terms a state of balance in society. But balance is in standard Greek medical terms a description of health in the organism. So justice is a form of health, in the individual and in society. But who (to complete the syllogism) in his right mind would ever deny that health is always preferable to disease, or affirm that disease is ever more beneficial than health? So too, justice, being now seen to be a state of the organism, personal and social, is invariably preferable over injustice and invariably more beneficial; indeed, just as the state of health coincides with the maximal well-being of a physical organism, so will the state of justice coincide with the maximal well-being (eudaemonia, sometimes translated happiness) of the soul or state.

With this argument, Socrates has apparently answered the question he set out to answer, and the *Republic* seems to have come to an end. How come in that case there are still six books to go? One possible answer is that it once was indeed the end, and that under questioning from curious if not alarmed readers and friends Plato decided to pursue a number of matters in greater depth. Be that as it may, Book five begins with a query from Adeimantus about a passing remark by Socrates earlier on in the discussion - not picked up at the time - that part of the communal life of the guardians would be their communal possession of wives and children! In answer, Socrates, far from backing off from his view, re-iterates it, adding for good measure and defending at some length two more statements that we know were talking points from the beginning: first, that in the matter of ruling an Ideal Society that women of appropriate genetic background and appropriate education will apart from the small matter of differential physical strength be just as able to rule as men, and second, that in such a society the rulers will invariably be philosophers ("lovers of wisdom") and the philosophers rulers. Asked (Bk 6, 502c) whether this ideal could ever be realized, Socrates says it would be difficult but not impossible.

I have used the phrase, in talking of prospective women-guardians, "of appropriate genetic background and appropriate education". The reference is of course to a feature of the *Republic* that always fascinates: that is, Socrates's suggestion that guardians can and can only be produced by a strict and detailed eugenics policy in conjunction with a strict and detailed educational system. As far as the former is concerned, it will involve an abandonment of the family as currently understood; selected females will be allowed to copulate at



annual sacred festivals with selected males, and any offspring will be brought up in a communal creche system. The manner of their education till the age of 18 is not described, but one can assume, as a minimal consideration, that it will be characterised by the pre-censorship of all that is deemed ugly and untrue that was mentioned earlier on in the account. From 18 to 20 there will be compulsory military service, followed by 10 years of training in higher mathematics, 5 in what Socrates calls dialectic, and 15 in public service. By this time our potential guardians will have reached the age of 50, after which time they may or may not finish up as guardians.

To understand why we must back up a little to inspect the metaphysics and theory of knowledge Socrates puts forward to underpin the system. Knowing and having an opinion, says Socrates, are two different states of consciousness, and have two different objects. The latter has as its object anything in the world around us—the world of space-time. Knowledge has as its object a set of perfect particulars not apparently in space-time, the so-called Forms (sometimes misleadingly translated Ideas), by reference to which all things are generically what they are. Since our future guardians must according to Socrates be endowed with knowledge not just opinion they will need an educational upbringing far transcending anything the rest of society will receive. This is achieved by a step-by-step process of examining reality in its more and more abstract aspects, beginning with the pure unqualified quantities that are the object of the various mathematical disciplines and ending with those aesthetic and moral Forms, like beauty or bravery or justice, which are purely and simply realities, uncharacterized even by quantity, that serve as the archetypes by reference to which reality in all its aspects, moral and aesthetic as well as physical, is what it is and makes sense in being such.

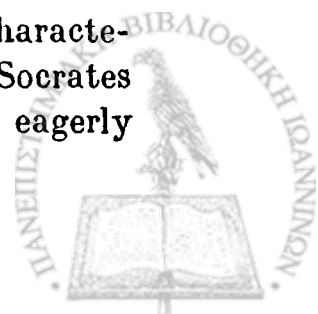
The latter process of investigation, called by Socrates dialectic, is still however only the penultimate stage. For the ultimate Form of all, transcending the rest as he puts it in venerability and power (509b), is not a Form that can come to be known by particular educational techniques, including the one he has just outlined, though those techniques do constitute an indispensable condition if such knowledge is ever to come about. This Form is the so-called Form of the Good, by reference to which Socrates's ultimate assumption, first adumbrated in the *Phaedo*, is finally and incontrovertibly grounded. I mean his assumption not only that the world of our acquaintance in all its aspects, including the moral and aesthetic, enjoys the particu-



lar level of *reality* it enjoys (which as it turns out is not much, by contrast with the Forms), but that it is *best* that this, along with every other feature of the real, should be the way it is.

These are heady claims, and we know that they drew opposition from the very beginning. But let us set them aside for the moment, so that we can rapidly complete the picture. In the closing pages of Book 7 he repeats his claim that implementation of his ideas is difficult but not impossible, and this time even suggests a possible trigger-mechanism (540e-541a): the rustication of all except elders and under-ten-year-olds! In books 8 and 9 Socrates describes the natural manner of decline, as he sees it, that would take place in the tripartite state (and in parallel fashion in the tripartite soul) were anything to go wrong with the IS. The decline follows a fairly predictable route, as the reasoning element in the state (i. e., the rulers) are gradually subverted by the unreasoning element (that's most of us, I guess), leading eventually to a point at which the one-man-one job regulation has been abandoned and - critically - all sense of who might appropriately rule and who should be ruled has been totally lost. This lamentable state, says Socrates in a passage of scathing satire, is the state of democracy, a state only one degree above the worst and most unjust state of all, the state of tyranny, in which the rational element in society has been completely subverted by the non-rational and a strong man has grabbed power who in his own soul *instantiates* that subversion. But such a soul, as we saw earlier in the dialogue, is in the state of ultimate imbalance, and hence ill-health as well as injustice. And who would ever choose ill-health over health, and so on, as we saw before. The argument has come full circle, and the *Republic*, here at the conclusion of Book 9, seems to have come to a natural end, as it had at the close of Book 4. And part of the overall conclusion, perhaps significantly, involves a third attempt to answer the question: will this Ideal Society ever be realized? This time the answer is no longer the optimistic one found on earlier occasions. It may well be, he says, that what I have been describing is just a paradigm that will in fact never see instantiation.

Book ten has all the appearances of being a second set of thoughts on a topic that may well have aroused concern as the portions of the dialogue concerning it were being written and circulated, and that is the attack on contemporary art and education that had characterised earlier parts of the dialogue. But if anyone expected Socrates to calm down a little they were mistaken. Instead he grasps eagerly



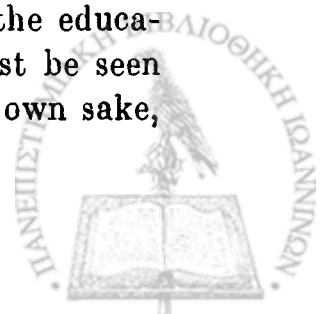
at two new weapons that had not been used or for that matter mentioned in his earlier discussion, that is the Theory of Forms and the notion of the tripartition of the soul, and presents an even more challenging case for his views.

First he argues that the world of art, in whatever form, is a world which invariably copies the world known to us by sense-perception a world itself that is simply at best a copy of the world of Forms. But copies, he says, have a lower reality-status than originals. Hence the world of art is, if you count inclusively, three degrees of reality removed from genuine reality, the world of Forms. In a word, the world of art has a low claim to significance for anyone claiming interest in what is in any strong sense the case. His second argument is that art *as such* not just some of it, appeals to the third, lowest part of our souls, the realm of gut instinct, and is of its nature thereby subversive of that balance which characterises intelligence, justice, and maximal well-being.

These are his final, startling words on the arts. The dialogue then concludes with a discussion of immortality and one of a number of powerful eschatological myths, the Myth of Er.

Such, in broad outline, is, as best as I can formulate it, the drift of the conversation that constitutes the *Republic*. I turn now, as promised, to a few of the major issues in it (it would take a book to cover them all) that have drawn the particular attention of various types of readers, and to the way in which such readers have been and continue to be affected. Let me list them (in no particular order of presumed importance) as follows.

1. Females, of appropriate genetic background and appropriate education, will be equally equipped to rule the Ideal Society as males.
2. The family and private property will not feature in the lives of guardians; children will be procreated by males and females of breeding age chosen for desirable intellectual, moral and physical qualities in a pseudo-lot system that is in fact controlled by incumbent guardians.
3. A "noble lie" will if necessary be told to the various sectors of society to convince them of the appropriateness of their place in the grand scheme of things.
4. A drastic pre-censorship of the arts will be part of education in the Ideal Society, both the education of the guardians and the education of the general populace. Whatever art remains must be seen as being for the overall benefit of the state, not for its own sake,



and will be characterised by beauty of form and structure and truth of content.

5. In the Ideal Society one and only one talent will be exercised by each individual. Among such talents is the talent for ruling, which will be the specific talent exercised by the guardians.
6. Among political systems, Athenian - style democracy is second worst, only a notch above tyranny.

We know from the opening pages of Plato's *Timaeus* and Book 2 of Aristotle's *Politics* that the above were "hot" topics from the beginning among readers of the *Republic*, and discussion of them still continues. Opinions range across a very broad spectrum. On the negative side perhaps the strongest blast has come from Karl Popper, in his influential book *The Open Society and its Enemies*. In this work he excoriates Plato (and Hegel) as historicists and enemies of democracy whose works and ideas have wreaked devastating harm to sound political thinking, and contributed in a major way to the rise of totalitarian activity, of both left and right varieties, in our own century. Secondary grapes have come from people like Harold Lasky and Alban Winspear, but this time from an overtly leftist angle; Plato is now credited with blame only for the rise of fascism. From a slightly different perspective again, in which the metaphysics and epistemology of the *Republic* are subjected to particular criticism, people like G. E. L. Owen have written off the *Republic* as being characteristic of the muddled thinking of what he used to call Plato's "mad" period.

Friends of the *Republic* were and still are considerably more numerous, though they are friends often on drastically differing grounds. Passing over Socrates's remarks about the possibility that the theory might never prove instantiable, Koyre voiced the view in the 40's that the *Republic* was a fine blueprint for the reconstruction of the societies of post-war Europe (he was ignored). In the Oxford and Cambridge of the last century and the early decades of this one the *Republic* was seen as an excellent basis for the training of the rulers of Empire. What happened to the young Winspear was no doubt true for generations of others. Early in the 20's, as a Rhodes scholar in Oxford, he was startled to hear from Professor Sidgwick, in his opening lecture on the *Republic*, the words, "Gentlemen, you are the future guardians!"

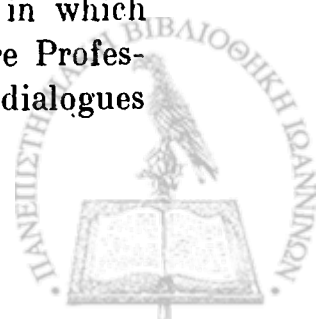
Elsewhere in Europe a different, though equally positive vision of the *Republic* was gaining ground. To a number of educators in Hit-



ler's Germany the *Republic's* call for an ordered society ruled only by people equipped to do so clearly sounded like dulcet music. This meant of course their underplaying some significant passages in *Republic* 5, with their apparent espousal of ideas uncomfortably similar in cast to those being promulgated by the *Fuehrer's* ideological adversary in Moscow. And they were not far wrong in their surmise; it was precisely Book 5 of the *Republic* that (till 1936, at any rate, when an abrupt change in the line on marriage and sexual mores was announced to a lot of stunned Party faithful) tended to be the central subject of approval in the University of Moscow and other gathering-places of the intelligentsia.

Since 1945 views on Plato have if anything multiplied, though two broad general divisions can still be picked out. In the one group can be found all those who think Plato is, usually via the mouthpiece of Socrates, offering us a complete philosophy, whose various arguments can be looked at, analyzed and assessed for their worth or lack of worth. Oxford philosophers tend to fall into this group, agreeing for the most part that Plato had an interesting early period, when his writings came close to reflecting the teaching and style of teaching of Socrates; a somewhat unfortunate middle period (during which he wrote among other things the *Republic*), when he lapsed into — among other things — an absurd metaphysic and some wild political speculation; and a respectable finale, when he started to show some appreciation for the value of logic and language. A variant on this group can be found amongst the heirs of Leo Strauss, who also find doctrine in Plato, but not often the doctrine anyone else finds there; whatever the natural drift of the argument, a sub-text more interesting to the faithful tends to be excavated in its place, a sub-text which Plato may or may not have recognised. A final, further variant on the Straussian variant is the so-called Tuebingen school of interpreters. For them too Plato has a clear and precise doctrine. For various reasons, however, he apparently -and disconcertingly for those not of the Tuebingen persuasion - never wrote out this doctrine in detail in the dialogues, but kept it for discussion among his inner sanctum. The school has grown apace, spawning entire books on what Plato did *not* write.

The other broad group of interpreters is genuinely new in Platonic studies in laying heavy stress on the dialogue - *form* in which Plato wrote. The most extreme exponents of the notion were Professors Woodbridge and Randall at Columbia, who took the dialogues



(including the political ones) to be simply expressions in highly dramatic form of the sophisticated conversation of some of the brighter minds in Greek society; there is no "Platonic" or "Socratic" doctrine, political or otherwise, they said, to be found there, or indeed any "doctrine" at all. Others, less extremely, point out that *some* account must be taken of the dramatic *form* in which Plato wrote, as well as of course the content, since otherwise he would have presumably written in treatise-form like anyone else. This group strikes me as being particularly plausible in its approach, and I shall return to them.

Before doing that, however, I should like to turn to a natural question stemming from all this, and that is: how can the writings of Plato, written for the most part in clear and frequently elegant - not to say scintillating - prose, have engendered such massive diversity of interpretation? Is it something to do with Plato, or with his interpreters, or both? The answer would seem to me pretty clearly "Both", and a very brief excursus into this area will complete my historical and methodological survey. The answer would seem to me pretty clearly "Both", and a very brief excursus into this area will complete my historical and methodological survey.

As far as Plato himself is concerned, the problems have to do with both the form and the content of the dialogues. In form they are basically conversational, and in many instances lead to no specific conclusion. So they are hardly, on the face of it, the natural medium for a thinker to choose had he had some clear and specific doctrine to articulate. In content they vary across a range of topics, with Socrates or some old and distinguished Athenian the lead-speaker, but with no clear indication that *their* views are to be treated with especial respect, though it is on the face of it a fairly natural assumption that they should be so treated. Some particular topics re-appear with fair frequency, and certain philosophical claims do too (like the Theory of Forms or the immortality of the soul), but there appears to be no attempt on Plato's part to make any of this rigorously self-consistent; ragged edges simply remain ragged. And frequently there is high drama in the story, as in the *Symposium*, leading to the question whether this was deemed significant by Plato, and if so in what way.

As far as readers have been concerned, they complicate an already complicated picture by wittingly or unwittingly bringing their own concerns to the investigation. As we have noticed, the simple assumption that the dialogues contain "doctrine" allows one politically



-minded interpreter to find totalitarianism of both stripes in the *Republic*, or another to find fascism, or another the blue-print for a reconstructed post-war Europe. The counter-assumption by contrast allows a different type of interpreter to read the *Republic*, startling suggestions and all, as just a conversation, containing within it no particular political or philosophical assertions with a self-evidently greater claim on our attention than any other important-looking items in our complex cultural and political environment. Others, somewhat less drastically, as we saw, proceed from the same counter-assumption to investigate the relationship between the dialogue's form and its content, each being assumed to be of critical importance. If this approach is basically sound, as I think it is, and in overall terms very much preferable to competing ones, there is still it seems to me a critical item to be added to it. It is an item which - by a nice stroke of fortune - Socrates himself supplies us with, when he tells his young friends in the *Phaedo* never to give up on argument, and when he mentions in the *Cratylus* how one does not enter an argument to win but to ensure that the better argument wins. In recent times this has emerged as the assertion that in a Platonic dialogue the number of interlocutors is always $x+1$, i.e., the ostensible number plus the reader - *ourselves!* - who continue the argument - one-on-one with Socrates himself if need be, or with the whole party -when the last line of the work has finally been read and the time for reflection has arrived.

With this agenda we can finally return to the *Republic*, and to that section of the *Republic* in particular whose assertions on matters political and artistic have from the beginning raised the most eyebrows, but now we return as participants in the drama, not simply spectators. If we are going to learn anything from it, what we shall learn will, uniquely to each of us, be the result of our own individual engagement with the argument in the context in which it is being pursued. Since I can presume to *speak* for no-one but myself, I shall try to offer you an example simply of how I myself try so to engage. Socrates will I hope forgive me if I offer him sound-bites of somewhat shorter length than he is used to, due to the constraints of time; I simply promise that on some future occasion he will be offered the leeway to which he has grown accustomed. So let us begin. The interlocutor I call Reader is myself, but it could be any of us, each with his or her own contribution to the dialectic and the drama.



Reader. Socrates, so much of your educational theory in the *Republic* is based on a mimetic or imitative theory of art. But what if this theory covers only some of the case, and misses for example the whole realm of abstract art? And what if art is not in fact best describable in terms of social purpose, as you seem to suppose?

Socrates. Interesting, but you need to offer as much detail to back your case as I did to back mine.

Reader. But you would agree that *if* my questions proved sound ones, your own case might be commensurately undermined?

Socrates. Maybe. But I suspect I have a big stream of common-sense opinion running in my favour.

Reader. You make a great deal of the dangers posed by various types of educational and artistic environment, and this seems to be based on acceptance of a view which a lot of other Greeks seem to have held, that is the view that "like produces like" or "like influences like". It's around now, too, as it happens; all those people who think violent TV tends to produce violent people would support you in very large numbers.

Socrates. I'm flattered.

Reader. But what if the presupposition is all wrong, or only part of the truth? How much of your theory would be left?

Socrates. The presupposition still seems fine to me, as it does apparently to all your students of TV-watching. I'll look at it again if and when you offer strong arguments to the contrary.

Reader. Well, let me turn to another point. That "noble lie" of yours, as you can imagine, sticks in a lot of craws. It seems.

Socrates. Stop right there! I can't be held responsible for bad translations. "Noble act of deception" is what I meant, and who doubts that on occasion an act of deception is eminently justifiable? Bringing into being a perfect society seems to me one such occasion.

Reader. Does that mean you think the end justifies the means?

Socrates. No, just that certain ends justify certain means.

Reader. You talk of the equal ability of both women and men to rule your ideal society, given appropriate genetic background and education. But then you talk about giving women as prizes to brave (male) warriors. Did you really mean that? Or did you just not get round to mentioning a similar situation in reverse, where on occasion *men* would be given as prizes to say super-intelligent women? Either way, what has happened to your concept of equality?



Socrates. Nothing. I just naturally describe from a male point of view, I suppose. But I can see now that what I said looks inappropriate.

Reader. You called democracy the next worst constitution to tyranny. But your argument is largely based on your theory of the supposed parallelism between the tripartite state and the tripartite soul, with ordinary people in the one described as the equivalent of the lowest and least reputable part of the other. But why should we believe in this supposed parallelism, or for that matter in the supposed tripartition of *either* soul or state (you seem to drop the idea completely in later dialogues)? Aren't you just committing an elementary fallacy of composition here - the sort of thing we are taught to avoid in introductory logic classes?

Socrates. The reference escapes me. But I have a feeling there may be something in your criticism; now that I reflect on the matter, it isn't necessarily the case that wholes and parts have identical characteristics. Perhaps that is why I felt uncomfortable with my argument fairly soon after formulating it and in fact stopped using it.

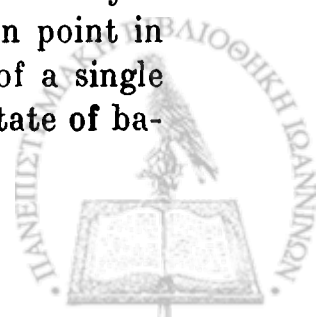
Reader. But not so uncomfortable as to want to actually jettison your overall view of democracy?

Socrates. No.

Reader. Well, let me come at the question from another angle. I'm thinking of your apparent contention that people have only one talent, and that democracies are characterised by people running around thinking they have more than one, and in particular thinking they have a talent for ruling. First of all, why would anyone ever say anything so patently counter-factual as that people only have one talent each? And secondly, why do you hold ruling to be a talent like the others, such that an architect can never apparently be a politician? The whole thing seems so perversely and self-evidently false.

Socrates. Calm down. I must obviously have expressed myself unclearly, since my intention was to claim that we all have one *principal* talent, and this is the one we must exercise in the overall interests of the Ideal Society and, as it happens, of ourselves as individuals within it. As for the talent for ruling, why not? Didn't Pericles have it? By contrast, that recent nonentity-

Reader. Stop! You have made your case. Let me just ask you one general question to round off the discussion. Your main point in the *Republic* is that justice and happiness are two facets of a single state of the good soul and of the ideal society, that is, the state of ba-



lance and health; this being the case, justice will always be the more desirable state of the organism that we call the *soul* in the way that health always is for *biological* organisms. But haven't you just invented a private language here? Who apart from you would ever think of happiness as a state of an organism rather than a *feeling* of some sort? And if it really is a feeling, what is left of the basis of your argument for justice?

Socrates. Not so fast. You have been fooled by those translators again. That word they keep translating "happiness" is really best translated "well-being" and this of course is very much a characteristic that can be attributed to an organism, whether the organism "feels" good or not. But on reflection I concede that most Greeks would *also* think of it as involving *feeling* in *some* measure at least, and so would, like you-

But we can break off there. These engagements with Socrates can go on for hours, but enough has been said for me to make my point. The greatness of the *Republic* lies not so much in any set of doctrines, overt or covert, that it propounds, as in its singular ability to draw us into a world of high drama and sinewy argument on fundamental issues, and as active participants not just bystanders. It is a world of part whimsy, part irony, and part deadly seriousness, conveyed to us in language that borders intoxicatingly on poetry. In entering into this world we enter into the heart of the socratic method, where the question at issue is always open to further scrutiny; where the pursuit of the better argument, whatever the fallout, is an ongoing imperative; where drama and reason forever jostle in fruitful tension. It is a dizzying world unknown to the writers of treatises, a world where the risks and challenges are great and the rewards even greater. It is the world of Socrates; the world of the drama of the life of reason.



ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΜΙΑ ΠΡΩΤΗ ΜΑΤΙΑ ΣΤΗΝ ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΑ

Η εργασία αυτή είναι μια εισαγωγική παρουσίαση της Πλατωνικής Πολιτείας απευθυνόμενη σε ειδικούς και μη αναγνώστες. Μετά από μια σύντομη παρουσίαση της δομής του διαλόγου, ο συγγραφέας επικεντρώνεται σε συγκεκριμένα θέματα του διαλόγου, τα οποία έχουν προκαλέσει κατά την ιστορική διαδρομή της Πλατωνικής Φιλοσοφίας αντικρουόμενες αντιδράσεις σε μελετητές ποικίλων πολιτικών και άλλων πεποιθήσεων. Ως πλέον ριζοσπαστικές και διαχρονικά προκλητικού χαρακτήρα θεωρούνται οι εξής θέσεις:

1. Η αναγνώριση της γενετικής ισότητας ανδρών και γυναικών, η οποία υπαγορεύει την ανάγκη παροχής ίσων ευκαιριών εκπαίδευσης και αξιοποίησης και των δύο φύλων.
2. Οι προτάσεις για οικογενειακή και οικονομική κοινοκτημοσύνη μεταξύ των μελών της τάξης των ηγετών.
3. Η προσφυγή εκ μέρους των ηγετών σε 'ευγενή ψεύδη' με στόχο την εξασφάλιση της κοινωνικής συναίνεσης των κατώτερων κοινωνικών στρωμάτων.
4. Η πρόβλεψη λογοκρισίας για τα καλλιτεχνικά έργα, ιδίως τα ποιητικά έργα, στο πλαίσιο της δημόσιας παρεχόμενης εκπαίδευσης όλων των βαθμίδων.
5. Το αξίωμα «κάθε άνθρωπος οφείλει να έχει μία δραστηριότητα», αυτήν που θα του επιτρέψει να αξιοποιήσει το όποιο φυσικό τάλαντο έχει.
6. Ο χαρακτηρισμός της σύγχρονης του Πλάτωνα Αθηναϊκής δημοκρατίας ως του χειρότερου μετά την τυραννία είδους πολιτεύματος.

Στη συνέχεια επιχειρείται να δοθεί μια ερμηνεία γι' αυτήν την αντιφατικότητα της απήχησης των συγκεκριμένων θέσεων, οι αιτίες της οποίας θα πρέπει, κατά τον συγγραφέα, ν' αναζητηθούν στη μορφή και το περιεχόμενο του διαλόγου, ή μάλλον στον συνδυασμό των δύο αυτών στοιχείων. Η εργασία τελειώνει με την προβολή ορισμένων λόγων που εξηγούν την επικαιρότητα της Πλατωνικής Πολιτείας.

T.M. Robinson
Καθηγητής Πανεπιστημίου Toronto, Canada

