

Plato's Republic: The Education of Glaucon

My task today is to focus on Books 8 and 9 of *The Republic* where Socrates takes up the description of unjust cities and individuals that was interrupted at the beginning of Book 5 by the demand that he talk first about women, then about how the just city could actually come into existence and lastly about the education of the philosopher, on whom the actual existence of the just city depends. Socrates describes in Books 8 & 9 how the just city or aristocracy he and the boys have been building in speech will inevitably fail and become first a timocracy, a city built on honor, then an oligarchy, a city built on the wealth of a few, third a democracy, and finally a tyranny. Each of these cities, mixing bronze and iron, gold and silver in new and unhealthy ways, serves as an image of the soul of an individual man, revealing progressive disharmony within the tripartite soul, caused primarily by eros and greed rising to dominance by enlisting the aid of the spirited part. There is a rough but definite correspondence between these unjust cities described in 8 & 9 and the previous just cities described in Books 2-4:

Ideal (Books 2-4)	Real (Books 8-9)	Human Form & Metal
City of Metals – Guardians	Aristocracy: Ancestral City	The Just Man: Gold
City of Noble Hounds: Warriors Man: Silver	Timocracy: Honor	The Timocratic
City of Luxury: Traders Bronze	Oligarchy: Wealth	Oligarchic Man:
City of Pigs: Craftsman	Democracy: Equality/Freedom	Democratic Man: Iron
Glaucon's City: the Perfectly Unjust Man	Tyranny: Love /Eros	The Tyrant

There is yet another city, surmounting both the ideal and real cities of this chart: the philosopher's city, built in the intervening Books of 6 & 7 about which we shall have more to say. The Ideal Cities, as charted here, are in ascent & are thrust into an indefinite future but the Real Cities & the Human Forms are in descent with the best city cast back into an indefinite past. The lesson of this odd chronology, I would suggest, is that the just city has never and will never come into existence. We note also the lowly place of democracy, a city that Socrates strangely says is the most resplendent and beautiful of cities. It is the stepping-stone to tyranny. Note that the ideal city corresponding to democracy is the city whose citizens Adeimantus charged Socrates with fattening like pigs in a sty. There may have been more meaning in that word "fattening" than we could have realized back in Book 2. It seems democracy becomes the slaughterhouse of the tyrant. Despite democracy's position as the entry way to tyranny, it is clear that Socrates feels most at home in this city. He says, for instance, that democracy is the best possible place to shop for regimes:

"because it's permissive and has every kind, so that anyone who wants to construct a city, as we just did, ought to shop in a democracy as in a regime bazaar. . . ." (557d)

A democracy may not be the healthiest city, it may not be Ronald Reagan's shining city on the hill, but it appears to be the one best suited for philosophy. I can hardly resist the temptation to suggest that Socrates is playing an image-making Charlotte to a radiant, democratic pig.

As Socrates describes the devolution from aristocracy to tyranny, from the just man to the tyrant, from health to ill health, it is important to point out that whereas the just city exists only in words or in a far distant Golden Age, the other kinds of cities do exist among the ancient Greeks. For instance, Sparta is a timocracy and Athens is a democracy. The ancestral aristocratic city fails because the oracle, briefly mentioned in Book III (415c6) as part of the noble lie, -- “that the city will be ruined if it ever has an iron or a bronze guardian” --, has strangely enough come true. You may well wonder how such a thing could have occurred in Plato’s tightly supervised city. And after all, it was a lie. For those of us who admire great champions of freedom, I am sorry to say the oracle is fulfilled only because an incredibly complicated mating formula has been misapplied. This is what Socrates says happened:

“Even though they are wise, the people you have educated to be leaders in your city will, by using rational calculation combined with sense-perception, nonetheless fail to ascertain the periods of good fertility and of infertility for your species. Instead, these will escape them, and so they will sometimes beget children when they should not.” (546b)

I will now read you the fertility formula whose application ultimately escapes the guardians: For the birth of human beings, there is a cycle comprehended by:

“the first number in which are found increases involving both roots and powers, comprehending three intervals and four terms of factors that cause likeness and unlikeness, cause increase and decrease, and make all things mutually agreeable and rational in their relations to one another. Of these factors, the base ones – four in relation to three, together with five – give two harmonies when thrice increased. One is a square, so many times a hundred. The other is of equal length one-way, but oblong. One of its sides is 100 squares of the rational diameter of five each diminished by one, or alternatively 100 squares of the irrational diameter each diminished by two. The other side is 100 cubes of three. This whole geometrical number controls better and worse births.” (546c)

What are we to think of a city whose continued existence is dependent on the correct application of such a formula? Or more importantly, whose potential existence is dependent on such a formula? And even if we can figure out the geometrical number, which appears to be 12, 960,000, how it is to be applied is a mystery. Glaucon, who insisted in Book 5 -- against Socrates’ own inclination -- to be given an account of how their city in words could actually come into existence, remains unfazed by these mathematical difficulties, the applied math involved or the lie within the lie. It will not be until Socrates makes clear the tangled degradation of the soul that occurs in cities that actually exist, especially that of the tyrant, that Glaucon -- brother of Plato, son of Ariston, a close relative of the infamous tyrant Critias, and perhaps the beloved of Socrates -- finally yields and grants the argument: if it requires a philosopher to bring the just city into existence, the just city cannot and will not ever exist for the simple reason that to engage in politics is abhorrent to the soul of the philosopher. Socrates by a marvelous sleight of hand has introduced the philosopher in Book 5 as the necessary condition for the actual existence of the just city only to undermine that very possibility by demonstrating that a philosopher who is properly raised to rule a city, who has his eyes on The Good, will never in fact be willing to rule. At the end of Book 9, having got a good look at the self-enslaved soul of the tyrant, a self-devouring monster whose only humanity is his outward form, Glaucon acknowledges the philosopher “won’t be willing to take part in politics,” to which Socrates replies:

“Yes, by the dog, in his own city, he certainly will. But he may not be willing to do so in his fatherland, unless some divine good luck chances to be his.”

Glaucón responds:

“I understand. You mean in the city we have just been founding and describing: the one that exists in words, since I do not think it exists anywhere on earth.”

Socrates consoles Glaucón:

“But there may perhaps be a model of it in the heavens for anyone who wishes to look at it and to found himself on the basis of what he sees. It makes no difference at all whether it exists anywhere or ever will. You see, he would take part in the politics of it alone, and of no other.” (592a5-b5)

Socrates like some Heracles rescuing Theseus from the Underworld is rescuing Glaucón from the darkness of his own lust for power. Or again, to use the language of the Cave Allegory, Socrates is turning Glaucón around -- in this instance, by the dog -- to use Socrates' own exclamation -- by hauling a three-headed Cerberus up from the Underworld (sometimes known as Fluffy) and revealing to Glaucón thereby the snarling heads of the tyrant's tripartite soul. The power that Glaucón would exercise over others, he is now ready to exercise over himself. Socrates has accomplished that “turning around of the soul” that is the object of education and lifts a man out of the cave of himself. Socrates has demonstrated to Glaucón that the life of a just man is not only desirable in itself and for itself but that it is more desirable than that of the perfectly unjust man, the tyrant. It remains for him to show in Book X through the Myth of Er that the just life is also more desirable with respect to its consequences for the individual soul. There Socrates draws a picture of the soul of a tyrant named Ardiaeus whose eternal punishment in the afterlife surely inspired Dante's *Inferno* and makes clear how each of us becomes responsible for his or her own life.

In the *Crito*, a dialogue that dramatically follows the *Apology*, Socrates provides an example of what it means to construct the just city within one's soul. In this dialogue, Crito comes to Socrates with a sure plan for his escape and so avoid his death sentence. Socrates, however, forestalls these plans by telling Crito that they must consider in their usual way whether such an escape would be just. And so a dialogue ensues whose conclusions both Crito and Socrates agree to abide by. In this dialogue, Socrates himself speaks for The Laws of Athens who acknowledge that an injustice has been done to him, but that his planned escape would be an even greater injustice to the city and, most significantly, to himself. The Laws of Athens speak philosophically in Socrates' own voice and person as the historical city of Athens could never have done. Socrates does accept the judgment of the Laws -- that is the judgment of the *Politeia* within himself -- that escape would entail the greater injustice and accepts the death sentence issued by the historical city, calmly drinking the hemlock and dying in a simple, dignified manner.

It is a Greek proverb that no man's life should be considered blessed until it is known how that man's life ends. Plato surely judged Socrates' life as truly blessed for his soul remained free of injustice to the very last. It is this most blessed man who is the heavenly paradigm envisioned at the end of Book 9 on which Plato would have his brother Glaucón found the true *Politeia*.

Pause for Questions

There is, however, another, very different account of *The Republic* given by those who read the book as essentially a political treatise and charge others as having fallen under Plato's spell and giving him a pass on what can only be called a totalitarian or fascist program. They will point out as evidence that even the translation of the title of the book, *Politeia*, meaning regime, has been softened into *The Republic*, surely a strange term for a system of government that endorses a rigid caste system and that everywhere justifies repulsive means in the name of the greater good. In addition, they point out that Socrates, whom Plato employs as the architect of his city, could not himself have come about in Plato's city or practice his uncompromising brand of philosophy. Indeed, if justice is defined as minding one's own business, Socrates is most noteworthy as a busybody who minds everyone else's. It seems either Socrates is a hypocrite or that Plato is abusing Socrates' legacy by using it to put forth his own agenda. These critics point also to the totalitarian legacy of would-be Plato's, Glaucon's, and Adeimantus's like Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin.

These charges against Plato are serious and difficult to turn aside and amount to putting philosophy on trial a second time. At the first trial, Socrates failed to persuade the jurors that his activity was not subversive but actually a service to the city. On this occasion, philosophy is on trial for seeking to impose a new, transparently totalitarian regime. We are even told at the end of Book 7 how such an imposition will come about:

"Everyone in the city who is over ten years old they will send into the country. They will take over the children, and far removed from current habits, which their parents possess, they will bring them up in their own ways and laws, which are the ones we described before. And with the city and constitution we were discussing thus established in the quickest and easiest way, it will itself be happy and bring the greatest benefit to the people among whom it comes to be." (Book 7, 541a)

Finally, if Plato is arguing that philosophers must be rulers so that the just city can become a reality, then philosophy has lost its role as the outsider and is no longer in a position to objectively question the city and its priorities.

I hope what I have already said will go a long way to answering these charges. But more is needed. No philosopher, who has his eye upon the Good, would ever involve himself in the kind of cleansing of the city pictured at the end of Book 7. It would require the soul of a tyrant. It is because Glaucon was not repulsed at this possibility that Socrates must make clear to him the soul of the tyrant in Books 8 & 9. And if Plato is envisioning a totalitarian society, it is certainly the strangest one we are likely to see: it is an upside down society where the rulers are the impoverished class while their subjects enjoy the material pleasures of life. Further, if Plato is held responsible for the likes of Marx, Trotsky and Lenin, then we must also give him credit for what has come to be known as a liberal arts education, founded as it is on the curriculum Plato devised for philosophers in Books 6 and 7; we must give him credit for the very kind of seminars our Humanities program seeks to provide, where ideas are tested in conversation and not inculcated by the might of authority, whether that be the teacher's or even Plato's. The heart and soul of a liberal education is the cave allegory and the turning around of the soul that is depicted there. And finally, we must say that to see Plato's program for the just city as something other than a reflection of the soul of the individual is to mistake the image for what the image represents and to fail to realize that justice for Plato is primarily the *arête* of the human soul and

not an attribute of a city. For Plato, this mistake is the gravest one of all – for not mistaking the image for what the image represents is critical to the soul's ascent to what Plato calls the Good.

I suggest to you that Glaucon and Adeimantus are being tested, as Socrates says philosophers must be, as young philosophers such as yourselves must be. You are supposed to find fault with Socrates' image of the just city. As young philosophers you recognized the various versions of the just city as severely lacking, they are robotic and soulless; you were offended at the lies and the patent condescension in every aspect of the just city's construction; and as young philosophers, you noticed that the conversations and dialogue were but shallow imitations of real philosophical discussions. It is as if we all were doing time in the lower reaches of the divided line, up against the wall of the cave, as if it were a debate by, for and of shadows.

Pause Pause Pause

You may have also noticed, however, that starting with Book 5, the discussion becomes more truly reflective of philosophical conversation and that the eros and eris of the participants become aroused: first in the discussion about women, then in the demand for bringing the city of words into actual existence, followed by the bold assertion at the very numerical center of *The Republic* that unless philosophers become rulers, the just city cannot come to pass. Then, Socrates surprises us by announcing that the most important element of the soul has been left out, something that is more important than wisdom, temperance, courage and even justice itself – what has been missing is the desire that exists in every soul for the Good. After Socrates' irritated dismissal of Adeimantus who wants only to argue for the sake of argument, Socrates discloses to Glaucon, as though to him alone, a world of incredible beauty through the analogy of the sun, the divided line and the allegory of the cave. The conversation has turned truly philosophical and provides an image at least of the one to one dialectic that moves freely to and from the idea of the Good. In Book 7, Socrates turns directly to Glaucon to ask if he wishes to continue their conversation for his own sake or for the sake of one or another eristic group:

"So decide right now which group you are engaging in discussion. Or is it neither of them, and are you making your arguments mostly for you own sake – though you do not begrudge anyone else whatever profit he can get from them?" (528a)

Glaucon answers:

"That's what I prefer -- to speak, question, and answer mostly for my own sake." (528a4-5)

Here we are at the very heart of the matter. Glaucon's very soul is at stake. The conversation could not be more real. He is somewhat blinded by the brilliance of what Socrates has disclosed to him. Socrates has been striving like some philosophical Orpheus, attempting to turn Glaucon's soul around with his most beautiful music and to tame those like Thrasymachus who would threaten his beloved. Socrates tells us at the very beginning of *The Republic* that he has gone down to the Peiraeus, the place beyond the river, to offer his prayers to the goddess of dead. You should know that at the dramatic time of the dialogue, Cephalus was already dead and by the composition date of *The Republic* Polemarchus had been executed by the agents of the Thirty Tyrants and Socrates had been put to death for what his fellow Athenians believed to be his association with these very same tyrants. That Glaucon disappears in history, apparently having

resisted his own dark tyrannic desires, suggests that Socrates in his sojourn in the Underworld, perhaps among the souls to be reborn, has been successful where Orpheus was not.

This lecture reflects my own education at St. John's College.