

6: THE POLITICAL DRAMA OF PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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THE OPENING SCENE

The first scene of Plato's *Republic* foreshadows the political questions that the remainder of the dialogue addresses in enormous detail. Socrates has the opening line (which he delivers to an unnamed character): "I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon."¹ The Piraeus was the seaport of Athens, a few miles southwest and lower in elevation than the city proper. Most important, it was the setting of the resistance movement that fought against the Tyranny of the Thirty, the brutal group of Spartan sympathizers who in 404 B.C.E., at the end of the Peloponnesian War, had overthrown the Athenian democracy, which had been proudly in place for a century.² The democracy was soon restored (in 403), but the trauma suffered by the Athenians was profound. Plato was twenty-five years old at the time, and at least two of his close relatives (Charmides and Critias) were among the Thirty and their henchmen. (The dialogue, which was probably written around 380, is set in approximately 410.)³

On its own, then, the setting provokes a political question: how valuable is democracy? Is it worth fighting, and perhaps dying, for? Is

¹ The entire dialogue is narrated by Socrates. Citations are from Allan Bloom's 1991 [1968] translation. Many of the themes discussed in this chapter are treated at greater length in Roochnik 2004.

² In his *Hellenica* (2.3.61–2.4.1), Xenophon describes the brutalities of the Thirty. So too does Aristotle in his *Athenian Constitution* (35–37). Aristotle also recounts (in 33) how the Athenian democracy was briefly overthrown in 411.

³ Howland 2004 [1993] contains a good sketch of the historical context of the dialogue. See 3–10.

"Well, then," he said, "either prove stronger than these men or stay here."

"Isn't there still one other possibility . . .," I said, "our persuading you that you must let us go?"

"Could you really persuade [us]," he said, "if we don't listen?"
(327c)

This is more than a bit of playful banter, for it mimics the altogether serious issue of political authority and its legitimacy. In a political community, the ruling body, whatever form it takes, must have the authority to compel citizens to perform some actions they do not wish to do (such as paying taxes or serving in the military). The question is, what is the source of such authority, and are some sources legitimate and just, while others not? In the passage cited above, Socrates says that his acquiescence to the demand that he stay in the Piraeus can be secured in one of two ways. Either he will be forced to by the superior numbers of Polemarchus and his companions, or he will be persuaded. There are at least two ways to conceive of the latter. Some persuasion takes place through the giving of good reasons. Socrates could be given a compelling argument why he should stay with Polemarchus, and could then be forced, by the power of reason itself, to accept its conclusion. On the other hand, someone can be convinced by bad reasons, or by some other form of rhetoric, to do something they are disinclined to do. For example, someone can be convinced by an effective emotional appeal or be seduced by means of alluring but false promises.

The passage thus suggests that there are at least three ways in which citizens can be compelled to do something they do not wish to do, and these prefigure three forms of political authority that subsequently are discussed in the *Republic*. In a tyranny, the ruler obtains the compliance of his subjects by means of the threat of violence. A democratic regime, by contrast, employs the wide-open forum of political debate, such as that which took place in the Athenian Assembly.⁵ Here speakers attempt to persuade their fellow citizens and use all sorts of rhetorical devices – arguments, appeals to nationalist pride, exaggerated promises – in order to win their debates and elections and to enact authoritative decrees. Finally, one can imagine a regime that would operate on the basis of reason. Its authority would be invested in rulers who know the

⁵ An excellent description of the Athenian democracy can be found in Samons 2004. See esp. 3–41.

right thing to do and can give rational arguments to justify their actions. The compliance of citizens would be obtained by the force of reason itself.

Polemarchus alludes to the limits, perhaps the lunacy, of this third option by asking, "could you really persuade [us] if we don't listen?" Most people are not good listeners, and they are especially inept when it comes to listening to carefully constructed arguments. Most people are more likely to be attracted to flowery, fiery, or fulsome appeals to emotion and fantasy than to dry reason. Listening in general, and to reasons in particular, is hard work, for it requires the ability to concentrate on what is being said, to remember it, organize the various elements into a coherent whole, and then to evaluate it rationally. Such work requires discipline and training; in other words, education.

Socrates will discuss these three regimes at length throughout the *Republic*. He will come down terribly hard against tyranny and argue (in Books 8 and 9) that it is altogether illegitimate and unjust. He will come down nearly as hard against the democracy (in Book 8) in which all forms of persuasion, rational or otherwise, are given free play. And (in Books 2–7) he will seem to champion that sort of regime in which reason rules and education is paramount. Indeed, the principal task of the *Republic* seems to be to devise a hypothetical version of precisely such a regime.

To return again to the opening scene: Adeimantus, one of the group of young men accompanying Polemarchus (and, like Glaucon, Plato's brother), lures Socrates to stay in the Piraeus by promising him a treat: later that evening, he says, there will be a horseback race in which the riders will pass torches from one to the other. Socrates seems impressed. "On horseback? That is novel!" (328a). Polemarchus augments the invitation by indicating that after dinner Socrates will be able not only to behold this spectacle, but also to converse with many young people. We will never know how Socrates would have responded on his own, for Glaucon interrupts by saying, "It seems we must stay" (328b).

To sum up: important questions are raised by the brief scene that opens the *Republic*. What is the value of democracy and of diversity? And, what form of authority ought to hold sway in a political community? These questions represent only a small fraction of the extraordinarily rich and complex teachings of the dialogue, teachings that are as much concerned with metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and aesthetic questions as they are with political ones. Nonetheless, they will be used to guide this chapter, for through them we will be

able to glimpse the political theory of Plato's *Republic*. We begin with Socrates' treatment of democracy.

SOCRATES' CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY

Socrates explicitly criticizes democracy in Book 8, but much of what he says there is implicit in earlier books. As such, before beginning our analysis of this passage we must first briefly establish the context of his remarks.

After the opening scene described above, Socrates goes to the home of Polemarchus, where he is greeted warmly by the patriarch, Cephalus. Socrates responds to the old man's cordial invitation to stay in the Piraeus by asking a rather rude question. "For my part, Cephalus, I am really delighted to discuss with the very old. Since they are like men who have proceeded on a certain road that perhaps we too will have to take, one ought, in my opinion, learn from them what sort of road it is – whether it is rough and hard or easy and smooth" (328e). In other words, Socrates is asking, what's it like to be really old and close to death?

Cephalus, a master of parlor talk, is not flustered by this intrusive question, and answers readily. Unlike his fellow seniors, who complain about the debilitating effects of their age, he does not mind growing old. His physical desires have quieted, and he is glad to be liberated from their maddening sting. Furthermore, the way he has lived his life has left him unperturbed at the prospect of his impending death.

Again, Socrates is rude, and he reminds Cephalus that many people would say that he bears his old age so easily, not because of his character or the proper living of his life but because he's rich. Cephalus brushes off this objection and is adamant that it is the quality of his life, not the quantity of his wealth, that has rendered him so cheerful. But Socrates is relentless. He asks him what the greatest benefit is that he has received from his money. Cephalus answers that it is the fact that he has not had to lie to people or to perform any unjust act and that he has been able to pay back all his debts. As a result he fears no punishment in the next life.

The word "unjust" triggers Socrates, and he pounces. "What you say is very fine indeed, Cephalus. But as to this very thing, justice, shall we so simply assert that it is the truth and giving back what a man has taken from another?" (331c).

We can imagine Cephalus stunned. From his rather casual remarks, Socrates has extracted what seems to be a rigorous definition of justice.

Socrates treats the conversation as if he had just asked the old man, "what is justice itself?"; the sort of question for which he is famous. The "what is X?" question seeks the "essence" of X. It looks for a definition that would articulate what X is in a manner that is sufficiently universal to apply to or cover all particular instances of X.

We can imagine the old man even more stunned when immediately after foisting upon him an answer to the question, "what is justice itself?" – an answer Cephalus surely had no intention of providing – Socrates refutes it with the following counterexample. What if you borrowed a knife from a friend, and then the friend became insane? Would it be just to return the weapon to someone who now might wield it dangerously? Probably not. And it might be best, and more just, to lie to your now psychotic friend when he asks you where his knife is. Therefore, Socrates concludes, Cephalus' definition has to be wrong. Justice is not simply telling "the truth and paying back what a man has taken from another" (331c).

This exchange establishes a basic task of the *Republic*: to find out what justice itself really is. Book 1 is devoted to examining, and rejecting, the various candidates proposed by Cephalus, then by his son Polemarchus, and finally by his third and most vocal opponent, a man named Thrasymachus.

Thrasymachus is a Sophist, one of those fifth-century teachers who wandered from Greek city to city hawking their instructional wares. The main item in their repertoire was rhetoric, often defined as the art either of speaking well or of persuasion.⁶ Not surprisingly, Sophists flocked to Athens, which was famous for its tradition of democratic debate, its protection of free speech, and its generally favorable reception of foreign intellectuals. In such a climate, those who were adept at persuasion could go far, and the Sophists promised to supply their students, usually wealthy and ambitious young Athenians (such as Glaucon and Adeimantus), with tools to further their own political aspirations.

Thrasymachus defines justice as "the advantage of the stronger" (338c). He later explains that by "stronger" he means the ruling body (338e). This implies that justice varies from regime to regime. In a tyranny, for example, the ruling body is the tyrant, and what is advantageous to him would be, according to the definition, just. In a democracy, where power is invested in the people (*dēmos*), what is advantageous to the people would be counted as just. Thrasymachus, then, is a relativist.

⁶ A good overview of the Sophistic movement can be found in Guthrie 1988 [1969].

He denies that there is an universal form of justice that would hold sway over all particular instances. Justice is not "absolute" (which comes from the Latin *ab*, "from," and *solvere*, "to loosen"). It does not exist independently of the various political contexts in which it is formulated. Because it varies from regime to regime it is dependent upon, rather than absolved from, the particular regime in which it takes shape.

Socrates is clearly opposed to such relativism. (Indeed, his very question, "what is justice itself?" suggests that there must be some sort of absolute conception of justice.) As a result, he attacks his Sophistic opponent with a barrage of arguments, only one of which (339a-340a) we will sample. Thrasymachus states that justice is what is advantageous to the ruler. Socrates then gets his opponent to agree that because the laws are directives put in place in order to further the advantage of the ruling body, and because there is no higher court of appeal (i.e., because there is no universal or absolute form of justice), it is just for citizens to obey all the laws. Next, he asks Thrasymachus whether the rulers ever make mistakes. Do they ever make laws that are ultimately to their own disadvantage? Thrasymachus answers yes. But because he has already asserted that it is just to obey all laws, only some of which are genuinely advantageous to the ruler, the Sophist is now in the uncomfortable position of having to admit that sometimes it is just for citizens to obey laws, and thus to act in such a way that is disadvantageous to the ruler. He has contradicted himself.

Like many of Socrates' arguments, the merits of this one are debatable, and so it should be carefully scrutinized. But one point emerges clearly: Socrates believes there is a difference between being right and making a mistake. If a ruler, for example, believes it to be to his advantage to levy heavy and oppressive taxes on his subjects, but this proposal so thoroughly infuriates the people that they rebel and overthrow him, then he was wrong in judging what was truly to his advantage. Right and wrong, true and false, are the basic ingredients that go to the heart of the Socratic enterprise.

Thrasymachus is stymied by Socrates, and so he changes tactics. Rather than attempt to refine his definition of justice, he offers an extended praise of injustice, which he describes as "more powerful and more free and more dominating than justice" (344c). Justice, on this view, is for suckers, injustice for those with the wherewithal to take advantage of others. With this tirade the Sophist puts forth a challenge of the highest order: why prefer a life of justice to one of injustice? The remainder of Book 1 is devoted to Socrates' rebuttal of Thrasymachus' position, but it ends with Socrates himself confessing disappointment.

While he has been successful in silencing Thrasymachus, and in this limited sense achieving victory over his Sophistic opponent, he acknowledges that he has failed to answer the very question that sparked the dialogue in the first place: what is justice itself (354b-c)? And without an answer to this question, any debate about the respective merits of the just and the unjust life is premature.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of Book 2 Socrates seems ready to wash his hands of the conversation and to go back home. Once again, Glaucon forces him to stay in the Piraeus. He is eager to pursue the question and to know why he should prefer a life of justice to one of injustice. To press Socrates to go further in his analysis, Glaucon asks him to explain what sort of good justice actually is. Good things, he says, fall into three categories. Some, like harmless pleasures, are desirable for their own sake. Others, like taking an unpleasant medicine, are desirable for their consequences. Finally, some are desirable both for their own sake and for their consequences. Socrates gives the examples of "thinking and seeing and being healthy" (357c). Into which of these three categories does justice fit? Socrates wants to put it in the third, but Glaucon objects. Most people, he says, would count it as a good desirable only for its consequences. In explaining what he means, he offers a simple version of what has come to be known as the social contract theory. On this view, human beings naturally would prefer to do unjust things, like steal their neighbor's property, without being caught or punished. But in advocating this preference, they will have to acknowledge that other people will be authorized to act with similar injustice against them. The condition of mutual injustice would be intolerable, so people opt for a middle path. They make a contract such that citizens bind themselves to laws and thus are no longer free to commit acts of injustice. This requires them to sacrifice the unrestricted ability to do what they wish. But the gain is that they no longer have to fear being acted upon unjustly by others. Political authority will protect them. Justice, on this account, is obeying the law and being protected by it. If such is the way of human life, then the Socratic praise of justice as a supreme good, as one good both for itself and for its consequences, has been blunted.

Glaucon amplifies his challenge by telling Socrates a story. Once upon a time, there was a shepherd named Gyges who stumbled upon a corpse wearing a ring. He stole the ring and discovered that it gave him the power to become invisible. So equipped, he was able to perform with impunity acts of injustice, such as seducing the queen and killing the king. Glaucon's question is this: why should any of us behave justly if we had such a ring and so could perform any unjust action we wished

without being caught? In other words, what intrinsic value does a life of justice have?

To meet this radical challenge to the goodness of justice – a challenge Socrates seems to enjoy (see 367e) – Socrates must come to a full understanding of what justice is. To accomplish this task, he proposes what scholars have come to call the “city-soul analogy” (368c–369a). The city, says Socrates, is like the soul “written large.” It has the same structure as the individual, but because it is bigger it is easier to see. If an ideal, a perfectly just, city could be “constructed,” then what justice itself is, and what a just individual is, would be easier to see. If justice can be seen, then Thrasymachus’ challenge, that it is better to live an unjust life, could be adequately confronted.

Thus begins the massive “construction project” that occupies Socrates from Book 2 through Book 7. At 527c he call his construct “the beautiful city,” and this, rather than the more familiar “ideal city,” is the phrase we shall use throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Finally, we can commence our discussion of Socrates’ critique of democracy, for, as we shall see, the beautiful city is radically undemocratic. Consider some of its most prominent features.

1. The beautiful city deploys a comprehensive censorship program.

Socrates insists that in order to mold a citizenry capable of obeying the dictates of its leaders – dictates that, as we shall discuss shortly, are designed to be entirely rational – all cultural activity must be tightly regulated. Such strictures apply most directly to the myth-makers, the storytellers who supply the city with its basic stock of narrative models. For example, the rulers of the beautiful city will ban the famous story told in Hesiod’s *Theogony* in which the god Cronus overthrows his father Ouranos and usurps his authority (see 378a.). Because this story could be interpreted as justifying an act of rebellion, it is construed as politically dangerous. Compliant and patriotic citizens, who are willing to subordinate the pursuit of their individual interests to the common good of the entire city must, Socrates seems to argue, be shielded from such potentially subversive literary material.

Another example: familiar stories about the afterworld, such as those found in Homer’s *Odyssey*, depict death in horrifying terms. These too will be banned. After all, if citizens believe that death is terrible and thus to be avoided at all costs, they may well be less willing to risk their lives in the defense of their city. (See 386a–388b.)

Because, according to Socrates, music plays a significant role in the psychological formation of the young, it is imperative for the beautiful city to monitor carefully what its citizens are listening to. Only those “modes” (or musical scales) that have a positive effect on listeners will be allowed. The Lydian mode will be forbidden, but the Dorian allowed (399a). Another example: the flute, the instrument traditionally associated with Dionysus, will be outlawed (399d).

To state the obvious: freedom of expression, a basic feature of democratic regimes, is eliminated in the beautiful city.⁷

2. The educational curriculum of future rulers is tightly circumscribed.

Just as the citizens of the beautiful city are allowed to sample only the most politically correct forms of literature, so too is their education severely restricted. As he describes in Book 7, in their youth future rulers are largely confined to the study of mathematics.

3. The beautiful city will permit only a governmentally sanctioned form of religion.

Citizens will be exposed only to certain politically acceptable conceptions of the gods. A myth that depicts a god in an unfavorable light, such as the treatment the tyrannical Ouranos and the rebellious Cronus receive in the *Theogony*, will be banned. Even more extreme, a depiction of the gods as anything but completely stable and unchangingly good will be censored. Clearly, this stricture implies a wholesale rejection of traditional Greek polytheism. (See 380a–383a.)

4. The city will allocate medical care unequally.

In the beautiful city only a small category of infirmities, namely wounds and simple, curable illnesses suffered by the otherwise healthy, will be treated. The chronically ill, the weak, and the very old, will be allowed to die (see 406c–8a.). The purpose of this sort of “Asclepian” (406a) medicine is to return citizens to their civic duties as quickly as possible. Socrates is here brutally hard on the practice of medicine as it occurs

⁷ S. Sara Monoson 2000 has explored at length the central role that “free speech” (*parrhēsia*), which is precisely what Socrates bans in his beautiful city, played in Athenian democracy. See esp. 51–63.

in his own city of Athens. It is, he says, no more than "an education in disease" (406a). (One can only wonder how strong his language would be in evaluating the practice of contemporary medicine.)

5. *A "noble lie" will be told to the citizens.*

It has two parts. The first states that all citizens were born, not from a mother and father, but from the earth itself. Their filial obligations, therefore, should be directed at the city, not at the individual human beings they identify as blood relations. According to the logic of the lie, all citizens are siblings, and therefore in the beautiful city not only interests, but pains and pleasures, are experienced communally. Socrates seems to justify this extremely non-democratic measure on the basis of its positive political consequences. Solidarity among citizens will be fostered, rebellion and factionalism curtailed, and in general the individuals will come to understand their own interests as identical to those of the city.

The second part of the lie is that all citizens were born with a certain metal in their souls. Some are gold, others silver, and the worst are bronze (or iron). In other words, the noble lie promulgates the view that the city has an unalterable, tripartite class structure. Once again, political stability is the justification for telling such a lie. If all citizens believe that their place in the city is fixed, with no hope of change, there would be no motivation to press for a radical alteration in the power structure.

Again to state the obvious: egalitarianism is not a value in the beautiful city. It is a top-down authoritarian regime in which rulers impose a severe hierarchy and all sorts of restrictions upon the freedom of the citizens.

6. *Private property will be abolished.*

In the beautiful city the rulers will "have common houses and mess, with no one privately possessing anything of the kind" (458c; See also 419a).

7. *The family will be abolished.*

Not only property, but all sexual relationships will also be rendered communal. As Socrates puts it, "the possession of women, marriage,

and procreation of children must as far as possible be arranged according to the proverb that friends have all things in common" (423e).

8. *The rulers will practice eugenics.*

Included in Socrates' telling of the "noble lie" is this admonition:

Hence the god commands the rulers first and foremost to be of nothing such good guardians and to keep over nothing so careful a watch as the children, seeing which of these metals is mixed in their souls. And, if a child of theirs should be born with an admixture of bronze or iron, by no manner of means are they to take pity on it, but shall assign the proper value to its nature and thrust it out among the craftsmen. . . . (415c)

As the dialogue unfolds, this rather chilling proposal gradually evolves into a full-blown program of eugenics. First, individuals are deprived of the right to choose their own sexual partners, and as mentioned previously the family itself is abolished (see 457d). Then we discover that gold-souled people are allowed to breed only with those whose metallic souls are equally golden.

[T]here is a need for the best men to have intercourse as often as possible with the best women, and the reverse for the most ordinary men with the most ordinary women; and the offspring of the former must be reared but not that of the others, if the flock is going to be of the most eminent quality. (459d)

At the beginning of Book 8 we learn that the rulers of the city have attempted to develop a mathematical science whose province is "better and worse begettings" (546c); in other words, a mathematically based science of eugenics. Although this program fails (and this failure, to be discussed in the third section of this chapter, *Monkey Wrenches*, is of utmost importance for an understanding of the *Republic*), it signals a fundamental objective of the beautiful city – to sublimate or redirect all private desire, especially sexual desire, toward the well-being of the city.

To sum up: in the putatively beautiful city the good of the community reigns supreme and all individual interests and desires are subordinated to it. A rigidly unequal class structure is in place, and a technical

apparatus is designed to preserve it. The city is authoritarian rather than democratic. It must be added, however, that the putative source of the rulers' authority is not in their power or their ability to threaten violence, but in their superior knowledge. The best way to elaborate this dimension of the *Republic* is to turn to a parable Socrates offers in Book 6, the ship of state.

Imagine that the city is a ship. The ship-owner is big and strong, but also deaf, myopic, and ignorant of seamanship. As a result, control of the rudder – in other words, who actually pilots the ship – is up for grabs. (The Greek for “pilot” is *kubernētēs*, the origin of our “governor.”) Even though they are as ignorant as the owner, the sailors of the ship compete with one another for this power. Eventually, by using any means necessary, from persuasion to throwing their competitors overboard, a victor emerges. He becomes pilot, but his abilities have nothing to do with sailing the ship well. Instead, he is good only at winning the competition for power.

In direct contrast to the actual pilot, there is the “true pilot,” the one who has studied astronomy, meteorology, navigational techniques, and so forth. Such a man could in fact expertly sail the ship toward its destination, but he will never have the opportunity to do so, for his knowledge of seamanship is useless in the competition for the rudder. The true pilot must tilt his head upward to study the stars in order to learn how to navigate well. He is thus singularly ill-suited to engage in the competition taking place on board the ship between his fellow human beings. The sailor who does eventually win the rudder keeps his gaze level, and so knows how to navigate through, and then triumph in, the fracas taking place on board the ship.

This parable paints a dismal picture of “real world” politics – the ship of state is doomed to be piloted badly – and highlights an essential feature of the teaching of the *Republic*. The beautiful city must invert the standard relationship that typically obtains between political power and knowledge, for it must be guided not by someone capable only of gaining power, but by a “true pilot” who knows where the city should go and how it can get there. The various non-democratic features listed previously are meant to create the conditions from which such a ruler can emerge. Furthermore, the principal task of Books 6 and 7 is to explain what it is that the ruler, the true pilot, actually knows. This is far and away the most conceptually difficult material of the *Republic*, for here we learn that the true pilot must be a philosopher. In these sections Socrates discusses his notoriously obscure teaching of the “idea of the good,” the supreme principle of knowledge and being. It is impossible

in a short essay even to begin discussing what this is. Suffice it to say here that it is the ultimate content of the true pilot's knowledge. As mentioned before, in Book 7, Socrates sketches the rigidly precise course of study that his rulers must undergo. When they are done, they are ready to take control of the city and rule it by knowledge, not opinion. Such a city is a far cry from a democracy, in which superior rhetoric, rather than superior knowledge, is the essential requirement for ruling.

In Book 8, Socrates begins a second stage of his political analysis, namely, a critique of what he calls the “mistaken regimes.” These are the sorts of regimes one might actually find in the real world and include the timocracy, rule by the honorable few (which seems to resemble Sparta); oligarchy, rule by the wealthy few; democracy, rule by the many; and tyranny, rule by the tyrant. Most relevant here, of course, is his discussion of democracy.

The most basic feature of a democracy is the freedom enjoyed by its citizens and protected by the city. “Isn't the city full of freedom and free speech?” Socrates asks. “And isn't there license in it to do whatever one wants” (557b)? Within the limits imposed by laws and strictures forged by the people themselves in their Assembly, citizens can act on their desires. They can choose their professions, sexual partners, and preferred forms of cultural activity. They can accumulate wealth. In direct contrast to the austerity of the beautiful city, in the democracy there is an “unleashing of unnecessary and useless pleasures” (561a).

There are three important corollaries to this affirmation of freedom. First is the protection of privacy. As Socrates puts it, in the democracy, “each man would organize his life in it privately just as it pleases him” (557b). Most important, there is no “compulsion to rule” (557e). Again in direct contrast to the beautiful city, where the best and most competent citizens are forced to rule, democratic citizens are free to ignore and not to participate in political affairs.⁸ Second, a democracy dispenses “a certain equality to equals and unequals alike” (558c). In other words, because all citizens are counted as members of the *dēmos* and alike share in the freedoms the city protects for them, they are counted as equals whether they are superior, mediocre, or inferior human beings. Third, there is a flowering of diversity. Enjoying the freedom and egalitarianism protected by their city, citizens can live

⁸ I refer to the “parable of the cave” that Socrates recounts in Book 7. Here he explains that the philosopher will be “forced” (519c) to return to the cave to rule the citizens trapped therein.

according to their own conception of a good life and pursue an endless variety of projects, from the arts, to commerce, to science, to athletics. They are free to travel and thus to bring home with them what they have learned abroad. As a result, Socrates describes the democracy as being "like a many-colored cloak decorated in all hues . . . with all dispositions" (557c).

Socrates encapsulates his criticism of the democracy by describing what he takes to be its typical citizen. He is "reared . . . without education" (559d), and thus is vulnerable to the lures of an unlimited number of "unnecessary desires" (558d). He

lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it's money-makers, in that one. And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout. (561c-d)

The picture Socrates sketches is of a whimsical and impressionable man bereft of any firm convictions. (Although do note that he does participate in philosophy, however inauthentically.) Such a citizen is instinctively hostile to any form of authority. In a democracy, children resist their parents' admonitions, students intimidate their teachers, slaves and women run free, and the exuberantly free citizen "spatters with mud those who are obedient" (562d). The result is chaos.

To summarize again: Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates constructs and seems to champion a "beautiful city" that is authoritarian (even if its authority is well grounded in reason), contains a brutal attack on democracy. Little wonder then that a famous twentieth-century scholar, Karl Popper, who lived through the horrors of the totalitarian threats of his own age, passionately condemned what he took to be the teaching of the *Republic*. Speaking about a Plato scholar named James Adam, he said the following: "we see that Plato has succeeded at least in turning this thinker against democracy, and we may wonder how much damage his poisonous writing has done when presented, unopposed,

to lesser minds." For Popper, "Plato's political programme . . . is fundamentally identical with [totalitarianism]," and as such he was the great opponent of individualism. He was a reactionary who rejected "the emancipation of the individual" that resulted from "the great spiritual revolution which had led to the breakdown of tribalism and to the rise of democracy" in the fifth century B.C.E. "Never," says Popper, "was a man more in earnest in his hostility toward the individual," and toward democracy.⁹

MONKEY WRENCHES

Karl Popper's enormous distaste for Plato's *Republic* may appear well founded, but in fact it entirely neglects an essential feature of the dialogue. Plato is a genius at throwing a monkey wrench into what initially seems to be a smoothly functioning piece of conceptual machinery, thereby transforming it into something far more puzzling and provocative. This section will explain how he does this when it comes to his apparently straightforward criticisms of democracy and diversity, for there are at least five ways in which Plato qualifies, seems to revise, or at least complicate, his views.

(1) *The beautiful city fails.*

And for one specific reason: its putatively wise rulers turn out not to be so wise after all. They fail to determine what scholars call "the marriage number," a phrase that refers to an obscure passage at the beginning of Book 8. Here Socrates tells us that despite their best efforts, the rulers are unable to calculate the "geometrical number" that is "sovereign of better and worse begettings" (546c). In other words, they fail to determine the mathematically precise science of eugenics mentioned previously. As a result, there is a "chaotic mixing of iron with silver and of bronze with gold" (547a), and the dream of a stable and perfectly stratified city, all of whose citizens do the job assigned to them without complaint and who thus live together in peace and harmony, will be shattered.¹⁰

⁹ Popper 1971. The citations come from 42, 87, 101, and 103.

¹⁰ The rulers' inability to calculate the marriage number is a major theme of Roochnik 2004. See esp. 68-69.

It is impossible here to decipher the mathematics of this passage, but what the number symbolizes is clear: the human effort to manage human reproduction through mathematical science. The inability of the rulers to achieve this power over the citizenry implies that, smart as they supposedly are, they cannot comprehend the complexities of sexuality. This passage thus acknowledges that there is something buried deep within human nature that simply cannot be controlled. In turn, this implies that Socrates himself realizes that the dream of a beautifully rational city, one thoroughly harmonious and free from internal strife and senseless war, cannot be realized.

(2) *The conditions required for the beautiful city to come into being are unacceptable.*

One example will suffice. As a culminating requirement for the city to come into being Socrates proposes that the rulers "send out to the country all those in the city who happen to be older than ten" (541a). It is possible that Socrates is being euphemistic here and what he really means is that everyone over the age of ten will be killed. Regardless, the logic of this proposal is painfully apparent. The beautiful city is completely revolutionary, for it requires a comprehensive alteration of conventional politics. Eliminating all citizens over the age of ten gives the rulers the clean slate they need in order to construct a new, thoroughly rational city.

Whether the phrase "send out to the country" means "kill" or not, this proposal is both absurd and monstrous. Therefore, in having Socrates offer it, Plato is either seriously advocating an absurd monstrosity, or is suggesting precisely the opposite; namely, that the requirements for a beautiful city to come into being are unacceptable. If the latter is true, then the purpose of the *Republic* is not to offer a blueprint of a perfectly just city, but instead to criticize political extremism and the ambition to create a rationalized heaven on earth.

(3) *Socrates' goal in the dialogue may be to educate individuals.*

Socrates says that rather than being a political program, the true intention of the beautiful city may be to educate individuals. He says this in response to Glaucon's epiphany that the city he has just helped to construct may in fact be impossible to realize. As Glaucon puts it, "it

has its place only in speeches, since I don't suppose it exists anywhere on earth" (592a-b). Socrates agrees:

But in heaven, I said, perhaps, a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn't make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other. (592b)

As in (2) above, this passage undermines the notion that the *Republic* presents a blueprint for the sort of totalitarian regime that Popper took it to be. In fact, the dialogue may be engaged in an entirely different sort of project, one whose goal is to help an individual "found a city within himself." To explicate exactly what this means is impossible in this chapter. Suffice it to say here that the true goal of Plato's dialogue may be to provide a philosophical education designed for individuals, rather than a political program suitable for cities.¹¹

(4) *What Socrates explicitly says about democracy is actually somewhat ambiguous.*

The most important example occurs in the midst of Socrates' apparent denunciation of the diversity that springs to life in a democracy: "Thanks to its license, [the democracy] contains all species of regimes, and it is probably necessary for the man who wishes to organize a city, *as we were just doing*, to go to a city under democracy" (557d; emphasis added).

The very activity that has just taken place in the *Republic* itself – namely, philosophizing about politics – could probably only occur in a regime that permits and protects freedom of speech and allows its citizens unrestricted access to a diversity of human types. And this is the democracy. So, while Socrates is surely serious in his critique of democracy, he nonetheless acknowledges that this regime has a unique virtue. Because of its commitment to equality and freedom, all sorts of human beings are allowed to flourish. Because the streets are alive and the theaters packed and citizens disagree with one another in public, philosophers in a democratic city have in front of them an enormous

¹¹ Again, I have tried to explain what this means at length in my book, *Roochnik* 2004.

resource. From the city they can learn much about human nature, in all its polymorphous perversity, and wonder what, in fact, would be the most just of all possible regimes for such creatures.¹²

The political teaching of the *Republic* thus resembles that found in another Platonic dialogue, the *Statesman*. Here a Stranger from Elea argues that while in principle there is only one legitimate form of political authority, that founded upon knowledge and reason, in the "real world" there are a variety of "second-best" regimes. Among these is the democracy. While it is pilloried as rule by ignorance (292e) and therefore "absurd," "difficult to conceive," and "ruinous" (298e–299e), it is nonetheless not unequivocally condemned. Because a democracy splinters into competing factions, it is a weak and inefficient form of government (303a). But this precisely tokens its unique virtue: it is least burdensome on the citizens and so, especially in the chaotic conditions that so often obtain in political life, it is least offensive and damaging. It is, in short, the best of the worst regimes precisely because it lets people, including (perhaps especially) the philosopher, alone.

(5) *The "Myth of Er" seems to offer a defense of diversity.*

Despite his repeated attacks on poetry, the *Republic* ends with Socrates telling an eschatological myth.¹³ Twelve days after he was killed in battle, a man named Er returns to life to report "what he saw in the other world" (614b). It's a complicated place, but the features relevant for our purpose can be briefly summarized. After death, good people are rewarded with a thousand years of pleasure and bad people a thousand years of misery. When their millennium of divinely sanctioned retribution has been completed, the souls are required to choose their lives for their next go-around on earth. "The whole risk for a human being" lies in being able to make this choice correctly, for its consequences will last another millennium. Socrates admonishes his listeners: "[E]ach of us must, to the neglect of our other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life" (618c).

The order in which the souls select their next life is based on a lottery, but Er reports that even if one chooses last – as Odysseus does in

¹² Monoson makes much of this passage as well. See, for example, Monoson 2000: 167. Also see Saxonhouse 1996: 102, for expression of a similar sentiment.

¹³ There are similar myths at the end of the *Phaedo* and the *Gorgias*.

this story – it is still possible to make a good decision. The reason for this is that "there were all sorts" of lives to choose from and their number are "far more than the souls present" (618a). As such, the greatest asset in making this choice well is a wide familiarity with a large number of different sorts of lives. Little wonder, then, that despite his bad luck in the lottery, Odysseus, the most widely traveled man of all, and so the one most familiar with the variety of forms that human being can take, chooses well. And notice what choice he made: "the life of a private man who minds his own business" (620c).

To reformulate this point: because the number of possible lives exceeds the number of actual ones, the Myth of Er suggests that human beings are always in a position to be surprised, and perhaps even instructed, by the way someone else lives. As a result, we can never be completely certain that the way we live is the best available to us. If we couple this aspect of the Myth with the opening scene of the *Republic*, which finds Socrates traveling to the Piraeus to see a new religious festival and admiring the show put on by the foreign Thracians, we see that the dialogue both begins and ends with an implicit affirmation of diversity. In order to choose our lives well and to engage in political philosophy, we must be exposed to a variety of human types. For only doing so will afford us access to the sort of knowledge that Odysseus has. Only doing so will allow us to engage in the philosophical activity that is the *Republic* itself.

One last point about the Myth of Er: as Socrates tells the story, the man who had won the lottery and so was first in line to choose his next life was someone who had "lived in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, *without philosophy*" (619c–d, my emphasis). As a result, and despite being first, his choice was catastrophic. Seduced by the apparent power and glory he thought it would bring him, he selected the life of a tyrant. Unfortunately, in doing so "it escaped his notice that eating his own children and other evils were fated to be a part of that life" (619c). In other words, without philosophy, we are doomed.

CONCLUSION

Only now can the title of this chapter be explained. Rather than containing a political theory, the *Republic* is a political drama, for within its pages lies a conflict. On the one hand, Socrates seems to champion an authoritarian and radically anti-democratic regime. He constructs a

city that denies the citizens individual rights and basic freedoms, puts into place a rigid class system, and attempts to control all aspects of literary and musical culture, religion, and education. It is crucial, however, to remember, and easy to forget, that the *Republic* contains more than Books 2–7, more than the construction of the putatively beautiful city. It also includes Books 1 and 8–10, sections that are typically assigned far less weight by scholars.¹⁴ A careful reading of these books, which include the opening scene, the failure of the rulers to find the marriage number, Socrates' ambiguous characterization of democracy, and several passages that can be read as affirmations of the goodness of diversity, significantly complicates the teaching of the dialogue.

The city Socrates constructs is indeed beautiful in some respects. Most of all, it is at peace with itself. It is a city in which the smartest people rule, and they do so for the good of the city rather than to further their own political ambitions. Unlike the Athens of 404 B.C.E., it does not tear itself apart into bloody shreds. Compared to such a regime, democracy looks pitifully inefficient and chaotic. Like the individual described at 561c, it is subject to the whims of those leaders whose only talent is in persuading the citizens to follow their lead. Decisions are made recklessly, the voters are fickle and selfish, and the city is run by opinion rather than knowledge. Nevertheless, Socrates is far from unequivocal in condemning the democracy or in championing the beautiful city. The cost of constructing the latter, most notably the requirement that all over the age of ten must be killed, may be far too high, and the technical devices needed for maintaining control, such as the "marriage number," are in fact impossible to attain.

In sum, then, the *Republic* expresses a tension. It acknowledges the benefits of the beautiful city, but questions its costs. It denounces the excesses of the democracy, but tacitly points to its advantages, especially for the philosopher. It is precisely this tension, this internal dialogue with itself, that renders the *Republic* a work of enduring value. It forces its readers to wonder about justice, the city, and the question of political authority, and it sets into motion a series of responses, both positive and negative, that becomes the history of political philosophy itself.

¹⁴ For example, Gregory Vlastos 1991: 248–51, argues that Book 1 is out of character with the rest of the *Republic* because it was written earlier. Julia Annas 1982: 294, dismisses Books 8 and 9 by saying that they "have been admired for their literary power, but they leave a reader who is intent on the main argument unsatisfied and irritated. Plato's procedure is both confusing and confused."

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