

Plato's *Republic*: Just Society or Totalitarian State?

In the *Republic* Plato lays out his analogy between the city and the individual soul and identifies personal happiness with public justice. With reason as the highest value, and the philosopher king as the embodiment of reason in the city, Plato proposes a political state that, despite its ostensible argument for justice and the good, has been criticized as anti-democratic, anti-humanitarian, anti-individualistic, and in short, totalitarian. What is it in Plato's argument that evokes such hostile criticism? Is Plato's vision for a good society incompatible with real justice itself? Does Plato arbitrarily define the word "justice" to suit his own political aims? Can we claim, at the very least, as Stanley Rosen does in *Plato's Republic: A Study* that, whereas the principles themselves are defensible, the attempt to realize them in actual political associations leads to the replacement of philosophy by ideology? In this essay I will attempt to answer these questions by exploring Plato's key concepts of justice, the good, and reason in the context of the few institutions he describes, that of education, leadership, and to a lesser extent family and labor. And I will conclude with a reflection on whether or not the set of arguments Socrates (and thus Plato) employs in the *Republic* is simply a "dramatic portrait of people conversing about the connection between justice and the good" in the construction of the ostensibly just city, as Rosen asserts (2), or if indeed, as Popper contends, it constitutes a political manifesto for class rule and tyranny.

In Book I Plato lays open the issue of justice by asking Thrasymachus what the nature and quality of justice is and how it can be compared to that of injustice (I. 351a). By approaching the topic of justice from its opposite, injustice, which he equates with dissension, quarrels and factions, Plato immediately sets up his connection between justice and unity and lays the ground for his analogy between the individual soul and the city. If it is injustice which has the power to set any group of people in the city "at variance and make them enemies to each other" (I. 351e), as well as to cause an individual to "have a divided mind and be incapable of action," indeed, "to be at enmity with all who are just as well as with himself" (I. 352a), then Plato deduces that justice must be the opposite of such a divisive force. Justice must be unity, harmony, complete agreement among the parts, whether of the city or of the individual soul.

Having grounded his concept of justice in unity, Plato proceeds to prescribe the element which will ensure that unity and, by extension, justice. For Plato, the crucial thing is the recognition of a person's or a thing's function. Explaining that "a thing's function is the work that it alone can do, or can do better than anyone else" (I. 353a) Plato is able to apply the concept not only to the individual in the city but also to the various parts of the soul, thereby allowing him to develop his analogy in Book II and more extensively in Book IV.

Plato devotes the opening of Book II to a discussion of the origin of the state and does so to show how his concept of justice is necessary. The state, Plato explains, "comes into existence because no individual is self-sufficing" but rather a member of one of the various classes which supplies needs to one another (II. 369b). As a member of a specific class, each individual possesses a specific function for which he is naturally fitted and, according to Plato, "he would do good work if he confined himself to that all his life" (II. 374c). In Book IV, Plato drives home this theory of justice and insists upon adherence to what Nicholas White, in *A Companion to Plato's Republic*, calls the "Principle of Natural Division" (17). For Plato there are only three classes of people in the city, the golden Rulers, the silver Guardians or Auxiliaries, and the bronze or iron tradesmen, or as Rosen categorizes them, the philosopher/ruler, the soldier, and the money-making partisan/worker (396). Justice relies on each class performing its proper function. So rigid is Plato about this principle that he goes so far as to say that where there are

three orders, “any plurality of functions or shifting from one order to another is . . . utterly harmful” and “the extreme of wrongdoing” (IV. 434c).

Whereas Plato does mention three orders, what he really is interested in is the upper class composed of the Guardians and the Rulers, some of whom, as in Aristotle’s ideal society, perform their function in the former class until reaching the age where they might move into the latter. How the establishment and rigid maintenance of such a class system promotes a good state is, again, grounded in the unity that will result from members of this class maintaining an exclusive right to membership, and by a strict separation of it from the lower class of artisans, tradesmen and farmers. To further ensure this unity, Plato proposes the radical proposition of a communal life for the class of Guardians in which wives and children are to be held in common. In such a system, with the aim of keeping the number of marriages constant and the quality of the citizenry high, all marriages between “the best of both sexes” would be regulated by the state and the offspring selectively culled to weed out the inferior, or as Plato puts it, this must be done “if the breed of our Guardians is to be kept pure” (V. 460c). Though he ostensibly includes women in the privileges of this class, and suggests that women of the same type must “share in the life and duties of the Guardians with men of the same type” (V. 456b), to facilitate as many of the best unions possible he promotes a kind of rigged lottery system whereby young men who perform well are given “more liberal opportunities to sleep with a wife” (V. 460a-c). Plato believes that such a system whereby every citizen is made “a brother or sister, father or mother, son or daughter, grandparent or grandchild” of another, where in fact wives and children become “communal property,” will require them to behave as a real family and to have the interest of the commonwealth at heart. They will thus “be free of quarrels and dissensions arising from ownership of property and family ties” (V. 462c - 464d). Even if we dismiss our qualms that the natural human disposition towards personal possessions and affection based on blood ties would make such an arrangement practically impossible, again, Plato’s design only applies to the higher classes of society. We are left to assume, then, that the class in which he lumps the artisans, tradesmen, farmers, and others who must labor for a living will continue to follow the traditional system of marriage and family life.

Plato’s failure to address the desires and satisfaction of the lower class opens up problems with his supposedly ideal society. As White observes, we know more about the psychology and motivations of the rulers and Guardians than we do of the members of the other classes of citizens. Not only do we lack any idea of their daily lives other than that they will perform their function for the good of the whole, we have no idea of their motivation to do so. Plato’s harmonious society is thus one in which basic needs are provided for by classes of people who agree to be ruled but who are “given no credit for a full understanding of the principles on which the society is based” (White 59). Can we really claim, then, that such a society based on the perfunctory fulfillment of functions and blind adherence to what amounts to social doctrine is really happy or good as a whole?

Although Plato does not give the same detailed account of how unity and harmony are to be maintained in the lower class of tradesmen, it is assumed, then, that there is a kind of “trickle down effect” and that each citizen in the entire system will know his place and stay put there. This assumption allows Plato to continue with his analogy between the city and the individual soul. He does this by first listing the four qualities necessary in the State: wisdom, courage, temperance and, as the underlying principle for all, justice. Wisdom is that quality which stems from the knowledge possessed only by the Guardians and Rulers and which allows for the best possible conduct of the state; courage is that which allows the Guardians to make the correct

decisions about what to fear and what not to fear; and temperance, “being a kind of orderliness, a control of certain pleasures and appetites” is that presumably necessary to keep the lower class in order. Plato asserts that “there will be no difference between a just man and a just society” and in the same way that a society is just when each of the three types of human character performs its own function, the individual will be a just person, which is synonymous with fulfilling his function, only if the three parts of his soul or nature fulfill theirs. These three parts, the rational, the spirited element, and the appetite, correspond to the Ruler, the Guardian, and the tradesman respectively. The soul, mirroring the city, will be a unity and enjoy justice when each part exercises its proper function of ruling or being ruled. Thus, Reason must rule with wisdom, Spirit will employ courage and do battle for Reason and temperance and justice will result. (IV. 435b – 442d). This analogy is hard to follow to its supposedly logical end. It is evident, again, that the lower class has no real function in connection with temperance, other than being subordinate to the Rulers and Guardians. Rosen puts his finger on the problem when he observes that the residents of the city seem to have a tripartite soul as persons but a unified soul as citizens. Thus, the worker class must be “isomorphic to the component of desire in the individual citizen”, and accordingly the Rulers and Guardians follow suit with their components of reason and courage. The individual citizen is thus not a harmony but a unity (396).

Because Reason is supreme in Plato’s city, and because rule requires a rarefied knowledge of the Good in its Ideal Form, a particular kind of ruler is called for, one in which political power and philosophy meet. This is the philosopher king who, possessing a passion for wisdom and the truth, can transcend belief in mere appearances and contemplate the realities or Ideal Forms themselves. He is one who can apprehend the highest kind of knowledge, the essential nature of the Good.

Plato uses two analogies to try to help us understand his Ideas. In the first he equates the Good to the sun. In the same way that the sun is the source of light and that which makes vision possible, the Good is the source of Knowledge and of Truth; it is that “which gives to the objects of knowledge their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing” (VI. 508e). Plato then moves to a discussion of the two orders of things, the visible and the intelligible, and the four states of mind – imagining, belief, discursive thinking, and knowledge - which are “assigned a degree of clearness and certainty corresponding to the measure in which their objects possess truth and reality” (VI. 509d - 511e).

The second analogy Plato employs by which he explains the degree to which one may be enlightened, or not, is that of the cave. We are asked to imagine a prisoner who first sees only shadows cast by a flickering flame, who then sees the fire itself, who once released sees reflections of objects in a pool, and finally who sees the actual objects and the sun itself. This is meant to illustrate man’s intellectual development. First we imagine, then we believe in that which we can see; arriving at a higher mental state we can think about abstractions of mathematical objects; finally we can possess knowledge of the Forms themselves, in particular the Form of Goodness. Because this Form is not only the cause of whatever is good and right, indeed, the parent of intelligence and truth, but also the most difficult to perceive, access to power must be confined to the philosophers, for only they, being able to contemplate a vision of this Form, can act with the wisdom required “to watch over and care for the other citizens” (VII. 520b). The fact that those who do reach this level, by nature of their intellectual and moral superiority, will be reluctant to hold this power, is only further evidence of their exclusive fitness to rule (VII. 531b).

Despite Plato’s emphasis on philosophy, wisdom, reason, and the Good, it is very difficult

to ignore the extremist overtones of the *Republic*. Through his mouthpiece, Socrates, Plato makes it clear, as Rosen points out, “that the rule of wisdom is tyrannical, and that it cannot tolerate words or deeds, laws or traditional institutions” or “political theories that impinge upon its rule” (5). Though he advocates for the entrance of philosophy into the city as an instrument for its transformation, a transformation that will contribute to the enrichment of human life, the resulting philosophical society Plato envisions is a closed one. While it may protect its citizens from the sickness which plagues the human soul, while it may even be just, it is one that is too strict to be adopted by human beings (Rosen 8-9). Indeed, one must question even the suggestion that it may be just. As we have seen, justice for Plato is very narrowly defined, consisting as it does in the strict adherence to White’s “Natural Division of Labor” and to the rule of Reason in the soul. Though Plato can contend, if not provide actual evidence that such a justice would result in a good city in that it a) ministers to the needs of its citizens; b) provides for cohesiveness and unity; and c) provides the necessary stability to ensure this cohesiveness and unity (422a – 424b), can we accept that this is what constitutes justice? However noble Plato’s intent, and Rosen does give credit to Plato for making “the extreme case for philosophical justice,” a justice which “is not the same for philosophers and non-philosophers alike,” (or more accurately, which is not the same for “non-Platonic philosophers” as for the rest of us altogether), because Plato’s justice requires the rule of those who see the pure Ideas in their original Form, it requires not only the manipulation of ethical concepts but also the use of rhetoric and force in order to persuade those who cannot see the ideas. It follows then that philosophy itself under such a construct loses its original meaning and becomes ideology. (Rosen 390).

Whereas White finds room to justify Plato’s “transcendence” of these meanings, Popper is unsparing in his criticism of such manipulation of meaning. For Popper, Plato identifies justice with the principle of class rule and class privilege. In his article “Plato as Enemy of the Open Society,” (consisting of major portions of chapters 6, 7, and 8 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*) Popper claims that Plato uses the word “just” as a synonym for “that which is in the best interest of the state,” that being “to arrest all change by the maintenance of a rigid class division and class rule” (45). Because for Plato, “the state is just if the ruler rules, if the worker works, and if the slave slaves,” he is distorting the word “just” to mean class privilege, while what we ordinarily mean by justice, according to Popper, is the absence of such privilege (46). Popper dismisses the idea that justice meant something different to the Greeks than it does to us and maintains that for them it had the same individualistic and equalitarian usage that it holds for us (47). In fact, it is Plato’s hostility towards the principle of equalitarianism that motivates his intentional misappropriation of the word. As Popper so adamantly puts it, “Equalitarianism was his arch-enemy and he was out to destroy it . . . in the sincere belief that it was a great evil and a great danger” (48). In this context, it is not surprising then that Plato never discusses the theory of equality before the law, of *isonomia* (49), though as Popper points out *isonomia* was clearly a theory underlying the equalitarian principle espoused by such men such as Pericles, Euripides, Antiphon, and Lycophrone (50). Nor, as Rosen observes, is there any discussion of the laws of the just city. Plato’s only principle of political organization rests on a justice equated to unity imposed on, not realized by, the parts that make up society.

If Plato takes liberties with his use of the word “justice,” so too does he give his own interpretation to virtue and the good. Plato’s exclusive notion of the Good is also at odds with contemporary uses of the word; as White points out, Plato does not recognize other customary meanings such as that connoting benefit to a person; the idea of moral goodness applicable to

people; or the notions of excellence or perfection, the “goodness-of-a-thing’s-kind” (46-47). Nor does he establish the practical value of the intuition of pure Ideas and the Good (Rosen 392). Only unity and stability, for the city as for the individual soul, are connected with being good. Popper, too, takes Plato to task for his limited definition of the word “good.” He finds Plato’s analogy of the Good to the sun as nothing but “empty formalism”; that is, he does not give a precise or rich definition of what it means to be good, and he criticizes Plato’s failure to discuss which deeds are good or produce good (92). He sees in Plato’s recognition of only one ultimate standard, the interest of the state, what Popper calls Plato’s “collectivist moral code,” objectionable not only because it is introduced without any seeming relation to Plato’s Idea of the Good, but also because its function is only to further Plato’s political end. Indeed, Popper sees it as evidence of Plato’s totalitarian treatment of personal ethics. Everything that furthers the state is good, virtuous, and just; everything that threatens it is bad, wicked, and unjust. If even individual actions are categorized by this single condition, if only those that serve the state are moral whereas those that endanger it are immoral, then, as Popper concludes, “the criterion of morality is the state” (63). Thus in Plato’s ideal city, even lying is good if it provides for the unity of the state. This clearly is a flaw for what is ethical cannot simply be defined as that which provides for the unity or stability of the whole.

The crucial problem in this is one rooted in a theme to which Popper returns again and again in his criticism of Plato, collectivism versus individualism. Just as Popper sees an enmity towards individualism and individual freedom as the basis of Plato’s anti-equalitarian stance, so too does he identify it as the foundation of Plato’s skewed interpretation of ethical terms. For Popper, Plato’s morality is the collectivist, i.e., tribal or totalitarian theory of morality. As he puts it, “If the individual is nothing but a cog, then ethics is nothing but the study of how to fit him into the whole” (64). Clearly Popper is writing from a twentieth century perspective influenced by what he sees as the devastating effects of anti-humanitarian collectivist movements such as the Fascists, the Nazis and the Communists on individual freedom. He does not give credit to Plato for contrasting his ideal city with the political evils that he did have experience of and which he discusses in Book VIII. For Plato, his rulers are, unlike tyrants and dictators and in contrast to the timocratic, oligarchic and bad democratic governments, benevolent and truly concerned with the commonwealth. Yet, Popper does temper his critique by admitting that Plato’s so-called totalitarianism, in that its ideal was not the maximum exploitation of working classes by the upper class but the stability of the whole, was sincere. Nonetheless, for Popper, it still amounts to amorality based not on individual selfishness but on collective selfishness. It is the immorality of the closed society, of the group, of the tribe (64). It is collectivism and collectivism, for Popper, is evil.

It is interesting at this point to outline, and counter, the main criteria for Popper’s claim of “Platonic totalitarianism” in the *Republic* and to see how they apply to Plato’s conceptualization of leadership and education. Popper cites three principles, all of which are starkly in contrast to a humanitarian theory of justice: a) the principle of natural privilege, as opposed to the elimination of such under humanitarianism; b) the general principle of holism or collectivism, as opposed to individualism; and c) the principle that it should be the task or purpose of the individual to maintain and strengthen the stability of the state, rather than the reverse, i.e., that it is the state’s purpose to protect the freedom of its citizens (50). We have already seen how the second and third principles, which are closely connected, are supported in Plato’s city; his insistence that the unity of the state is primary, and his prescriptive that all citizens should fulfill their natural function in the interest of the preservation and well-being of the commonwealth align neatly with

these principles.

As for the first principle, that of natural privilege, as was mentioned earlier, Plato is primarily concerned with the upper class of Guardians, some of whom will eventually ascend to philosopher-kings and, on the surface, it seems reasonable to propose that the best or the wisest, naturally a member of this class, should rule. But Popper attacks the very assumption underlying the idea that one is naturally suited to rule, or even that political power is essentially sovereign. On the first point Popper cites history, saying that “rulers have rarely been above the average either morally or intellectually” and that “while we can attempt to obtain the best, we must prepare for the worst” (68). On the second point, Popper argues that accepting the question “Who should rule?” as fundamental assumes that political power is unchecked, which of course means it is authoritarian and thus, in Poppers estimation, unacceptable. Rather than come at the question of leadership this way, Popper proposes a new question: “How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?” (66). The biggest difference between Plato and Popper here is that Popper’s question assumes the worst and is therefore negative and defensive. And, given Plato’s discussion concerning rule by tyrants and dictators, and by less desirable governments, it is not unrealistic to imagine that Plato did have something like Popper’s question in mind when he devised his own style of political leadership. His contention that a wise, just and good leader is really possible would preclude rule by incompetent or immoral leaders. That he just comes at it in a positive, idealistic, and prescriptive vein may, however, not be enough to counter Popper’s claims, especially when we consider the alarming proposition that the rulers will rise exclusively from the class of Guardians, a class indoctrinated to use force to preserve the state.

There is another issue connected to that of class, however, in Popper’s criticism of Plato’s leadership by the wise. What he objects to the most is what he sees as Plato’s corruption of the Socratic ideal of intellectual humility and honesty, of seeking the truth rather than possessing it, of open inquiry and democratic access. For Popper, Socrates’ “best” leader is the intellectually honest leader; for Plato, it is the most learned or the most noble, and thus either authoritarian or aristocratic, or both (75). It is hard to dismiss Popper’s argument here, especially in light of Plato’s identification of the Guardian caste, a class that has been eugenically and socially engineered to begin with, as the only one capable of producing individuals who possess the innate qualities necessary for selection for leadership. Moreover, Popper sees the Platonic brand of philosophical education that these recruits receive, one grounded in an esoteric knowledge of The Good unattainable to common people, as one that serves purely political ends. It not only increases the authority of the leaders by endowing them with supernatural or mystical powers, but puts a mark on the rulers and establishes a barrier between the rulers and the ruled. In Poppers universe, “Platonic wisdom is thus acquired largely for the sake of establishing permanent, political class rule” (94).

More disturbing is Plato’s enthusiastic support for what is variously called the “noble lie,” the “magnificent” or “glorious myth,” and even the “bold flight of invention,” i.e., the myth of the metals. At best this policy of lying to the people “to keep them content in their roles,” no matter how “medicinal” it may prove to be, relies on empty rhetoric, a device decidedly averse to Socrates; at worst it is, as Popper asserts, a use of deceit with the intent to “mislead or hoax” people in the interest of “strengthening the master class and, ultimately, of arresting all political change” (85). By twentieth-century standards, Plato is, in short, advocating the use of raw propaganda. It is hard not to wince when Popper contrasts this interpretation with Socrates’/Plato’s response to the question, “Whom do you call true philosophers? – Those who

love the truth” (83). To the contrary, Popper concludes that Plato does not use the term “philosopher” to mean “lover of truth” or “seeker of wisdom,” but rather as “learned man” or “sage.” Plato’s philosopher king “is not the seeker of wisdom, but the proud possessor of it” (90). In Popper’s view, he is not even a philosopher but an ideologue, a totalitarian, a dogmatist.

Popper’s language is, of course, that of a twentieth-century political philosophy steeped in the Western liberal democratic tradition. A champion of human freedom, a value he sees best supported by democratic government, his arguments rely not only on his interpretation of an open society but on his interpretation, too, of totalitarianism. By Popper’s standards, Plato’s perfect society does indeed resemble a modern totalitarian state in that he places all political power in the hands of a single ruler, asserts that each man has a proper function to fill in society, and places prime importance on the well-being of society, a well-being that relies on each man performing his function in service of the state even if against his will. But Popper disregards Plato’s interpretation of democracy and denies that his metaphysical doctrine of natural law, which holds that there is an absolute truth and that there are absolute standards of good and justice, holds any value. For Plato, democracy was not as we understand it but synonymous with “chaotic mob rule” (10). As Thomas Landon Thorson suggests in the Introduction to *Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat?*, what is important is not that Plato opposed democracy but that he argued for natural law (11) and this is what differentiates him from a totalitarian. Thorson contends that modern totalitarianism condemns the idea of natural law, replacing its authority with the arbitrary will of the dictator. Thus, whereas a totalitarian state would be characterized by “maniacal tyrants” such as Hitler and Stalin, Plato’s ideal society would reflect the beneficent rule of its philosopher-king, “by definition a lover and implementer of the good” (11). Herein lies a crucial question then: Does Plato’s conceit that there do exist natural laws and that only a select few can apprehend them, by nature an absolutist doctrine, equate with authoritarianism and totalitarianism?

Whether or not we label Plato’s *Republic* as vision of a just society or as model for a totalitarian state, I think we can agree with Rosen’s assertion that it forces us to reflect on the “necessity of a philosophical intervention into political life . . . for the sake of the city and for the sake of philosophy itself” (9). It reminds us that the dialectic, as a form of reasoning with ideas, is not antithetical to politics but crucial to its continued authority. More than anything though, as has been evidenced by the myriad utopian visions that have followed in its wake, the *Republic* compels us not only to question our own values and our own definitions of ethical terms but to consider how we might envision an ideal society in the context of our own place in history.

In our post-Darwinian age, perhaps the most pressing questions that the *Republic* raises are these: Can a system that upholds order, stability and unity as prime values be considered a good system? Can a system that does not allow for growth or conflict be considered a healthy system? Is a system which elevates the eternal above the temporal, permanence over change, the constant and static over the dynamic, and unity over plurality be one that is viable? Plato’s *Republic* was rooted in Plato’s Greece, in Greek politics. As Russell Jacoby observes in *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, to the extent that the *Republic* is utopian, it is strictly in service of how to build the harmonious state or city; it is almost a practical guide for Greek cities and colonies” (167). It is not a practical guide for us, at least in many of its elements, and to interpret it as such is to miss its relevance. Plato’s world, like Spinoza’s, lacked the evolutionary lens through which to interpret reality. We can no longer view reality or the concept of perfection as something static and unchanging. Any discussion of a utopian society will now have to contend with the dynamic nature of an evolutionary vision of reality. Plato has

given us a superb model to follow, however. If, like Plato, we can demonstrate how an ideal society could be established, if we can conceptualize one that is really based on natural human capacities, and if we can show that the values we hold most highly are ones that can be realized without sacrificing the happiness and well being of the citizens, we will have approached the genius of Plato's *Republic*.

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