

Plato's *Republic*

An Introduction

SEAN McALEER





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Afterword

Having travelled so great a distance together, a few words about our journey seem in order. Few readers, I suspect, will want to live in Plato's ideal *polis*—and they will be in good company, if a recent biography of Socrates is to be believed: 'We can be in absolutely no doubt that Socrates would have disliked and disapproved of the republic Plato wanted to bring into being'.¹ Whatever its virtues, it is too lacking in individual liberty to suit most of us. Most of us will side with John Stuart Mill over Plato, and regard 'the free development of individuality [as] one of the leading essentials of wellbeing'.² Plato's utopia is far too much on the communitarian side of the spectrum for our comfort. We can set to one side the historical unlikelihood of the sort of aristocracy that Plato imagines; we are all familiar—though thankfully, for most of us, not in a first-hand way—with the evils of totalitarianism. The issue is more philosophical than that. Although romantics will demur at enthroning reason, many readers will agree that 'it is better for everyone to be ruled by divine reason, preferably within himself and his own' (9.590e), but many of these will insist that 'preferably [...] his own' is too weak and will deny to their dying breaths that this reason may permissibly be 'imposed from without'. Most readers will prefer a life in which they make their own choices to one in which their choices are made for them—even when they acknowledge that their own choices are often poor. Mill argues that the evils of paternalism—of interference with the choices of others *for their own good*—far outweigh its benefits. But one need not appeal to the consequences to be committed to the priority

1 Paul Johnson, *Socrates: A Man for Our Times* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 93.

2 Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 69.

of liberty and autonomy over wellbeing. One might, like Kant, take it to be a matter of respect for human dignity, which is grounded in our capacity to make choices, to deliberate and decide and then to act. We are justified in interfering, says the anti-paternalistic individualist, only where our choices harm others.

But even for such individualistically inclined readers, the *Republic* can offer salutary lessons. For while the pendulum swings too far to the communitarian end of the line in the ideal *polis*, one might concede that it swings too far to the individualistic side in, say, contemporary American culture. Perhaps we would do better to be more mindful of the good of the whole, to see our politics not as a means for advancing narrow individual and special interests but rather as a way to 'promote the general welfare'. Plato's anti-individualistic and anti-democratic animus is often expressed in his disdain for diversity and variety and complication—with things that are 'multicolored' (ποικίλος [*poikilos*]), as he often puts it. Too much variety in poetic meter is frowned upon (3.399e), as is medical treatment that is too complicated (4.426a). And of course, democracy's multicolored constitution is the source of its specious beauty (8.557c), as are its 'multicolored pleasures' (8.559d) and the cast of characters that are its citizens, 'characters fine and multicolored' (8.561e). And let us not forget about the 'multicolored beast' (9.588c) that embodies our emotions and desires. While we need not value diversity for diversity's sake, taking diversity as an intrinsic good when its goodness is more properly instrumental, we need not think of it as an intrinsic bad, as Plato seems to do. A community can celebrate its diversity while at the same time celebrating and nurturing its unity. It can be one from many—*e pluribus unum*, as it says somewhere or other. What is required for this is an attitude toward community and individuality that is more complex than Plato offers in the *Republic*. We can celebrate individuality and liberty while at the same time enabling individuals to be good team members, good cast members, etc. So while most of us do not accept Plato's full embrace of the good of the community over that of the individual, we can incorporate more communitarian thinking into our lives and politics. Simply put, to think this is a matter of individualism *versus* communitarianism is to commit the all too common (and all too human) fallacy of the false dilemma.

Similar considerations can apply to other aspects of Plato's thought where we recognize an important insight or truth that we do not feel comfortable taking fully on board. Consider justice as each person doing their own part and not meddling in the affairs of others. As we saw in Chapter Five, Confucius is in broad agreement with this, and one finds similar sentiments in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'It is better to strive in one's own dharma than to succeed in the dharma of another. Nothing is ever lost in following one's own dharma, but competition in another's dharma breeds fear and insecurity'.³

Many readers will find that their peace and serenity and indeed their personal happiness increase as they strive to cultivate their own gardens, as Voltaire puts it toward the end of *Candide*, even though many of these readers will lament the political acquiescence they see in this idea. The trick, it seems, is to find the proper balance—to find when it is appropriate to mind one's own business, as it were, and when it is appropriate to demand and work for change. This, I think, is the task of practical wisdom, which functions not by applying abstract rules and principles but which, with principles operating in the background, assesses particular situations to see what each demands.

There are many other instances of such topics in the *Republic*, and I hope to have brought enough of them to the surface for readers to do their own thinking about them. But there is one last big-picture consideration I must address before we end. The *Republic* is one of the great books of philosophy, but as we have seen, sometimes in perhaps excruciating detail, there are stretches where it is far from great philosophy. Its central argument, the Powers Argument of Book V, is fatally flawed, yet it is the only argument Plato gives us in the *Republic* in support of his distinctive, two-worlds metaphysics. While the Allegory of the Cave can survive at least in part without its support, the Sun and Divided Line analogies sink or swim with it, as their central point is to make sense of the distinction between the intelligible world of the Forms, where knowledge lives, and the visible world of particulars, the realm of belief. Moreover, 'the greatest and most decisive' argument for the view that the just life is happier than the unjust life, the Metaphysics of Pleasure Argument, also depends on the Powers Argument. Socrates

3 *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. by Eknath Easwaran, 2nd ed. (Tomaes, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), p. 108 [Chapter 3, verse 35].

may be correct in giving the palm to the just life, but he has not adequately argued for this conclusion, so his belief in it would seem to be unjustified. Socrates recognized in Book I that he jumped the gun in thinking he had shown that the just life is happier than the unjust life when he had not yet determined what justice is. But having determined the nature of justice to his and his interlocutors' satisfaction, he seems oblivious to the ways in which the Metaphysics of Pleasure Argument is fruit of the poisoned tree that is the Powers Argument. What gives?

There is a tendency, to which I am prone, to think that this must be intentional on Plato's part, that so smart a philosopher could not have unknowingly offered so poor an argument for so important a conclusion. Perhaps Plato took himself to be accurately reporting Socrates' own argument rather than giving his own. Perhaps he recognized the argument's shortcomings and left uncovering them to his readers, in hope that they—that we—would notice them and become better philosophers as we tried to work them out. It is hard to know.

The eminent philosopher and historian of early modern philosophy Jonathan Bennett, that rare bird who was as excellent a teacher as he was a philosopher, wrote in the preface to his first book on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: 'Like all great pioneering works in philosophy, the *Critique* is full of mistakes and confusions. It is a misunderstanding to think that a supreme philosopher cannot have erred badly and often: the *Critique* still has much to teach us, but it is wrong on nearly every page'.⁴

Much the same could be said of Plato's *Republic*. It might be scant comfort to some readers, but it seems to me to offer a powerful lesson on the point of doing and reading philosophy, which always requires doing it for oneself. Though Socratic wisdom consists in knowing that one does not know, it does not require giving up those beliefs one cannot justify. The key to being ethically justified in retaining these epistemically unjustified beliefs, it seems to me, is humility: we recognize them *as* not justified, perhaps as a result of our intellectual shortcomings, and continue to reflect upon them. There is a lot of cognitive space between nihilism and dogmatism. That so great a philosopher as Plato is frequently wrong is a testament to how hard it is to do philosophy well.

4 Jonathan Bennett, *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. viii.

That Plato fails to embody philosophical perfection is not a reason to give up on him or on ourselves.

Some Suggestions for Further Reading

Readers intrigued by Plato's thought will want to read Rebecca Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Will Not Go Away* (New York: Vintage, 2015), a brilliant, wise, and funny book which imagines Plato on a contemporary book tour.

Readers interested in a brief, compelling account of the life of Socrates by an eminent biographer should see Paul Johnson, *Socrates: A Man for Our Times* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

Readers interested in exploring more of Plato's philosophical thought will find it all here: *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

For a canonical philosopher whose thinking is very much at odds with Plato's, interested readers might try both David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993) and Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983).

