

PLATO

BIOGRAPHICAL GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Plato (427-347 BC) born in aristocratic and wealthy family
his youth roughly coincided with Peloponnesian War (431-404)
this war ended in defeat for democratic Athens at the hands of Sparta
at the end of the war Sparta installed a government of thirty rulers (“Thirty Tyrants”)
who were selected for their antidemocratic sympathies
one of the most ruthless of these was Critias, the cousin of Plato’s mother
her brother Charmides was also one of the thirty

Plato fell under the spell of Socrates (469-399)
Socrates wrote nothing and professed ignorance
but his suspicion that no one possesses moral knowledge
and his conviction that we must spend our lives searching for it
inspired many, including Plato

the Thirty were overthrown and democracy restored in 403
only four years later, in 399, Socrates is brought to trial
some scholars believe the prosecution was motivated at least in part by the perception
that Socrates was a danger to the restored democracy
in the *Apology* Plato portrays Socrates as someone who could not be easily classified
as democrat or antidemocrat
there are antipopulist elements
and yet a reminder that Socrates disobeyed the Thirty

in the *Crito* Socrates is described as a man so satisfied with the Athenian legal system
that he has hardly left the city’s walls [the rare venture outside in the *Phaedrus*]
yet he insists one should pay no attention to the opinions of the many
and follow the commands of an expert instead
but were not the laws of democratic Athens an expression of the opinions of the many?

Still more perplexing is the willingness of Socrates to engage in various forms of disobedience
and the arguments in the *Crito* for obeying the laws of the state
in the *Apology* he tells the jury that he will obey only the god who commanded him
rather than obey any orders from them
and yet in the *Crito* he refuses to escape from jail
because he accepts the idea
proposed by the personified Laws of Athens
that he is subordinate to Athens as a child to a parent, or slave to a master
if Socrates is willing to disobey his jurors,
why is he not equally willing to disregard its decision that he is to be punished by death?

Perhaps it is not likely that Plato means to portray Socrates as such a muddled thinker
for he generally portrays him as a man of penetrating insight and great argumentative skill
the apparent difficulties in Socrates’ ideas are devices Plato uses
to provoke readers into philosophical reflection

just as his conversations with Socrates led him to philosophical reflection
now he uses Socrates to produce the same effect in us

Plato's dialogues create a sense of unfinished business
lines of thought are disrupted
gaps in arguments remain unfilled
"often difficult to know what Plato intends because he never speaks in one voice"
he uses dramatic characters
and portrays a clash of views
because he regards the written word as [at best] a stimulus to philosophical insight
rather than the embodiment of wisdom

we are told by ancient sources that Plato left Athens after the death of Socrates
traveling through Sicily, North Africa and Egypt
became acquainted with Pythagoreans
key ideas: immortality of the soul, reincarnation; mathematical nature of reality
both of these Pythagorean notions come to the fore in Plato's writings afterwards
after the early works such as the *Apology* and the *Crito*

Plato returned to Athens in 387
establishing the "Academy"
(after the grove beyond the city walls that was Sacred to the hero Academos)

THE APOLOGY

Socrates' defense in the *Apology*
begins with a distinction between his form of speech and that of his accusers
what Plato is getting at here is the distinction between *rhetoric* and *dialectic*
which he often uses to portray the difference between Socrates and the Sophists
the Sophists were contemporaries of Socrates
philosophically the Sophists held to a position of *skepticism* or *relativism*
and they were teachers of rhetoric who especially thrived during Athens' experiment with democracy
they were paid very well (as opposed to the way Plato portrays Socrates)
for all the elites paid good money to have their sons schooled in rhetoric
for *the art of persuasive speech* was a means to real political power in a democracy

the conflict between Socrates and the Sophists might be said to come down to the difference between
the *philosopher* and the *sophist*
which literally is the difference between
a *lover of wisdom* and a *person of wisdom*—someone who claims to possess wisdom

Socrates makes a distinction between two sets of accusers (18a–e)
there is the current charges against him by Meletus and Antyus
"Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young, and of failing to acknowledge the gods acknowledged
by the city, but introducing new spiritual beings instead" (24c)

but it is the long-standing slander against him that Socrates knows will be his greatest danger
this trial takes place when Socrates is 70 years old in 399 B.C.E

we know that Aristophanes wrote the comedy *The Clouds*
making fun of Socrates some 30-40 years earlier
so obviously Socrates was a very well-known figure in Athens for a long time
during those long years Socrates made a career out of interrogating the wise and powerful of Athens
and it is this ongoing interrogation which has led to the long-standing slander against him

knowing that this older accusation against him is going to be the most difficult to deal with
Socrates responds to it first, telling a tale that one might imagine
might not have set well with the 500 members of the jury as Socrates begins to tell it
(it becomes obvious that Socrates would have conducted a quite different defense if he was interested
merely in saving his life)

he tells the jury that a friend of his, Chaerephon, went to the oracle of Delphi
and asked him who the wisest person of all was
and the oracle responded that no one was wiser than Socrates (21a)

at first this sounds, of course, like the height of arrogance
but then Socrates explains that it was because he did not believe what the oracle said
and that he wanted to find out why the oracle said it
that he took to interrogating the wise of Athens in order to find someone wiser than he

he finds out that everywhere he looked for wisdom he found only the conceit of wisdom
he concludes with the famous point that the oracle must have meant

‘The wisest amongst you, human beings, is anyone like Socrates who has recognized that with
respect to wisdom, he is truly worthless’ (23b).

the wisest person is thus the one who knows he does not possess wisdom
this perhaps gives us a clue to what a *lover of wisdom* is

this is a point that gets to the heart of the question concerning what philosophy is
and it has a political significance
for the conflict between Socrates and the Sophists
takes place during the Athenian experiment with democracy
at issue is a question about what kind of conversation we are to have about
the difficult issues of the day that divide us as a people

Plato portrays the Sophists, and the orators schooled by them,
as the kind of people who are confident of their wisdom
and only interested in winning an argument and persuading the other to their point of view
Plato fears that the consequences of the Sophists’ skepticism and relativism
is that there can be no point to the conversation except persuading the other to one’s own point of view
thus *might makes right*

Plato portrays Socrates as the kind of person who
is not interested necessarily in winning the argument but at gaining knowledge and discovering truth
and thus if the other in a true dialogue can persuade you that you are mistaken
that is not then a defeat but a victory, since one is closer to the truth

the key to a philosophical dialogue is thus beginning with the wisdom of Socrates knowing that one does not possess wisdom
one starts with an open mind and is thus willing to listen to the other
we see an example of the dialectic in process in Socrates' response to the current charges against him
here we see Socrates interrogating Meletus in his usual manner
getting him to examine his assumptions and follow through the logical thread of his arguments

in his defense Socrates is not so much interested in saving his life
but defending his way of life, that is, the practice of philosophy
the heart of this defense takes place in sections 28a–31c
here he explains why it is that the practice of philosophy is so important
both for the individual and the state
philosophy is a matter of caring for the soul

it turns out that Socrates' insistence on the importance of philosophy rests upon a belief in the immortality of the soul
the most important thing for the soul is to escape from injustice
for injustice harms the soul
Socrates is not really so much interested in saving his life
for he thinks that it is far more important, and much harder, to avoid injustice rather than death
as he puts it toward the end of the dialogue:

I suggest that it is not death that is hard to avoid gentlemen, but wickedness [other translations have "injustice" here] is far harder, since it is fleet of foot than death. (39b)

Socrates also argues that it is important for the state to avoid injustice
presumably because it is harder for the individual soul to be free from injustice living in an unjust state
it is for this reason that he tells the jury that his defense of his way of life—philosophy—is not really a concern for his own welfare but for the welfare of Athens:

At this point, therefore, fellow Athenians, so far from pleading on my own behalf, as might be supposed, I am pleading on yours, in case by condemning me you should mistreat the gift which God has bestowed upon you—because if you put me to death, you will not easily find another like me. The fact is, if I may put the point in a somewhat comical way, that I have been literally attached by God to our city, as if to a horse—a large thoroughbred, which is a bit sluggish because of its size, and needs to be aroused by some sort of gadfly. Yes, in me, I believe, God has attached to our city just such a creature—the kind which is constantly alighting everywhere on you, all day long, arousing, cajoling, or reproaching each and every one of you. (30d–e)

Later Socrates will go on to say that philosophy—the examined life—is so important that the unexamined life is not even worth living (38a)

Socrates insists in the *Apology* that we cannot know what happens after death
but in the *Phaedo* presents a series of arguments attempting to prove the immortality of the soul
one of the most striking components of this dialogue and those of this period
is the affirmation of a new kind of objective reality—the “forms” or “ideas”
which exist eternally
beyond the visible and perishable world

those who think the visible and perishable is the real world
are like living in a dream
they fail to realize that what they observe is mere appearance
there is a greater reality—waking life
of the forms that stand behind appearances

Is Socrates right in his defense of the importance of philosophy in the *Apology*?
perhaps we might not be totally or at all convinced of the immortality of the soul
but most of us probably think it is important to avoid becoming unjust
and would probably also agree that it is important for the state to avoid injustice
most Americans today would surely not like to think of their country as unjust
the problem is we may not be so clear about what just what justice is

but can we say that as a nation we have been vigilant in our concern to avoid injustice
or has our nation become a bit sluggish because of its size
and thus is like the lazy thoroughbred Socrates speak of?
would we not then need a gadfly like Socrates to give us a little bite?

the *Apology* ends with the question of justice standing before us
and this question of justice is the main concern of the *Republic*

theories of justice are as old as human society
the ancient codes of the Hebrews, Persians, and Babylonians were theories of justice
in the sense that they tried to develop rules to cover fair dealings and distribution of goods,
the punishment of criminals and the settling of disputes

a fully developed theory of justice, however, should try to analyze the nature of justice
the first great theories of justice were those of Plato and Aristotle

THE REPUBLIC

The word "republic" is from Latin: *Res publica*, from *res* 'concern' + *publicus* 'of the people, the public'
thus meaning "public matters" or "the state."

In Greek, the title was the *Politeia* (πολιτεία), from *polis* 'the city,' the organization of, thus
Government or *Constitution*.

the *Republic* goes far beyond politics
into connected fields of education and the social aspects of literature and art
but also into metaphysics and epistemology

chief political ingredients are its delineation of the ideal state
and its account of the various forms of actual states which fail to achieve this ideal
Plato's theory of knowledge is brought in to support his view that only the few who have
knowledge—the philosopher-kings—should rule
the whole discussion begins with a series of arguments
about the nature of justice
directed against the moral skepticism of the Sophists

in short, Plato's argument is that justice in the state is the same as justice in the individual thus cooperation among all for the sake of the successful society is the key to justice but this means that the interests of the individual become secondary for the majority of people in ancient Greece, especially the slaves, this secondary role was the norm because their submission was seen as necessary to the overall success of society their individual interests and rights were minimal in Plato's universe, everyone has their 'place' and justice means acting accordingly

the first two books consider justice as a property of individuals and their actions rather than that of political systems

in Book I Plato portrays a series of unsuccessful attempts to define justice superficial conceptions—that justice is repaying debts, or helping friends and harming enemies are quickly dispatched Socrates plays the role of someone who lacks knowledge whose mission is simply to reveal to others their ignorance

the more serious challenge of Thrasymachus—that justice is the interest of the stronger becomes the central focus any attempt to vindicate the life of a just person must address itself to the cynicism and immorality represented by Thrasymachus Plato seems to be saying there is a bit of Thrasymachus in all of us and that we can only exorcize him by philosophical inquiry

in the *Gorgias* a position opposite to Thrasymachus' is criticized—the idea that justice is a conspiracy of the weak to keep down the strong in the *Republic* that line of thought is presented in Book II by Glaucon

Glaucon begins making a distinction between three classes of things:
1) things that are intrinsically good, not because of their consequences
2) things which are valued both for their own sake and their consequences
3) things which are valued for their consequences only

in which class does justice belong? Socrates, of course, thinks justice belongs in the highest class like true happiness it is sought for its own sake not for its consequences

Glaucon points out that the many would rank justice in the third class something which is disagreeable, irksome and repulsive on its own but is valued because of the consequences Glaucon thus takes up Thrasymachus' argument that the life of the unjust man is better than the just that people practice justice not because of its intrinsic rewards but basically, it is implied, because of social pressures if people could get away with injustice they would

the argument runs something like this:
to commit injustice and get away with it is best

to suffer injustice is worst
the practice of justice stands midway between these extremes
justice is simply a matter of law that forbids injustice
even those who practice justice do so unwillingly
thus justice is simply an agreement by which all abstain from injury to others
for the sake of self-protection
[this is really Hobbes' central political theory]

against this Socrates argues that self-protection provides no motive to refrain from evil-doing that is going to escape detection

then Glaucon proposes an experiment

Let us give full liberty to the just man and to the unjust alike, to do whatever they please, and then let us follow them, and see whither the inclination of each will lead him. (359c)

this leads, of course, to the ring of Gyges thought experiment (359d)
a shepherd, Gyges, finds a golden ring
when turned makes him invisible
upon discovering this he contrives to be appointed messenger to the king
upon arrival he seduces the queen, and conspiring with her, slew the king
and took possession of the kingdom

the experiment is to suppose there were two such rings
one given to a just man and the other to an unjust one
if it were guaranteed that one could get away with injustice
would there be any reason to be just?

to push the experiment we have to imagine
the unjust man thoroughly unjust, and the just thoroughly just
the unjust man makes no mistake in his pursuit of injustice
while committing the grossest injustice

he fools everyone and has the highest reputation for justice
ends up with power, wealth, women of his choice
everything one could desire

the case of the just man is the exact reverse
while practicing perfect justice he has the worst reputation for justice
the just man ends up imprisoned, tortured, and crucified
is it not best then, not to be just, but to seem just?

after these ethical preliminaries explicitly political issues are raised
as Socrates uses the idea that justice is more clearly perceived in the larger-scale of the state
thus the comparison of the structure of the soul and the structure of the state
here Socrates sheds role as merely an ignorant inquirer who merely poses problems for others
he becomes instead a systematic philosopher

putting forth a grand theory about the nature of human beings, the ideal state, the soul, mathematics, knowledge and the highest realities

the strategy pursued throughout the remainder of the *Republic*
is to exploit the fact that it is not merely individuals who can be characterized as just or unjust
can also use the terms to praise or discredit certain forms of government
thus perhaps we can grasp the nature of justice
by asking what leads to the existence of a political community
and what the justice of such a community consists in

political and individual justice is conceived as the same property
eventually leads to the proposal that justice consists in
each part of a thing doing its own thing
in a just city or state each position is filled by someone who is qualified to contribute to the good of the whole
the state is just and well ordered
to the extent that citizens are assigned the positions for which their capacities best fit them
thus those who are rational and have real knowledge should rule
those who are spirited and strong are fit for defense and maintenance of order—the guardians
and the large remainder who are controlled by unreflective appetite are fit to be producers

similarly, in a just human being, each part of the soul operates in a way that serves the good of the whole
Plato finds a parallel hierarchy of reason, spirit, and desire in the individual soul

in Book III the topic turns to who should rule the ideal city
the rulers must be selected from the guardian class
and here is where the idea of the “noble lie” is introduced

This being the case, I continued, can we contrive any ingenious mode of bringing into play one of those noble lies of which we lately spoke, so that, propounding a single noble lie, we may bring even the rulers themselves, if possible, to believe it, or if not them, the rest of the city? (414b)

it is suggested that the guardians must be brought to believe a fiction
that the composition of men’s souls are made of different metals
gold, silver, iron and bronze
those who are made of silver and gold will be brought into the guardian class
those who are made of iron and bronze will be cast into the class of artisans and farmers

an analogy is proposed comparing the ideal city
to a flock of well-cared for sheep
the guardians or auxiliary class must be like the sheep dogs
since the guardians (sheep dogs) will be stronger than the artisans and farmers (sheep)
care must be taken that these guardians do not become like wolves

for this the guardians must obviously have the right education
but they must also be forbidden from possessing private property, except as necessary
they must live then in communal dwellings
“no one should have a dwelling or storehouse into which all who please may not enter” (416d)

the guardians must be told a noble lie:

“we must tell them that they are in perpetual possession of a divine species of the precious metals placed in their souls by the gods themselves, and therefore have no need of the earthly ore” (416e)

by the end of Book IV Socrates seems to be on the verge of completing his demonstration of the great value of justice—but his argument has really only just begun the institutions of the ideal city have not been fully discussed Plato’s aim is to foster the greatest possible unity in the city

much of Plato’s attention in Books, V, VI, and VII is devoted to the manner of life and education of the guardians they are to be chosen by heredity (and eugenic arrangements in mating) and by merit they are to have no personal property, living in communal barracks they are to have no family life: wives are to be shared and they are to be kept ignorant of the identities of their children their education is to shield them from metaphysically and morally deficient forms of art, music and literature (Book X)

the topic that looms largest is the proposal that the best political community is the one that gives complete authority to rigorously trained and morally flawless philosophers the *Republic* reaches its culmination in the depiction of the philosopher-king as the human being of perfect justice the search for the value of justice has led to the conclusion that this virtue is most fully present in those who understand the nature of the forms justice is the greatest good because the best sort of life is one in which the structure of the soul is guided by one’s love and understanding of the highest realities the best guardians are to be led by education in mathematics to the highest, most abstract rarified level of knowledge which concerns the eternal and unchanging forms above all the knowledge of the “form of the good” these few will be the ones fit to be philosopher-kings

Socrates never gives a definition of the good and in this sense the entire project of the *Republic* is radically incomplete seems to suggest that goodness has a mathematical nature that is why philosophers should be first trained in mathematics

Books VIII and IX round out Plato’s argument portraying the diseased political structures and fragmented psychologies that arise when the city or the soul are not justly ordered especially when worldly values take precedence

in Book VIII we have Plato’s ranking of the types of governments in descending order:
aristocracy: power of the best, from *aristokratia* (αριστοκρατία), *aristos* ‘best’ + *kratia* ‘power’
timocracy: power of honored, from *timokratia* (τιμοκρατία), *timē* ‘honor’ + *kratia* ‘power’
oligarchy: rule by the few, from *oligarchia* (ολιγαρχία), *oligos* ‘few’ + *archia* ‘rule’
democracy: power of the people, from *dēmokratia*, (δημοκρατία), *dēmos* ‘people’ + *kratia* ‘power’
tyranny: rule by a tyrant, from *turannia* (τυραννία), *turannos* ‘tyrant’

as Book VIII ends with the description of tyranny
Book IX opens with a long vivid description of the tyrant (not included in our selection)
eventually Socrates returns to Glaucon's challenge in Book II
how is it that justice is intrinsically good?
how is it that the just person is better off than the unjust
even if the unjust gets away with injustice and the just is mercilessly tortured and killed?

Socrates response consists of three complex arguments
"that injustice is profitable to the man who is perfectly unjust" (588b)
in other words, what of the unjust person who is able to get away with injustice?

Socrates responds to this with a powerful image of what the soul of the unjust person is like
the soul of the unjust person grows more vicious if he escapes detection (591b)

Book X
this book is important particularly for the philosophy of art
Plato is concerned with the question of the education of the guardians and the detrimental effects of art
especially poetry, which stirs the passions
artists are only going to be allowed into the ideal city on the condition that they accept censorship by the
ruling philosophers

it is here that Plato gives us the famous account of art being three steps removed from truth
as Plato understood art in terms of representation
a painting (or sculpture) is a representation or a copy of a thing (and not an adequate copy at that)
and any sensible thing is a poor copy of the forms
art is merely a poor copy of a poor copy
art does not lead us out of the cave to the waking world of the light of the Sun
but remains lost in the dream world of appearances

in the closing sections of Book X the peripheral and external rewards of justice
having been dismissed in Book II are allowed to return
since the soul does not perish the good of justice does not come to an end when the body perishes
by postponing the question of life after death to the end of the *Republic*
Socrates leads us to see that a life of justice would be worth living even if there were no afterlife

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three of Plato's dialogues concerned with politics: the *Republic* first and foremost
but also the *Statesman* and the *Laws*
concern with the actual forms of government reappears in the later two political dialogues
here Plato sets out the classification of forms of government into
rule by one, by the few, or by the many
he identifies a good and a bad variety of each:
monarchy and tyranny, aristocracy and oligarchy, constitutional democracy and lawless democracy

in the *Statesman* the main topic is whether the state should be run in accordance with fixed law
(an idea absent from the *Republic*) or the insight of the truly wise
by this stage of his career, disillusioned by his experience in Syracuse

where he completely failed in getting the tyrants to become philosopher-kings
he concedes that his utopian ideal is unrealizable
and thus he comes to the view that law is essential to a well-ordered state

in the *Laws* further watering-down of the proposals of the *Republic* are carried out
many themes of the *Republic* recur, such as the equality of women
and the need for controlled education
in conformity with the replacement of individual wisdom by impersonal law
there is a concession of marriage and property to the rulers (under public control and limitation)

if the ideal state cannot be attained
the second-best state is one which allows some constitutional role to all citizens
social order is to be achieved not by rule of the wise
but by a balance of forces (separation of powers)
these principles of the necessity of laws and a need for a balance of classes
became the main elements of Aristotle's *Politics*