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Plato's Irony

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Plato's Irony

Plato's *Republic* remains one of the most influential texts of the Western canon, surviving millennia of various translations and interpretations. Traditional interpretations of the *Republic* contend that there is not a distinction between philosophy and politics and that Plato's presentation of Socrates' dialogue with Glaucon and Adeimantus reflects the author's own ideas. Socrates' Kallipolis, the "just city," serves as an early example of totalitarian governance that parallels modern regimes in countries like Cuba or North Korea. Although Plato was in fact a student of Socrates, he did not necessarily have to agree with everything his teacher argued; additionally, contemporary scholars such as Allan Bloom beg the question as to whether the Kallipolis was actually an ironic and satirical construction thought up by Socrates that he ultimately knew was absurd and impossible. Looking closely at the *Republic*, it seems doubtful that Plato truly was as illiberal and antidemocratic as he may seem at first glance: Kallipolis was almost certainly not Plato's own ideal political constitution.

From a modern scholar's point of view, it is irrefutable that Kallipolis as a polis is unrealistic and unattainable, as it is an ideal very far removed from human nature. Plato's *Republic* as a whole underscores the limitations of politics by emphasizing this aforementioned disparity between human nature and the just city: Kallipolis abstracts from the body and philosopher-kings can not possibly make good rulers. Plato allows his audience to see the conflict between striving for the good of the individual and the good of a whole community: since an individual finds his "*eudaimonia*" in studying philosophy, it is against the philosopher's nature to truly rule for the common good. This notion is antithetical to Socrates' supposed claim that the only people fit to rule the just city are philosophers and that the highest well-being for

humans is only achievable by reconciling philosophy and politics.

It is possible that Socrates' argument is ironic, meaning that he suggests one thing to Glaucon, Adeimantus, and others in the dialogue, but actually means something entirely different (i.e., he presents Kallipolis as natural but inwardly understands that it is not). If one were to pursue this path of reasoning, they would come to the conclusion that Plato, too, was being an ironist in writing the *Republic*. Plato catalogs his teacher's experiment, relaying its ups-and-downs until the very end, no matter how increasingly outlandish and unnatural Socrates' rules for the just city become. He must be aware of the lunacy of Socrates' claims: after all, the process of recording the dialogue for posterity required some mode of thought and would provoke inquiry into anything he may have found disagreeable or preposterous. As Aristotle writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Ironists, who tend to say less than they are, appear more refined in their characters." (1127b23-24) Socrates as an ironist seems to be a common theme in much of literature written on the famous philosopher, and Aristotle himself (a student of Plato) agreed with contemporary analysts in this regard. It is a logical assumption, therefore, that Kallipolis was not an entirely serious "just city," but rather Socrates' satirical take on limits of politics and philosophy in the *Republic*.

Some aspects of Socrates' (and Plato's) argument seem almost comical, furthering the possibility of ironic intentions with the development of Kallipolis. For example, Book V of the *Republic*, which focuses on women's lives in the just city, contains striking similarities to Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*, or Ἐκκλησιάζουσαι. In this play written to criticize the Athenian government, a group of women take control of the city, instituting reforms that ban private wealth and enforce equity between the sexes (particularly beneficial measures for old and unattractive women). Socrates seems to have been inspired by this play in Book V, where he acknowledges that women have the same individual ranking of their spirits as men and that they

too have a place in the just city. However, when reading the text, it is difficult to believe that Socrates or Plato valued our contemporary notion of “women’s rights” at all, or any form of equality, for that matter: there is an understanding that women, albeit members of Kallipolis, would always be inferior to men in every category. It is, therefore, not too ridiculous to suggest that Plato may have been trying to outdo Aristophanes in his own version of comic satire.

Kallipolis is also simply contrary to human nature. It is most saliently abnormal in limiting man’s innate desires, primarily sexual *eros*, in addition to abolishing privacy and the structure of the family in favor of a communal lifestyle (reminiscent of People’s Communes in Maoist China, for example). However, Socrates is clear to emphasize that the city *is* natural, as it is based on both man’s most basic needs and a division of labor and leadership that parallels the internal hierarchy of the soul: reason, desire, and spiritedness (*thumos*). Essentially, Socrates uses the tripartite soul to justify the social network of Kallipolis. He may have had more ground to stand on if his argument was based in reality; however, Plato is clear to emphasize that the organization of Kallipolis is based on the “noble lie.” (414c [p. 93]) Essentially, in order to ensure the success of the city, the guardian class would have to lie to the citizens about nearly every aspect of their lives. The Myth of the Metals and the belief that all citizens were born of the ground of Kallipolis would be utilized to dull the minds of the populace into believing that the hierarchy they found themselves in was the natural order of things. However, Socrates acknowledges that Kallipolis would be destined to fail, even if the guardians attempted to keep up the noble lie, falling into tyranny. Plato displays Socrates’ reasoning in a way that conveys these lies as ultimately unconvincing for a successful city, thereby demonstrating his own beliefs: that Kallipolis as an illiberal authoritarian government is not only impossible, but worthless to even try.

The unnaturalness of Kallipolis is subsequently extended to its ruling class: the philosopher-kings. In order to argue that a ruling class of philosophers is unnatural, the question

of justice developed in the *Republic* must be addressed (although a definite conclusion as to what justice is is never reached in the dialogue itself). As stated before, individual justice may be understood as the internal harmony of reason, desire, and spiritedness. Only the philosopher can achieve this harmony of the soul, and consequently justice itself. In addition to the harmony of the soul, Socrates also advocated for the harmony of philosophy and politics for the success of Kallipolis. However, the previous notion of justice in conjunction with the harmony of philosophy and politics would be impossible with philosophers in charge of the city. The philosopher can only be just on the individual level because he has an understanding of eternal forms, which others in the city do not. On the other hand, all people can be “just” in the civic sense, or in service to the polis as a whole. Although both of these types of justice are discussed in the *Republic*, Plato does not successfully connect them in a way that argues that men naturally should wish to serve the polis. Bloom writes, “The question is whether... devotion to the common good leads to the health of the soul or whether the man with a healthy soul is devoted to the common good.” (Bloom, 337) Therefore, humans do not have a natural imperative to be good citizens, and Kallipolis requires that the philosophers be *unnaturally* good by serving the interest of the people rather than their own self-interest. This leads to the conclusion that the entire structure of the polis is unnatural, and, in relaying the duties of the philosopher-kings the way he does, Plato stresses how Kallipolis is destined to be dysfunctional, revealing his own misgivings towards Socrates’ plan of the ideal just city.

Much evidence exists to support the argument that Plato did not truly believe all he espoused in the *Republic*. That Plato was not as “antiliberal and antidemocratic” as he may seem is a relatively recent opinion that is dismissive of traditional interpretations, but it is nonetheless very probable, given the amount of aforementioned evidence in this paper. However, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary Platonic scholars will never be fully sure of Plato’s

true opinions. As it is impossible to ask Plato about his true convictions and to see whether Socrates himself even believed what he said in the *Republic*, all interpretations of the text, if properly supported, cannot be invalidated. Ultimately, the Socratic paradox, which says that wisdom is found in acknowledging ignorance, is a valuable lesson to take into account when analyzing and interpreting Plato's *Republic*.

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