

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# Plato's Three Waves and the Question of Utopia

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One of the important contemporary controversies over the interpretation of Plato's *Republic* centers on the question of utopia. Was Plato, in setting out his "city in speech" (*Republic* 369a. All quotations not otherwise identified are from Bloom.) or "city in heaven" (592b), constructing a city whose realization as an earthly city he considered genuinely possible? If so, the *Republic* may be interpreted as a realizable utopia, and Plato interpreted as a radical political thinker in at least this sense: he invites us, given the real possibility of a perfectly just city, to be radically dissatisfied with any city—every city—which fails to live up to that realizable standard of perfection. He invites us, that is, to become revolutionaries. Or is the real teaching of the *Republic* quite the reverse, intended to reveal the impossibility (and perhaps undesirability) of the conditions for perfect justice, thereby teaching us that the standard of perfection is inappropriate in the realm of politics, that there is no "solution" to the political problem, and thus that we should be political moderates?

Both sides of this controversy, which is important not only for the interpretation of Plato but as a core question of political philosophy, have well-known representatives.<sup>1</sup> Their disagreement is based in part on the fact that, as we shall see, the evidence in the *Republic* itself is deeply ambivalent, if not contradictory. The crux of the issue would seem to hinge on the contents of Books V–VII, where the famous "three waves" are presented by Socrates as the most formidable obstacles to the establishing of the perfectly just city. The general procedure of most commentators has been to consider the three waves together as a unity and make their judgment on the possibility and desirability of such a city's coming into being. This only adds to the confusion, since what is said about each of the three waves is hardly the same. My thesis will thus be that by looking at what Socrates says of each of the waves separately, we shall discover that he has very different attitudes regarding the questions of possibility and desirability for each of them. This will lead us not only to a reassessment of the perfectly just city, but also to a reconsideration of its significance for the meaning of the *Republic* as a whole. In order to accomplish this, a

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careful examination of what is said of each of the three waves will be necessary.<sup>2</sup>

Let us briefly recover the context. At the end of Book IV, Socrates has completed an outline of the just city, and wants to turn next to a delineation of the types of inferior cities, which he finally gets to only in Book VIII. He is interrupted in this enterprise because he has, in his outline, slipped over some extremely controversial issues, on which, at the beginning of Book V, Adeimantus and Polemarchus catch him up. They insist that he make explicit and defend these proposals. Books V–VII are his defense, and constitute the long setting out of the three waves. The first wave, which entails the equal education and treatment of women and men, extends from 451d to 457b. The second wave, which lasts from 457c to 473c, includes the commonality of wives and children, the abolition of private property, the abolition of the family, and the establishment of extraordinary laws for sexual intercourse in the name of eugenics. The third and much the longest wave, from 473d to 541b, from the end of Book V through all of Books VI and VII, concerns the establishing of philosopher-kings as rulers.

Let us now begin tracing the argument at the beginning of Book V. The first noteworthy fact is that when Adeimantus and Polemarchus catch Socrates up at 449c, the issue they focus on is in fact what is later called the second wave, having women and children in common.

“In our opinion you’re taking it easy,” he said, “and robbing us of a whole section of the argument, and that not the least, so you won’t have to go through it. And you supposed you’d get away with it by saying, as though it were something quite ordinary, that after all it’s plain to everyone that, as for women and children, the things of friends will be in common.” (449c)

At 450c, in his reiteration of the charge, Glaucon adds to the community of wives and children “their rearing when they are still young, in the time between birth and education, which seems to be the most trying” (450c). This is still the second wave, since the first wave treats of the guardians’ education when they are older. In short, there is no predisposition on the part of those present to view the first wave as problematic. It is what becomes the second wave that initially troubles Socrates’ interlocutors. Socrates himself introduces the first wave. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is less resistance to it.

The next point of importance to our thesis occurs at 450d, where Socrates introduces the criteria of decision for the ensuing argument concerning the three waves: possibility and desirability in the sense of “what is best.”

“It’s not easy to go through, you happy man,” I said. “Even more than what we went through before, it admits of many doubts. For, it could be doubted that the things said are possible; and, even if, in the best possible conditions, they could come into being, that they would be what is best might also be doubted. So that is

why there's a certain hesitation about getting involved in it, for fear that the argument might seem to be a prayer, my dear comrade." (450d)

Henceforward, these are the two standards by which the three waves, and so the city in speech, will be judged.

The first wave begins at 451d, though it is not named as such until its completion at 457b. It is bounded by references to "the female drama" at 451c, and "the woman's law" at 457b. The gist of it is that women and men should be reared, educated, and treated as equally as possible.<sup>3</sup> We might thus be tempted to call it the first Equal Rights Amendment, although given the rigorously Spartan lives this class will have in the city in speech, it might more accurately be described as the first "Equal Responsibilities Amendment." It is introduced by analogy to dogs:

"Do we believe the females of the guardian dogs must guard the things the males guard along with them and hunt with them, and do the rest in common; or must they stay indoors as though they were incapacitated as a result of bearing and rearing the puppies, while the males work and have all the care of the flock?" "Everything in common," he said, "except that we use the females as weaker and the males as stronger." (451d–e)<sup>4</sup>

We might note this one proviso on absolute equality: When physical strength is at issue, such as in battle, concessions will be made to the generally superior strength of men. We can acknowledge that, given the nature of warfare at this time and the fact that the rulers are to excel both at philosophy and the waging of war (543a), this qualification is a significant one. But it is no less important to recognize that it is the only qualification on equal treatment granted in the first wave, and it is repeated at 456a and 457a–b. It is therefore a fair inference, especially for us today, that should conditions be such that physical strength is not at stake, there would be no exceptions to the principle of equal education and treatment of men and women. In any case, and this is the crucial point, since the men are to be educated through the two foundations of Greek education, music and gymnastic, "Then these two arts, and what has to do with war, must be assigned to the women also, and they must be used in the same ways" (452a; I emphasize the last clause to bring out the point that women are not to be given the same education and then treated differently, as is so often still the case).

This equal treatment will be so thoroughgoing, Socrates continues, that women and men will even exercise naked together in the gymnasium. This, he insists, is "the most ridiculous" aspect of the first wave (452a–b), and this should be noted. If this aspect can be justified, we may infer, the first wave will be relatively unproblematic. It is justified by an appeal to Athenian provincialism; once, the Athenians thought the idea of men exercising naked together was laughable, but now it is accepted as quite natural (452c). So there is no

reason to suppose that the present attitudes could not be overcome. Although the convention against men and women exercising naked together might seem even more difficult to overcome than that regarding men alone, Socrates' point remains well taken; the problem is one of convention and could be overcome. But perhaps, against Socrates' argument and the evidence of such practices as nude beaches and nudist colonies, one might regard the problems with mixed nudity, conventional or not, as insurmountable. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that if one slight concession to convention were made, that we allow the guardians to exercise clothed, such a step would resolve this "most ridiculous" aspect of the first wave, and nothing would stand in the way of the core of its proposal, the equal treatment and education of women and men.

Socrates now employs a strategy which he applies in the first wave alone; he presents the counterargument to the position he espouses and refutes it (453b–456b). Let us recognize that this is reasonable strategy when one is arguing seriously for a position. The most persuasive arguments often present the positive evidence for the position espoused and then present the counterarguments and show their inadequacy. I emphasize this because the very structure of the argument suggests a tone of seriousness which, as we shall see, is lacking in the second wave.

The gist of the counterargument will be immediately familiar as the most common argument used against defenders of equal rights and equal treatment of women today: men and women have different natures and therefore should be treated differently and do different things (453b–d).

Socrates replies by distinguishing what aspect of male and female nature is different, and whether and to what extent those differences are relevant to rearing, education, or fighting. To make his point, he uses, as a *reductio ad absurdum*, the analogy of the bald shoemaker:

"Accordingly," I said, "it's permissible, as it seems, for us to ask ourselves whether the nature of the bald and the longhaired is the same or the opposite. And, when we agree that it is opposite, if bald men are shoemakers, we won't let the longhaired ones be shoemakers, or if the longhaired ones are, then the others can't be." "That," he said, "would certainly be ridiculous." (454c)

The point is clear enough; only when it can be shown that a difference between men and women makes a difference in regard to education and treatment will it be acknowledged as relevant. As we have already seen, only one difference has been so acknowledged, that of physical strength, which will have a certain relevance to the duties assigned in war. Socrates states this principle nicely at 454e:

"Then," I said, "if either the class of men or that of women shows its excellence in some art or other practice, then we'll say that art must be assigned to it. But if they look as though they differ in this alone, that the female bears and the male mounts,

we'll assert that it has not thereby yet been proved that a woman differs from a man with respect to what we're talking about; rather, we'll still suppose that our guardians and their women must practice the same things." (454e)

The positive statement of the criteria of selection for a given activity is set out briefly at 455c: some people learn better and more easily retain information necessary for a given enterprise. This is what determines whether a person has the right nature for each activity. Since, with regard to ruling, none of the crucial information to be learned is necessarily tied to gender, Socrates draws the following important conclusion:

"Therefore, my friend, there is no practice of a city's governors which belongs to woman because she's woman, or to man because he's man; but the natures are scattered alike among both animals; and woman participates according to nature in all practices, and man in all, but in all of them woman is weaker than man." (455d–e)

Women and men will participate equally in everything from music and gymnastic to medicine, philosophy, and ruling (455e–456a), with, as usual, the sole concession being made to relative physical strength.

Socrates begins his summing up of the argument for the first wave at 456c:

"Then we weren't giving laws that are impossible or like prayers, since the law we set down is according to nature. Rather, the way things are nowadays proves to be, as it seems, against nature." (456c)

The first wave is desirable because it is according to nature. "Nature" is here taken clearly in the teleological sense. For something to be "according to nature" is for it to be the best that it can be, a view that seems to inform almost all of Greek intellectual life with the exception of sophistry, which argued for the superiority of convention. The first wave is according to nature since in all but one of the requirements for ruling (physical strength), men and women are equally likely to be qualified. Indeed, as Socrates notes, the present practice of discrimination against women is against nature. It is possible because, as has been shown, the present strictures against equal treatment are themselves conventional rather than natural. Thus Socrates concludes at 457a, the first wave is both possible and beneficial. The escape from the first wave is announced at 457b.

Especially because of its contrast to the next wave, it is worth reviewing the structure and content of the argument for the first wave. The criteria of possibility and desirability are established. The counterargument, that women and men have different natures and therefore should be treated differently, is presented and refuted on the grounds that the only difference that makes a difference when it comes to the tasks the guardians will be assigned, including ruling

and philosophy, is physical strength, which is easily accommodated. Equality in education and treatment is defended as desirable because it is natural (in the teleological sense) and as possible because the present prescriptions against it are merely conventional. In short, the arguments for the first wave seem structurally and substantially plausible, and I find no reason to hold that Socrates is not quite serious in his optimism about its possibility and desirability.<sup>5</sup>

The second wave is announced at 457d:

“All these women are to belong to all these men in common, and no woman is to live privately with any man. And the children, in their turn, will be in common, and neither will a parent know his own offspring, nor a child his parent.”

Glaucon acknowledges immediately that this wave is far bigger than the first, that it is far more dubitable as regards its possibility or benefit (457d), and well he might. For as it is developed, the second wave gets expanded to include not only the communality of women and children and the systematic ignorance of parentage, but also, among its more startling proposals, the abolition of private property (458d), the abolition of the family (460d), and the assurance of eugenics through the control of sexual encounters by the fixing of lots drawn to see who can have sex at the sacred times (459a). Clearly, just in so far as the second wave is more dubious, its defense, both in structure and content, will have to be all the more powerful than the first wave. As we shall see, the exact opposite is the case.

While the structure of the argument for the first wave is sensible and plausible, that of the second is bizarre. Socrates begins by trying to evade the argument for desirability, hoping that its benefit will be assumed, though its possibility disputed.

“As to whether it is beneficial, at least, I don’t suppose it would be disputed that the community of women and the community of children are, if possible, the greatest good,” I said, “But I suppose that there would arise a great deal of dispute as to whether they are possible or not.” (457d)

When Glaucon plausibly insists that both would be in dispute, Socrates immediately takes the reverse tack; he asks that its possibility be assumed while he proves its desirability, and then—he says here—he will go on to prove its possibility. Claiming that he is “idle” and “soft,” he requests,

“I too am by now soft myself, and I desire to put off and consider later in what way it is possible; and now, having set it down as possible, I’ll consider, if you permit me, whether their accomplishment would be most advantageous of all for both the city and the guardians. I’ll attempt to consider this with you first, and the other later, if you permit.” (458a)

Though perhaps strange, such a strategy, were it followed faithfully, would probably be acceptable; after all, it is not obviously important which of the two criteria, possibility or desirability, should be satisfied first. However, if we now, for the sake of seeing the structure of the argument, leap to the end of the second wave, we see that after having presented his evidence for the desirability of the extraordinary proposals of the second wave, and forced by Glaucon to turn to the evidence for its possibility (471c), Socrates responds with the following strategy, or perhaps better, strategem, which I quote at some length:

“Do you suppose a painter is any less good who draws a pattern of what the fairest human being would be like and renders everything in the picture adequately, but can't prove that it's also possible that such a man come into being?”

“No, by Zeus, I don't,” he said.

“Then what about this? Weren't we, as we assert, also making a pattern in speech of a good city?”

“Certainly.”

“Do you suppose that what we say is any less good on account of our not being able to prove that it is possible to found a city the same as the one in speech?”

“Surely not,” he said.

“Well, that's the truth of it,” I said. (472d–472e)

Socrates goes on, in a complex way to be examined subsequently, to develop the third wave as the simplest and best way to attain an approximation (473b) of the second wave. Here it is important to recognize that even prior to our examination of the explicit content of the argument for the second wave, its very structure is suspect, and in a way of which the author of the text must surely have been aware. Its possibility is never established. We shall have to see about its desirability. Let us turn to the details of the second wave.

As previously mentioned, the second wave calls initially for the communality of women and children and the systematic ignorance of who one's natural relatives are among the guardians. As the implications of this are developed, private property and the family are abolished. Most stunning of all, however, are the steps recommended regarding sex. The men and women, exercising naked together, will be sexually attracted to each other (458d). In order to control this, “geometric necessity” must be imposed on “erotic necessity,” to borrow Glaucon's phraseology (458d). Strict rules will be imposed on sexual encounters, rules whose connection to “geometric necessity” is eventually expressed in the notoriously complicated and playfully ironic “nuptial number,” introduced at 546b (see Rosen and Adam). The secret principle of these rules will be eugenics, which is introduced by a comical analogy with Glaucon's dogs and cocks. Just as Glaucon watches over their “marriages and procreation” (459a) and allows only the best to mate with the best and at the best time, so shall the same principle be followed with the guardians. Now as we saw, the

analogy with animals had been plausibly used in the first wave to suggest that men and women should be treated as equally as possible. Here we must ask, is it also plausible to treat human eros with the same calculated utilitarianism as we apply to animals? Is there reason to believe that human erotic feelings are no deeper and more complex than we assume to be the case with animals? It is, to say the least, dubious that the author of the *Symposium*, where erotic attraction is characterized as the source of creative inspiration (206cff.) and the first decisive step to philosophy (210aff.), and of the *Phaedrus*, where eros is called one of the four forms of “divine madness” (245bff.), really thinks so. To the contrary, as these texts attest, Plato is one of the first thinkers of our tradition to genuinely appreciate the profundity, the complexity, and so the deep significance of human eros. His total abstraction from this significance in the present passage therefore cannot be intended literally. The abstraction from eros throughout the *Republic* has been noted by a number of commentators (see Rosen, Strauss, and Bloom [1968]). The present passage is surely one of its most striking instances. It is the first serious flaw in the argument for the second wave, and it is decisive.

In any case, the principle of eugenics is to include:

1. Lies and fixed lotteries to deceive everyone into thinking that it is just by chance that the “best” people keep drawing the winning lots, and so are selected to have sex, again and again (459d–460a).
2. Temporary “marriages,” apparently lasting only long enough for copulation to occur, so that women and children will be held in common and natural parentage will remain unknown (460c).
3. The exposure of defective children (460c).
4. Incest prohibitions with rather obvious loopholes (461e).

At 462a, the details of the structure of the second wave now apparently established, Socrates turns to the defense of its desirability. The gist of the argument is this: the greatest good for the city is unity, the greatest evil that which divides it (462b). If people have private concerns, desires, possessions, these might at times come into conflict with the concerns of the city and so cause divisions (462c–d). By eliminating all privacy, therefore, including private property, the family, and even the recognition of who one’s natural children are, one could eliminate the cause of divisions in the city. If the city is my parent, or more generally, my family, there can be no conflict between my concerns for my family and for my city. I shall be the perfect patriot. (The infamous “noble lie,” announced in Book III at 414cff. and now apparently abandoned, was meant to accomplish the same end. There is a certain tension between the noble lie, which entails the belief that I am born not of human parents but of the earth beneath my city (414d), and the second wave, which entails the belief that all guardians of a certain age are my parents, brothers and sisters, etc.). So the second wave will be beneficial because the community of wives and children will be the cause of the unity of the city.

A number of serious flaws can be noted in this argument. First, it assumes that political unity, or patriotism, is not just a value but the highest value. More fully, it assumes that what may—problematically—be the highest political value should straightforwardly be instituted, thereby implying that there are no values which might supersede even the highest political ones. Most of us might agree that political unity is one of the desiderata in a political community. But should we simply accept without argument, as Glaucon does at 462b, that it is the highest value? Are we not all too familiar with situations in which the demand for political unity seems more to undermine justice than to encourage it? One need only consider the case of Socrates himself, against whom the charge of corrupting the youth is clearly tantamount to the claim that he undermined the unity of the city. Even within the project of the *Republic* itself, the claim that unity is the highest value is problematic. One might argue (though Socrates does not) that the primacy of unity is implicit in the earlier definition of justice as each one minding one's own business and not interfering in the business of others (433a–b), but this is hardly obvious or unproblematic. In any case, what about the other cardinal virtues, or the knowledge necessary to rule? Quite especially, what about the Good itself, which would clearly seem to be the leading candidate in the *Republic* for the highest value? At 504d, Socrates clearly asserts that the Good is greater than justice, and so that even the highest political values are not the highest altogether. In sum, it is hardly self-evident that political unity is the highest value. If it should turn out not to be, then other values might conflict with and even supersede it. It would then be even less obvious that the extreme measures suggested in the second wave would be justifiable in the light of these other values. In any case, the supremacy of the principle of political unity, a crucial premise in the defense of the desirability of the second wave, has not been argued for.<sup>6</sup>

Second, there is a flaw in the quest for the abolition of privacy, an absolute limit on the possibility of communism, which is subtly admitted by Socrates at 464d: the body is irreducibly private.

“And what about this? Won't lawsuits and complaints against one another, in a word, vanish from among them thanks to their possessing *nothing private but the body*, while the rest is in common?” (464d; my emphasis).

Is this a small qualification, as Socrates obviously wishes it to be taken? Or is it not rather a decisive limit on the possibility of communism, and so on the guarantee that I shall never experience “private” desires which conflict with the public good? Once again, no argument is presented in support of this important point. It is passed over in silence.

Third, it is hardly plausible to assert that simply by believing that we are all of one family, divisions and discord will be eliminated. As we are all painfully aware, arguments and discord among family members can be among the most

bitter and violent. Especially considering what we are given to believe of Socrates' own marital situation, we can hardly expect him to be so naive about this.

Fourth, in any case, it is only the guardians, apparently, who will have this communism. The entire class of workers and artisans in the city will presumably continue to have orthodox families and private property. Will they not continue to have the same old problems, perhaps even exacerbated by the now enormous differences between their lives and those of the guardian class? Socrates assures Glaucon at 465b that nothing of the kind will occur, but his assurance is hardly consoling, especially without any argument.

There follows (467a–471c) a long discussion by Socrates concerning the training for and conduct of war by the guardians, which includes such policies as bringing the children to watch battles from a safe distance (467e), erotic rewards for valor (468b–c), and the different treatment of Greek enemies than barbarian ones (469c–471b). Glaucon finally catches Socrates up on this at 471c, but in an unfortunate way. Indicating that Socrates is likely to go on and on, Glaucon demands that he turn now to whether such steps as the second wave requires would be possible. But in so doing, he grants its desirability:

“Is it possible for this regime to come into being, and how is it ever possible? I see that, if it should come into being, everything would be good for the city in which it came into being.” (471c)

As we have seen, its desirability has hardly been adequately established. Especially compared to the power of the arguments for the first wave, those for the desirability of the second wave are critically deficient.

Socrates responds to Glaucon's challenge by admitting that he has been stalling, but for the reason that establishing the possibility of the second wave requires the third wave, which threatens to be overwhelming:

“All of a sudden,” I said, “you have, as it were, assaulted my argument, and you have no sympathy for me and my loitering. Perhaps you don't know that when I've hardly escaped the two waves, you're now beginning the biggest and most difficult, the third wave.” (472a)

The logical structure of the connection between the second and third waves is thus somewhat complex, and needs to be clarified. The desirability of the second wave is founded on the principle of the supremacy of the value of political unity and the presumption that human eros can be treated in roughly the same way as the sexual desire of animals (we have seen the flaws in these arguments). The possibility of the second wave, we are now told, requires the third wave, the establishing of philosopher-kings. Thus, it would seem that if the third wave proves possible, and if we were to accept the arguments for the desirability of the second wave, then the second wave would have been shown

to be both possible and desirable. However, Socrates' next steps throw this whole situation into question.

For his next step, as we have previously seen, is simply to deny that the possibility of the second wave as it stands can be proved. I have already quoted the passage at 472d–472e where he admits this. However, he qualifies this impossibility in a subtle and important way. If we pick up his speech at the point of his denial of its possibility, we find Socrates saying:

“Well, then, that’s the truth of it,” I said. “But if then to gratify you I must also strive to prove how and under what condition it would be *most possible* (kata ti dunatōtat av eiē), grant me the same points again for this proof.”

“What points?”

“Can anything be done as it is said? Or is it the nature of acting to attain to less truth than speaking, even if someone doesn’t think so? Do you agree that it’s so or not?”

“I do agree,” he said.

“Then don’t compel me necessarily to present it as coming into being in every way in deed as we described it in speech. But if we are able to find that a city could be governed in a way *most closely approximating* what has been said, (hōs an eggōtata tōn eirēmenōn polis oikēseien) say that we’ve found the possibility of these things coming into being on which you insist.” (472e–473b; my emphasis)

Here a number of crucial points must be reiterated. First, Socrates admits that he cannot prove the real possibility of the second wave as it stands. This is already a crucial limitation on the original project of proving the possibility and desirability of all three waves. In the strictest sense, it is an admission of defeat. Second, only an approximation of the second wave can be established, and Glaucon must accept that. Third, the smallest step required for this approximation of the second wave is, as we see at 473d, the third wave, the establishing of the rule of philosopher-kings.

A moment’s reflection on this situation makes clear that everything would seem to depend on precisely how the city established with philosopher-kings would differ from the city of the second wave. What, after all, is and is not possible in deed as well as in speech? Will the fixed lotteries and rules for eugenics still be in effect? Will parents know their natural children? Yet we are never told anything about how the two cities would differ. Nevertheless, we must remember that what is being established in the third wave is not the precise city of the second wave but some undetermined modification of it, with philosopher-kings at its head. By implication, the third wave presents us, however quietly, with a different city from the city of the second wave. (To this may be added the evidence of Book VIII, at 546–47. There, in Socrates’ account of how the city in speech, even if established, must fall, he attributes its inevitable failure explicitly to the failure to sustain the conditions of the second wave; the sex laws will inevitably be disobeyed. This is tantamount to an ex-

plicit admission that even if an approximation of the second wave were somehow established, it would not endure.)

We must conclude of the second wave, therefore, that a defense of its possibility is admittedly impossible and the arguments for its desirability manifestly inadequate. We can turn now to the third wave, which, I emphasize again, is introduced as the smallest necessary step to render possible some undetermined modification of the second wave. (Since, as we have seen, the first wave is possible and desirable, and, as we shall see, the third wave is called unlikely but not impossible [499b–c, 499d, 502a–b, 502c, 540d], the second wave, as admittedly impossible in the strict sense, would seem to be the most extreme. It is puzzling, therefore, that Socrates calls the third wave the biggest [473c]. The explanation of this will lie in the extreme complexity of the third wave.)

The formulation of the third wave occurs at 473d:

“Unless,” I said, “the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, . . . there is no rest from ills for the cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I think for human kind. . . .” (473d)

The working out of this wave, however, takes more than two books (the end of Book V, plus all of Books VI and VII) to accomplish. It is full of philosophically important discussions, including the Good, the divided line, and the image of the cave. We shall be concerned here only with those aspects of the argument which directly concern the establishing of the desirability and possibility of philosopher-kings. It is, as one might expect, exceedingly complex. Suppose we begin, as does the actual argument, (474dff.) with the question of desirability. Why is it even problematic that having rulers who are philosophers would be desirable? Because philosophers are in ill repute in most cities, regarded as at best harmless but useless, at worst harmful to the cities (487c–d). To deal with this problem, which Socrates acknowledges is a real one (487d), he must distinguish between the reputed philosophers and the true philosophers. The elucidation of this distinction involves the introduction of the themes of being and becoming, opinion and knowledge, and the Forms (474dff.; see especially 476–80), as well as a long discussion of the extreme difficulty and unlikelihood of actually developing such philosophers (487dff.; see especially 496b–e). This includes the extremely problematic recognition that such philosophers, were they to come along, would not want to rule and so would have to be forced to do so (519cff.). Throughout these passages, Socrates regularly reiterates his contention that the development of such philosophers, and so of philosopher-kings, would be very unlikely, but not impossible (499b–c, 499d, 502a–b, 502c, 540d). So far, so good, at least by the order of the argument. The problem arises for the issue at hand because Socrates’ account of the “true” philosopher suggests a man or woman (540c) who, by the standards of the other dialogues, is less a lover of wisdom, lacking and therefore striving after

wisdom, than a wise person, with a comprehensive knowledge not only of the Forms and their relation to phenomena, but even of the Idea of the Good itself (see especially 484b, 484c–d, 506a). (Again, how could the Good be known comprehensively by anyone if it is “beyond” truth, intelligibility, and even being [*Republic* 508e–509c]?) Thus the philosopher-kings are described as people who “grasp what is always the same in all respects” (484b), who “not only know what each thing is, but also don’t lack experience or fall short of the others in any other part of virtue” (484d), and who will know the just, the beautiful, and the Good (506a). In short, the apparent assumption of this section of the *Republic* is that the philosopher-kings will be in fact wise people, with a comprehensive knowledge of the whole, in the light of which they will, reluctantly, rule the city.

But the whole thrust of most other Platonic dialogues is that such a situation is humanly impossible. Wisdom of this sort is for the gods alone, indeed, is the principal difference between the gods and humans. In the *Apology*, Socrates is called by the Delphic Oracle the wisest of men, and his wisdom is precisely the recognition of his lack of knowledge (*Apology*, 20ff.). In the *Symposium*, human being, as erotic, is characterized by a radical incompleteness and the constant striving for completeness, including the completeness of wisdom (see especially the speeches of Aristophanes and Socrates), and in the *Phaedrus*, only the gods are portrayed as being able to sustain a contemplation of the “hyper-ouranian beings” (247–48), whereas the souls of mortals are constantly dragged down and get only partial glimpses of these higher entities (248a–c). Human beings are, like the eros which is our nature, ontologically “in the middle” between the mortal and the divine (*Symposium* 202d–e), between ignorance and wisdom (*Symposium* 203e–204a). Indeed, at *Symposium* 204b, philosophers are explicitly singled out as in this intermediary state between ignorance and wisdom. The philosopher-kings of the *Republic* are thus portrayed as having achieved an epistemological status elsewhere reserved for the gods. Not for nothing is this city referred to as “in heaven” (592b). Indeed, even within the *Republic* itself, as the previously cited passage at 546a–b attests, the ultimate incompleteness or partiality of the philosopher-kings’ wisdom is admitted. They will fail in their efforts to adhere consistently to the complex sex laws.<sup>7</sup>

This makes the question of the possibility of the philosopher-kings altogether problematic. If, as it certainly seems, the philosopher-kings are not people like Socrates who lack wisdom, recognize their lack, and strive for wisdom, but rather are wise people, then there is next to no evidence in the dialogues as a whole that Plato believes such an achievement is possible for humans. Considering the question from the standpoint not of philosophers but of wise people, the third wave is almost certainly impossible. On the other hand, by this (impossible) standard, it is also more plausible that it would be desirable. Do we not all wish for political leaders who genuinely and comprehensively know what they are doing?

But suppose we consider the possibility, not of wise rulers as entertained in the *Republic*, but, more realistically, of genuine philosophers of the Socratic stripe becoming rulers. Certainly it would be possible for people like Socrates, who recognize their lack of wisdom but spend their lives striving for it, to take the rule of a city. No doubt it would be, as the *Republic* itself suggests, extremely unlikely, since precisely those philosophers would not want to rule (the case of Socrates himself is apt here). Nevertheless, such a person would fairly fit the *Republic's* contention that it would be “unlikely but not impossible” to find such a ruler. But then, would it any longer be desirable? If it would be relatively unproblematic to desire as a ruler someone with a genuinely comprehensive knowledge of the political realm and of the whole, it is, to say the least, less obvious that the best of all possible regimes would be ruled by a Socratic philosopher, always questioning, never accepting on faith conventional beliefs, caring more for the individual souls of citizens than for the political whole, etc. Perhaps one could generate what would no doubt be a long and involved argument in behalf of such a ruler. But no such thing is presented in the *Republic*.

At the very end of Book VII, bringing his argument to a conclusion, Socrates reiterates once more his insistence that the rule of philosopher-kings is hard but not impossible:

“Do we agree that the things we have said about the city and the regime are not in every way prayers; that they are hard but in a way possible; and that it is possible in no other way than the one stated: when the true philosophers, either one or more, come to power in a city       ” (540d)

Glaucon, altogether reasonably, as we now see, asks how. Socrates responds with the following striking conclusion as to how such a situation, the conditions of the third wave, might be brought about:

“All those in the city who happen to be older than ten they will send out into the country; and taking over their children, they will rear them—far away from those dispositions they now have from their parents—in their own manners and laws that are such as we described before. And, with the city and the regime of which we were speaking thus established *most quickly and easily*, it will itself be happy, and most profit the nation in which it comes to be.” (541a; my emphasis)

Are we to believe that Plato seriously held that it would be possible to convince the parents of an entire city (presumably including artisans as well as potential guardians and philosophers) to leave that city, leaving their children under ten behind in the hands of the founders of a new city who would raise them according to the austere measures set out by Socrates earlier in the dialogue? I suggest that it is altogether more likely that the claim that such a city is possible is ironic, that the conditions for bringing it about, far from being accomplished “most quickly and easily,” are effectively impossible.

Let us briefly summarize where we stand so far. We have seen that significantly-different judgments are made regarding the first, second, and third waves. To review briefly, the first wave, equal treatment and education of men and women, was plausibly argued to be both possible and desirable. The second wave, radical communism, abolition of the family, eugenics, and their sundry implications, turned out to be indefensible as regards its possibility, and desirable only on the dubious premises that, first, political unity was the highest of all values (an assumption decisively undercut by the claim in Book VI that the Good is the greatest thing), and second, that human eros could be fairly treated with the same cold calculation as that of dogs. Only a vague and undetermined modification was allowed, and that only on the hypothesis that the third wave would be proved possible and desirable. For all intents and purposes, we can conclude that the second wave in the strict sense is neither possible nor desirable. The third wave, the establishing of philosopher-kings, proved to be structurally the most complex. If we take “philosopher” in the sense outlined in Books V–VII, namely, as wise persons with comprehensive knowledge of the structure of the whole, then philosopher-kings would be almost obviously desirable but almost certainly impossible. If, more realistically and more in keeping with the conception of philosophy regularly exhibited by Socrates, we take the philosopher to be someone who lacks wisdom, recognizes that lack, and strives to overcome it, then a philosophic ruler seems possible, though hardly probable, but its desirability becomes much more debatable, and in any case is not defended in the *Republic*. What conclusions can be drawn from this?

First and most obviously, we see that we should no longer speak simplistically of the possibility or impossibility, desirability or undesirability, of the three waves taken together, at least not without first recognizing that different judgments must be made on each separately. If we do take all three waves together, especially considering the extremely problematic character of the second wave, we may fairly conclude that the weight of the evidence is on the side of those who argue that the city in speech is not intended as a real possibility. But this conclusion must always be moderated by the recognition that very different conclusions are drawn for each of the three waves taken singly.

But another, perhaps more far-reaching, conclusion can be drawn regarding the connection of the three waves to the teaching of the *Republic* as a whole. To see this, we must remind ourselves that the construction of a perfectly just city was not the originating project of the dialogue. The originating project was the concern to answer the questions generated by the discussions in Book I, especially between Socrates and Thrasymachus: What is justice, and Who is happier, the just or the unjust person? The concern with the city arose as a consequence of the famous “city-soul” analogy, introduced in Book II (368d–369b) in order to get a “better look” at justice.

Keeping this in mind, let us leap ahead to the apparent conclusion of the

whole issue of the “city in speech,” which occurs at the very end of Book IX. Socrates has been arguing in conclusion that the philosophic person should be concerned with the health of one’s own soul, the “regime within.” Glaucon comments:

“Then,” he said, “if it’s that he cares about, he won’t be willing to mind the political things.”

“Yes, by the dog,” I said, “he will in his own city, very much so. However, perhaps he won’t in his fatherland unless some divine chance coincidentally comes to pass.”

“I understand,” he said. “You mean he will in the city whose foundation we have now gone through, the one that has its place in speeches, since I don’t suppose it exists anywhere on earth.”

“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.*” (592a–b; my emphasis)

The real issue, we are told in conclusion, is not whether such an actual city is possible, which now seems to be rather unimportant, but whether such a city can be established in Glaucon’s, and in each of our, souls. About this striking conclusion a number of observations may be made.

First, Socrates’ last exhortation at 592b (which I emphasized in the quotation) is in striking tension with the whole thrust of the setting up of the city in speech, where we were regularly reminded that the happiness of the individual is not the issue but the city as a whole (e.g., 420b, 466a), and that in particular the philosopher-kings must be made to see that they have a duty precisely not to “mind the things of this city (i.e., the individual soul) alone,” but rather to make their concern the ruling of the larger city (519c–520a). Yet here, at the end of Book IX, we are told that even if such a real city were established, the true philosopher would mind the concerns of the city within his soul alone, “and of no other” (592b). In short, this crucial conclusion of the *Republic* flies in the face of a central contention, a central requirement, of the city in speech.

Second, the conclusion clearly invokes again the issue of the city-soul analogy. An analogy, of course, is never an identity; it must always be examined to see where the analogy works, and where it breaks down. Let us do that with particular reference to the relevance of the three waves to the city-soul analogy. What do we discover?

The first wave, equality of men and women, might seem at first to have no correlation when we turn to the individual soul, and perhaps that is the simplest way to take it. What, after all, would be the literal correlation to men and women within the individual soul? However, one might speculate that a cor-

relation is possible if we take such equality to refer to the “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics of the individual soul. We could then say that the point of the first wave, applied to the individual soul, is that, first, there are both “masculine” and “feminine” elements in each soul, and, second, the “masculine” and “feminine” elements in the soul must be treated and nurtured equally, and that this is especially true for the philosophic soul. (“Full humanity is a discrete mixture of masculinity and femininity” [Bloom (1968), p. 384]. One might also note *Symposium* 203bff., where Eros’ parentage is delineated—contra Pausanias—as the heterosexual couple, Poros and Penia, and where, thus, the erotic aspect of the soul is portrayed explicitly as partaking of both the “masculine” and “feminine” parents.) The conclusion of the application of the first wave to the city-soul analogy would thus be that equal treatment and nurture of the “masculine” and “feminine” elements in the individual soul is both possible and desirable.

The second wave, radical communism of women and children, etc., simply has no specific correlation when we turn to the individual soul. Questions regarding sex laws, who should have sex with whom and when, rigged lotteries, and how to keep people from knowing their natural family members, have no correlate in the relations between parts of the individual soul. I suspect that this is no accident. Recall that the second wave was of the three the most unambiguously problematic regarding its possibility and desirability. It proved impossible as it stands and arguably undesirable as well. But because the second wave is irrelevant when applied to the soul, it need not affect negatively our conclusions regarding the soul, though it certainly must when applied to the city. With regard to the individual soul, then, we can dispense with the morass of problems regarding the second wave.

The third wave, however, the rule of philosophy, does seem manifestly relevant. Given the triadic structure of the soul (580dff.), it clearly appeals to the desirability of reason ruling over the spirited and desiring parts of the soul, which is precisely the point Socrates seems to be appealing to in his conclusion at the end of Book IX. It is tantamount to the rule of philosophy in the individual soul.

If we now recall the ambiguity of our conclusion regarding the third wave and apply it to the individual soul, we get, as our final conclusion, something like this: If comprehensive wisdom were possible for an individual, it would certainly be desirable to live one’s life by the dictates of that wisdom; but it seems that such an achievement is not possible for humans. If, however, we take philosophy, more realistically, in something like the Socratic sense, we get, as the real conclusion to the *Republic* on this issue, that living a life under the rule of philosophy, that is, living the sort of interrogative life exhibited by Socrates, is possible, though unlikely, and problematically desirable. For women and for men. That seems a fair conclusion.

## NOTES

1. For the former view, see T.L. Thorson, a compendium of six essays, all of which, with the noteworthy exception of Leo Strauss's, assume that Plato argued seriously for the possibility of his "ideal state." The essays of R.H.S. Crossman, "Plato and the Perfect State", and Karl Popper, "Plato as the Enemy of the Open Society" are the most explicit examples of this widely held view, a view which, as this volume attests, does not preclude vigorous disagreement on other issues among its defenders. For representatives of the view that the *Republic* is an anti-utopian work, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, and Stanley Rosen, "The Role of Eros in Plato's *Republic*."

2. It might be objected that, on the surface, Socrates seems to affirm the possibility and desirability of all three waves. To call this surface appearance into question demands reading between the lines, taking serious account of the possibility of irony, and construing Plato as not necessarily always intending that the reader of the dialogue accept as Platonic doctrine everything that Socrates says. For an extended hermeneutic of irony in the *Republic* which addresses these themes, see my "Taking the Longer Road: The Irony of Plato's *Republic*." The present paper will hopefully be an exhibition of that hermeneutic. For a different but compatible statement of the complexity of interpreting Platonic dialogues, consider the seminal notion of "Platonic provocations" set out in Mitchell Miller's "Platonic Provocations: Reflections on the Soul and the Good in the *Republic*."

3. For a comprehensive and instructive discussion of the history of scholarship on the proposals for women in Book V, as well as the attitudes towards women generally in the dialogues, see Natalie Harris Bluestone, *Women and the Ideal Society: Plato's Republic and Modern Myths of Gender*. Bluestone includes the suggestion, which is not developed, that "although the co-equal proposals (the three waves) are connected as Plato presents them, the justice of each can be considered separately." (p. 106).

4. The words employed here, *asthenesterais* . . . *ischuroterois*, both have as their primary senses physical strength and weakness, although both can also be used with broader connotations (Liddell and Scott, pp. 256, 843). Especially given what Socrates is presently to say regarding equal treatment, it is most plausible to limit his meaning here to relative physical strength and weakness.

5. Contra Bloom (1968), pp. 380–84, who calls the first wave, together with the second, "absurd conceits" (p. 380), "absurd considerations" (p. 381), "nonsense" (p. 382) and describes Socrates as "fabricat(ing) a convention about the nature of women," and "admit(ting) that the best women are always inferior in capacity to the best men;" (p. 383). Bloom is surely right, however, when he asserts that part of the teaching here is that "full humanity is a discrete mixture of masculinity and femininity" (p. 384), a position on which I shall comment further in my conclusion. For a view closer to my own, see Dale Hall, "The *Republic* and the Limits of Politics." In reference to the first wave, Hall argues against Bloom and Strauss that "there are none of the familiar signs of irony or comedy in Plato's discussion of equality. Socrates does not appeal to absurd premisses, nor reason fallaciously, nor contradict himself." (p. 296). Hall goes on, unfortunately, to make the same claims for all three waves, and Bloom, in his reply ("Reply to Hall"), is able to raise serious and plausible objections to Hall's overall thesis.

6. Thus even if one assumes that when Aristotle refers to some who believe in unchangeable substances as holding that "the One itself is the good itself" (*Metaphysics*, 1091b13–14) he is referring to Plato, and moreover, that he is correct, it is hardly obvious that political unity is identical with the Good itself. Still further, if we do identify political unity with the Good, stunning consequences would follow. Since we are told that the good is "beyond being and intelligibility" (*Republic* 508e–509c), it would seem to follow that we could not in principle comprehensively understand unity/good, nor could we establish it within "being." By this argument, then, the perfectly just city would be manifestly impossible. For an interesting discussion of the issue of political unity with reference to the *Symposium*, see Arlene Saxonhouse, "The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*."

7. Cf. *Euthydemus*, 291bff. for the impossibility of the “kingly art.” Even if one were to ignore such evidence as 546a and adopt a version of the “chronological hypothesis,” arguing that although “the early Plato” held to the impossibility of comprehensive wisdom, “the mature Plato” (of the *Republic*—ignoring 546a) thought that wisdom was achievable, one would still have to explain away such crucial “mature” dialogues as the *Theaetetus*, which ends in aporia.

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