

Interpretation

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In the final paragraph of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates declares that "a tale was saved and not lost." He adds, in the optative mood, that "it could save us too, if we were persuaded by it." Since neither Glaucon nor any of the other characters are allowed to respond, this ending is more ambiguous than it initially seems. Was Glaucon actually persuaded and saved? Jacob Howland's provocative new book *Glaucon's Fate: History, Myth, and Character in Plato's "Republic,"* takes up this perplexing question.

Howland's bold thesis centers around the novel historical claim, first advanced by the historian Mark Munn, that Glaucon died fighting alongside Critias, the notorious leader of the tyrannical Thirty who appears in several other Platonic dialogues. The historical evidence offered by Howland, as he himself acknowledges, is circumstantial at best (8). Neither Glaucon's puzzling absence from the *Apology*, nor his undoubted courage and ambition, nor the setting of the *Republic* at the place of the alleged battle, suffices to locate Glaucon anywhere near the scene of the crime in 403. One might expect that the demise of so famous a Platonic character under such sensational circumstances would have left some compelling historical trace, even in the fragmentary classical sources. Howland accounts for the "absence in the *Republic* [and presumably elsewhere] of direct evidence of Glaucon's involvement with the Thirty" by claiming that the Athenians were forced to swear an oath to forget about it, represented in the *Republic* by the river Lethe, whose name means "forgetful," at the end of the dialogue (244). Yet do

philosophers feel obliged to honor oaths of this sort, decades after the fact? Like so much in Howland's book, this remains an intriguing conjecture. Is there enough evidence attesting to Glaucon's untimely, dishonorable death to justify a reinterpretation of the entire *Republic* on its account? Or is a reinterpretation of the *Republic* and certain other dialogues necessary, in order to sustain a historical hypothesis for which the external evidence is so patchy? If this is the case, we need to examine Howland's novel exegesis of the *Republic*, as the strongest witness to his historical claim.

How thoroughly was Glaucon convinced by Socrates to abandon politics and turn to philosophy? Glaucon is usually viewed as a likable and willing interlocutor, albeit prone to fits of martial and erotic fervor. He is certainly not a philosopher of the rank of his brother Plato, but between that and seeking to become tyrant there may be other, milder human possibilities. In order to sustain his thesis, Howland needs to paint an unusually dark picture of Glaucon. A centerpiece of this effort is his constant praise of the True City, against which Glaucon so memorably rebels (56–62, 73, 78, 80, 133, 179, 191, 195, 197, 221, 234; see *Rep.* 372e6). Howland's glowing account of this city rests on his gloss on the Greek words *ousia*, which he takes to mean essence as well as wealth, and *sunousia*, which he takes to comprise all forms of living together, including poetry, music, and, if not philosophy, soundness of mind. By establishing that the True City contains the necessary ingredients for human flourishing, Howland is able to rebuke Glaucon's rejection of its goodness as a sign of his manly political excess, corrupted by the "inflated perspective" of Athenian custom (58–60; *Rep.* 372b8). While Howland's interpretation of the Greek words is semantically correct, it does not fit the description of what Glaucon calls the City of Sows (372d4), whose list of professions omits soldiers, poets, and philosophers, and whose meals consist mainly of bread and herbs (*Rep.* 369–73). It is hard to fault Glaucon for his attachment to the finer things in life, a quintessentially human passion which keeps the dialogue in motion. Yet Howland's observations contain more than a kernel of truth: Glaucon's visceral reaction against this frugal, peaceful city reveals a proud, erotic nature that might be difficult to moderate and control.

Howland continues to cast his critical eye on Glaucon by portraying the "blatant...excesses" of Book 5 concerning the material and sexual awards for the best warriors as primarily a test for him. Corrupted by a bad musical upbringing and the vices that follow from it (401b–402a), Glaucon fails this test, urging the establishment of the city despite its flagrant injustices (73–76). Howland is right to assert that this aspect of life in the city tends to

undermine, if not destroy, the rigorous education in self-restraint and stern laws regulating property and sex that appeared to characterize the city up to this point. But does Glaucon's attraction to prizes for valor make him badly educated and uncontrollably ambitious? Does Socrates mean to indicate the incurable nature of Glaucon in particular, or make the more general point that spirited human beings of his type cannot flourish in a society whose virtuous equality is so severe that even courage and accomplishment cannot be suitably honored and rewarded? Howland also ignores the possibility that the promise of sexual rewards to the best warriors might serve as a subterfuge for advancing the city's breeding program.

Lurking everywhere in Howland's reading of the *Republic* is the ominous shadow of Critias. Glaucon's notorious cousin is not so much as mentioned in the dialogue, but Socrates's jealous rivalry with him allegedly colors his entire approach (6, 8, 209–11). Unfortunately, only fragments of Critias's own writings survive. Howland adduces a passage from a lost play attributed to him, spoken by the accursed Sisyphus in a context than can never be recovered (87–88). Howland may more confidently rely on the Platonic dialogues in which Critias appears: the *Critias* and *Timaeus*, which are explicitly linked to the *Republic*, as well as the *Charmides*. Howland convincingly brings out Critias's preoccupation with technology, revealed in his portrayal of both Athens and Atlantis (103, 106). But there are also aspects of Critias's speech that impose limits on human art. The power and unity of Atlantis begin to wane as soon as its original "divine portion" dissipates: rather than seeking a human solution to this problem, Critias turns to Zeus, at which point his speech breaks off (*Critias* 121b–c). Critias also displays a keen interest in natural disasters, which destroyed Atlantis and have whittled away at Athens: in the face of such cosmic events, human art appears powerless (*Timaeus* 22c–d, 25c–d; *Critias* 111b). Howland's intricate interpretations of these passages do not adequately explain Critias's concern with nature's destructive power (106, 197–200). A comparison of Critias's Atlantis with its most obvious modern analogue, the *New Atlantis* of Francis Bacon, might illuminate some of the difficulties that Howland's focus on the link between Critias and technology so effectively raises.

Howland adds contemporary weight to his novel interpretation by borrowing the modern term "ideology" along with the various -isms that sprout from it (121, 129, 187). Beginning with a chapter titled "Channeling Critias," Howland develops the notion that Critias's ideas seep namelessly into the *Republic*, through the early speeches of Thrasymachus and Glaucon (13, 126).

“An intellectual bully, Thrasymachus would have been at home among the fist-pounding radical elites of the twentieth century, including theoreticians of communism and fascism” (128). Yet might there be a crucial difference between Thrasymachus’s artless defense of what any particular government does, and the sweeping theories of ideological totalitarianism? At the very least, Thrasymachus would have rejected the efforts of these ideologues to realize genuine justice on earth as destructive and foolish. We may wonder whether Hitler, Stalin, or any of their minions could have been so easily tamed by Socrates. Howland’s efforts to present the story of the Ring of Gyges as a sign of Glaucon’s incurable attraction to the injustice of Critias (141–47) overlook Glaucon’s stated purpose of forcing Socrates to defend justice more convincingly than he has so far against Thrasymachus’s arguments (357a–b).

Howland’s interpretation culminates in the claim that the Callipolis which Socrates constructs in the *Republic* represents a frightful ideological tyranny. The “fate of philosophy in Callipolis” is linked to the story of Arion, as recounted by Herodotus. Arion’s plunge into the sea in his beautiful clothes constitutes an image of the soiling of philosophy by the city, while Periander, for whom he works, embodies the tyrant (Howland 158–65, 213; cf. *Rep.* 336a). This story is invoked, according to Howland, by Socrates’s reference (at 453d) to a rescue by a dolphin, which cites no human being by name. Can we be sure that Socrates means to invoke Herodotus’s version of the story? Howland’s extensive use of it depends on a positive answer to this question.

Howland provides further evidence for the importance of Critias in carefully observing Socrates’s switch from *gnōsis* to *epistēmē* at 477b. He reads this as an attempt to appeal to Glaucon’s prejudice in favor of Critias’s view: “Like Critias, Glaucon embraces a phantasm of the philosopher as a scientific knower” (187, 205). Yet why should we regard *epistēmē*, which often refers to genuine knowledge, as a phantasm? Howland puts great weight on Socrates’s acknowledgment that he has gotten carried away in his angry defense of philosophy (213, 536c). He argues that this confession is not, as some might assume, gently ironic, but rather indicative of a serious blunder on Socrates’s part, provoked by a desire for “poetic revenge” against the never-mentioned Critias. “In constructing Callipolis, Socrates has come to resemble the very men he despises—mean, small-souled men who pollute Philosophia with their indecent association” (213–14). Missing from Howland’s account, however, is Socrates’s placement of this city in heaven at the end of Book 9. Glaucon’s agreement on the impossibly remote location of the city would

seem to indicate that he too has abandoned any effort to realize the tarnished city on earth.

In this fresh, audacious new book on the most famous Platonic dialogue, Howland has delivered a virtuoso performance. Not content to publish only one book on the *Republic*, titled the *Odyssey of Philosophy*, he has now revised his views. A knowledgeable, careful, and intense reader of Plato, Howland picks up on a wide range of subtleties and details. Informed by a lifetime of studying Greek thought, his command of both relatively obscure Greek sources, such as Xenophon's *Hellenica*, as well as the work of renowned poets such as Homer and Aeschylus, is evident throughout. The *Republic* is chock full of references to Greek myth, and hardly a single one seems to escape Howland. Even those who resist the book's central thesis will benefit greatly from its erudition in these regards. Yet Howland's thesis remains highly conjectural. Its greatest value, therefore, is to point to the ambiguity of the *Republic* itself. In cautioning against the hasty assumption that Glaucon, having been cured of political ambition by Socrates, lived out the rest of his life uneventfully, Howland raises a number of important questions. First, to what extent can or should the Platonic dialogues be situated firmly in history, so that their meaning is determined partly by the future fate of their characters? Second, how powerful is Socratic argument as an antidote against political ambition? Since it failed to temper the behavior of Alcibiades and Meno, we should not automatically suppose that it succeeded in reforming Glaucon. Third, is Socrates himself beyond such passions as envy and competitiveness, or is he in fact dominated by them? In this respect, Howland revives an argument against Socrates that was developed by Nietzsche over a century ago.