

# **PLATO'S LABYRINTH**

## **SOPHISTRIES, LIES AND CONSPIRACIES IN SOCRATIC DIALOGUES**

Aakash Singh Rathore



‘Just as some mysterious force compels the author of *Plato’s Labyrinth* to train for triathlons in the crowded and dangerous labyrinths of New Delhi, so too does this same force compel him, as one of India’s foremost political theorists, to guide his readers through the labyrinths of Plato’s dialogues. What purpose do these two pursuits share? Aakash Singh Rathore refers to the conspiracy in universities that prevents students from understanding fully the radical and erotic nature of Platonic philosophy. This book charms his readers just as Socrates charmed many Athenians to show that philosophizing is not a useless luxury but the most profound form of liberation available to humanity.’

—**John von Heyking**, author of *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship*

‘Aakash Singh Rathore ingeniously reinscribes Plato’s work into our own day by revealing its ancestry in Socratic argument as much as Sophistic rhetoric. He challenges textbook orthodoxies in evoking authors and artists from Strauss, Xenophon, Nietzsche and Shaw to Homer, Rodin and Myron. Deploying drama, conspiracies and humor, Rathore’s creative rereading of Plato is rigorously grounded in texts while exploring their esoteric unconscious. Consequently, he establishes intellectual freedom as egalitarian precisely because it is won through processes of indirect communication, intense physical labor and immense responsibility.’

—**Kanchana Mahadevan**, author of *Between Femininity and Feminism: Colonial and Postcolonial Perspectives on Care*

‘This study of Plato’s Socratic writings, interpreted from the viewpoint of their dialogue form, and carried out by means of techniques of literary analysis inspired by contemporary philosophers, brings to light an entire network of intrigues beneath the surface of Plato’s narration. This original and provocative work seeks to unravel the tangled trail of intrigues. The book is filled with twists and surprises.’

—**Luc Brisson**, Co-President of the International Plato Society;  
Director of Research, Centre National de la Recherche  
Scientifique, Paris; and author of *Plato the Myth Maker*



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## PLATO'S LABYRINTH

This original and stimulating study of Plato's Socratic dialogues rereads and reinterprets Plato's writings in terms of their dialogical or dramatic form. Taking inspiration from the techniques of Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida and Leo Strauss, Aakash Singh Rathore presents the Socratic dialogues as labyrinthine texts replete with sophistries and lies that mask behind them important philosophical and political conspiracies.

*Plato's Labyrinth* argues that these conspiracies and intrigues are of manifold kinds – in some, Plato is masterminding the conspiracy; in others, Socrates, or the Sophists, are the victims of the conspiracies. With supplementary forays ('intermissions') into the world of Xenophon and the Sophists, the complex and evolving series of overlapping arguments that the book lays out unfold within an edgy and dramatic narrative.

Presenting innovative readings of major texts – Plato's *Parmenides*, *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Meno*, as also Homer's *Odyssey* – this work is an ambitious attempt to synthesize philological, political, historical and philosophical research into a classical text-centred study that is at once of urgent contemporary relevance.

This book aims to revitalize the study of ancient Greek thought in all its diverse disciplinary richness and will interest students and scholars across the social sciences and humanities, especially those in philosophy, Greek and classical studies, language and literature, politics, media and culture studies, theatre and performance studies, and history.

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# PLATO'S LABYRINTH

Sophistries, Lies and Conspiracies  
in Socratic Dialogues

*Aakash Singh Rathore*



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*I dedicate this work to two  
of my great teachers . . .*

**Umberto Eco**

*Twenty years ago,  
under a red Bologna portico,  
you said something enigmatic  
about a labyrinth.*

**Jacques Derrida**

*One Parisian summer.  
One Platonic Text.  
Seventeen years of flashbacks.*







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# PARODOS

## Esoteric writing, sophistries, lies and conspiracies

The real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages.

– Leo Strauss

The *Parodos*: In the opening of a standard Greek drama, the *parodos* is the song sung by the chorus as it first enters the orchestra and dances for the spectators. It touches on the main motifs of the dramatic action that the play will unfold. Why this introductory chapter is titled *Parodos* is about to become more clear.

This is a new book on an old subject. The subject being the works of Plato, widely known and profusely commented upon. Plato scholarship has been continuous since the time of Plato's student, Aristotle, and the books number in the thousands. Although the dialogues interpreted here are renowned, and there is no end to the wealth of commentary on them, the reading provided to them in this book you are now holding will be shockingly unfamiliar. Each chapter (and the intermissions between them) provides a strikingly unusual interpretation, one that runs quite contrary to the standard way Plato's dialogues are taught at colleges and universities throughout the world.

The usual way to read and teach Platonic dialogues is to accept the statements of Socrates as representing the philosophical teachings of Plato, more or less ignoring all of the dramatic aspects of the dialogues: for example, the cursing, the anger and emotion, or the physical attributes of the speakers. As one critic of this approach has put it, any hypothetical student of Platonic scholarship 'who had never read a dialogue but was presented with much of the secondary literature

written on them would never guess, in fact would be shocked to hear, that the original text is a drama'.<sup>1</sup>

In this book, however, special attention will be paid to the action and the persona of the interlocutors in the dialogues, and not only to the statements put forward. In a manner reminiscent of Dan Brown's conspiratorial reconstruction of ancient writings, paintings and practices from *The Da Vinci Code*, this completely eccentric little book on Plato will reread well-known Platonic dialogues as nothing short of conspiracies. Of course, the truer inspiration is not Dan Brown, but his much more sophisticated predecessor, Umberto Eco. Eco, in classic works like *Foucault's Pendulum* (which gave me the model for the name *Plato's Labyrinth*) and *Name of the Rose*, teased out certain mysterious aspects of the nature and history of philosophical activity and indicated numerous potential moments of conspiracy within formalized philosophy. What manner of conspiracies do we attempt to expose in this book?

### A controversial hypothesis

It is not a long and slowly unwinding plot like in Dan Brown or Umberto Eco. In the present book, each innovative reconstruction that the chapter or intermission embarks upon differs from the others in some way. The conspiracies and intrigues are of different kinds – in some, Plato is committing the conspiracy; in others, Plato is the subject of the conspiracy. To help you understand this unusual approach, we are going to take a quick detour to examine the life and work of the German philologist and philosopher Leo Strauss, on whose observations I have modeled my own set of conspiracies.

Acknowledged by ancient Greek thought, but masked by Modern thought, there is a principal tension which Strauss characterizes as the conflict between the philosopher and the city. This conflict was epitomized in Plato's trial and death of Socrates<sup>2</sup> and provided Strauss the key to rediscover another ignored, or possibly even totally forgotten, phenomenon. This ignored/forgotten phenomenon is what he calls the art of esoteric writing.

While the tension between the philosopher and the city comes out most poignantly in the death of Socrates, it is also a topic dealt with explicitly by Plato's student Aristotle. This occurs both in Aristotle's writings – where he speaks of the philosopher as someone who lives not in the centre of the *polis*, or city (that is, in the heart of where

social opinion thrives), but on the outskirts – as well as in his personal life – where the biographer Diogenes Laertius attributes Aristotle's departure from Athens as a fear that the same fate that Socrates suffered would soon also befall Aristotle himself. And tellingly, the topic of esoteric writing is also raised in relation to Aristotle. Specifically, we find its mention in a letter that Aristotle's student, Alexander the Great, addresses to his teacher. I will cite the letter at some length, as well as the puzzling response which Aristotle is said to have given to Alexander. All of this is from the biographer Plutarch, in his famous *Life of Alexander*:

It would appear that Alexander not only received from Aristotle his ethical and political doctrines, but also participated in those secret and more profound teachings which philosophers designate by the special terms 'acroamatic' and 'epoptic', [i.e. fit for oral teaching only, and for the initiated, esoteric, as opposed to exoteric doctrines] and do not impart to many. For after Alexander had already crossed into Asia, and when he learned that certain treatises on these recondite matters had been published in books by Aristotle, he wrote him a letter on behalf of philosophy, and put it in plain language. And this is a copy of the letter:

*Alexander, to Aristotle, greeting. You have not done well to publish your acroamatic doctrines; for in what shall I surpass other men if those doctrines wherein I have been trained are to be all men's common property? But I had rather excel in my acquaintance with the best things than in my power. Farewell.*

Accordingly, in defending himself, Aristotle encourages this ambition of Alexander by saying that the doctrines of which he spoke were both published and not published; for in truth his treatise on metaphysics is of no use for those who would either teach or learn the science, but is written as a memorandum for those already initiated.<sup>3</sup>

Now, while Plutarch offers his own explanation for Aristotle's claim that the secret teachings were both published and unpublished, Leo Strauss offers another take on this. In Strauss' view, what Aristotle means, and what a long line of classical philosophers understood, was that each book that is published both says and does not say exactly what it means. That is, innumerable classical philosophical books are



written with certain explicit and certain hidden teachings, and it is up to the studious, cautious and attentive reader to use interpretative tools to discern what it is that the philosopher is really aiming to teach. In short, Strauss employs the controversial hypothesis that certain classical texts are written with esoteric and exoteric teachings<sup>4</sup> to rediscover classical thought.

In this book, we will make use of Strauss as a model for uncovering innovative interpretations of Platonic dialogues, opening up the conceptual space for us to outline our own conspiratorial reinterpretations. To help you apprehend this technique better, let me first introduce you to the life and work of the peculiar Leo Strauss.

### Leo Strauss, who?

Born in Kirchheim (near Marburg), Germany, Leo Strauss (1899–1973) studied at the University of Hamburg. He attended lectures in Marburg and the courses given by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in Freiburg. In 1932, he decided to leave Germany, first for France and then to England. He moved to the United States in 1938, taking teaching positions at the New School for Social Research in New York, the University of Chicago and finally at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland (where, incidentally, I myself first learned to read ancient Greek).

Since Strauss' writings were mainly composed and published in the United States, the influence of his student days at the German universities, or the continental strain of his thought, is often overlooked. However, the importance he attached to the Husserlian theme of the 'crisis of our time',<sup>5</sup> Heidegger's 'darkening of the world', referring to the shattering of any horizon providing indications of meaning or grounds for values, has started to become more recognized lately. For Strauss, the current situation, where there is no agreement about the most fundamental issues, where even the possibility of reaching an agreement is belittled as being merely a community perspective, is the situation out of which the contemporary hermeneutics arises.

Beginning with this notion of the crisis of our time, let us undertake a quick sketch of Leo Strauss which will help you in understanding how the present book makes use of Strauss as a model. This crisis, commonly titled 'the crisis of modernity', is an issue central to Strauss' thought. It is, of course, an issue which he inherits from Husserl and Heidegger.

In the final analysis, Strauss comes to largely blame Heidegger himself for the present form this crisis takes, but Heidegger is still credited by Strauss as a philosopher who pioneered a method for a possible solution to it – what we will discuss shortly below under the concept of *destruktion*. One can find in Husserl's 'Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy'<sup>6</sup> some essential themes which Strauss will spend his life developing. In his inquiry into the crisis of modernity, Strauss assumes Husserl's evaluation of the hegemony of natural science and his positing that this hegemony is in part responsible for 'Europe's sickness', and his concomitant criticism of 'objectivism'. For example, in Strauss' essay 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy',<sup>7</sup> one finds that his own criticism of positivism is compared to Husserl's criticism of naturalism.

But it is important to bear in mind here that while Husserl's entreaty to 'return to the rationalism of Socrates and Plato' as a solution to his supposition 'that the European crisis has its roots in a mistaken rationalism' is the same conclusion that Strauss draws, the meaning of the 'rationalism' of Socrates and Plato comes to suggest something very different for Strauss than it did for Husserl. A part of this difference is owing to Heidegger's influence on Strauss. As Strauss stated, 'Heidegger won out over Husserl; he radicalized Husserl's critique'.<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger's *destruktion*<sup>9</sup> of the tradition of philosophy provided for Strauss the paradigm of how to begin to understand the rationalism of the ancients. Strauss recalled that Heidegger intended to uproot Greek philosophy, but this uprooting presupposed laying bare the roots – this meant laying bare the roots of philosophy in themselves and not as things that had come to appear in the light of the tradition and of modern philosophy. Strauss was convinced of the need to return to, to recover, classical philosophy; that is, to lay bare that the way classical philosophy is understood by academic philosophers is wholly inadequate.

So here we find one of the first ways that the orientation of Leo Strauss is influential on the way that Platonic and wider Greek thought is reread in this book. I seek also through this exercise to lay bare the aforementioned inadequacy by means of the reinterpreted readings offered here.

But we should try to understand better why Strauss thought as he did. In other words, we need to understand the character of the crisis of modernity for Strauss. One of the clearest explanations of this can

be found in Strauss' essay 'The Three Waves of Modernity'.<sup>10</sup> According to Strauss, the crisis of modernity consists in the fact:

that modern western man no longer knows what he wants – that he no longer believes that he can know what is good and bad, what is right and wrong. Until a few generations ago, it was generally taken for granted that man can know what is right and wrong, what is the just, or the good, or the best order of society – in a word that political philosophy is possible and necessary. In our time . . . according to the predominant view, political philosophy is impossible. . . . The crisis of modernity is then primarily the crisis of modern political philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

It has been mentioned here already that Strauss praised Heidegger for his determination to recover the thought of the ancients, and we shall shortly turn to Strauss' version of this recovery, but we also noticed that Strauss came to blame Heidegger for the present status of the crisis we are considering. Strauss esteemed Heidegger as 'the radical historicist' and, consistent with what has already been described, claimed that science and history, the two great powers of the modern world, have nearly succeeded in destroying the very possibility of political philosophy. Strauss regarded historicism as fundamental to the crisis of modernity, as it relativises thought and action, construing a sequence of events as a history necessarily determinative of the content of philosophy. Deliberative thought was locked into its historical horizon, merely one among myriad others, and thus choices and decisions taken in an effort to achieve justice could be undermined simply by relativising it. Through historicism, every political judgement suffers an immediate and irremediable legitimisation crisis.

In an effort to grasp the nature of the crisis of modernity, to uncover its causes, Strauss undertook to place historicism in an historical context – to do a history of history, as he called it. He studied modern political philosophy to this effect, identifying the contributions to the crisis of modernity by modernity's most influential thinkers. This is the over-arching principle of his works *Natural Right and History*, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. However, diagnosing the problem was not Strauss' only mission; he sought also to discover a cure. With this aim Strauss turned to classical thought.

Strauss' return to classical thought, in contrast to a common criticism made against him, is not merely a naïve fondness for the ancients over the moderns in the context of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. Strauss is aware that the modern world accommodates organizations of society alien to antiquity. He maintains that

only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the principles as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these principles to our tasks.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the majority of Strauss' published work pursues a comprehension of classical texts and authors. The better known among these are his books on *Plato's Laws*, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* and his three ground-breaking works on Xenophon.

As Strauss saw the crisis of modernity as essentially a crisis of modern political philosophy, his quest for a solution to this crisis consequently required a study of classical political philosophy – more specifically, the thought and work of Socrates, Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle. Classical political philosophy, in contrast to modern, recognized certain fundamental and eternal tensions misguidedly rejected by modern thought.

Modern thought is dominated by the notion of constructing something like a 'universal and homogenous state', that is, a global society consisting of all nations, all of which are free and equal, populated by men and women who are all free and equal, all enjoying affluence, all enjoying justice – and this achieved through the fruits of a science which claims total conquest over nature, resulting in technologies serving as the bedrock of human happiness. Classical thinkers, far less utopian and idealistic, accepted the concept of particular political groupings, the plurality of constitutions and politically significant inequalities among human beings, some arising naturally, some conventionally. They emphasized virtue over freedom, and consequently thrift over pursuit of wealth. For them, science was the contemplation of nature, and technology its imitation, not necessarily its conquest. These important preferences of classical thinkers were embodied in

the *polis*, or the city, which Strauss analyzes in depth in several of his works.

Recall that one of the principal tensions acknowledged by classical thought, although masked by modern, is what Strauss calls the conflict between the philosopher and the city. Overlooking this conflict, Modernity delegates philosophy to a position of service to the relief of man's condition. It assumes that philosophy fulfills its salutary function only when its results are diffused among nonphilosophers. Thus, in modernity, the chasm between philosophy and the city is believed to be bridged. But it was certainly not bridged in pre-modern thought. This tension leads us to explore the peculiar discovery of Strauss' from his rereading of the classics, the art of esoteric writing. Once again, the hypothesis that certain classical texts are written with esoteric and exoteric teachings is the distinctive method Strauss employs to rediscover classical thought, or as I will put it here, to render a rereading of Plato in a conspiratorial way.

### On esoteric writing

Strauss' main statement on esoteric writing is to be found in his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.<sup>13</sup> The Preface of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* presents its primary view as the problem of the relation between philosophy and politics. Strauss begins his introduction by offering his work as a contribution to the – hitherto non-existing – sociology of philosophy. He suggests that the lack of a sociology of philosophy derives from the fact that sociology emerged at a time when an essential harmony between intellectual and social progress was presupposed. Sociology focused largely on the relations of different types of thought to different types of societies, rather than the fundamental relation of thought per se to society. By neglecting this fundamental relation, sociology never considered that philosophers may form a class of their own, with the differences between them being less significant overall than the difference between this general group and the societies in general.

Strauss indicates that the origin of this neglect was the limit of the historical information available to the early sociologists. They were limited in their first-hand knowledge to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century-Western thought. To see the need for a sociology of philosophy, then, it is helpful to look at other eras. Strauss himself turned to Jewish and Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages.

For Strauss, one may first become awakened to the full range of themes regarding the relationship between philosophy and politics in Al Farabi.<sup>14</sup> The majority of the Introduction to Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing* consists of a summary presentation of the major works of Farabi. He introduces, in the process of interpreting Farabi, issues that form the over-arching concern of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and which in fact occupied Strauss' attention throughout all of his subsequent writings.

It is there that Strauss reintroduces the concepts of esoteric and exoteric teachings. Farabi indicates one 'crude' reason that this distinction was necessary: philosophers were 'in grave danger'; that is, there was not recognized a harmony between philosophers and society as in modernity. Philosophers, further, did not defend the interests of one or another party – they defended the interests of philosophy pure and simple. The exoteric teaching served as an armor to protect philosophy, and it was needed for political reasons. As the form in which philosophy became visible to the community, it was 'political' philosophy. Contemporary thought about the relation of philosophy to society takes it for granted that philosophy always possessed political or social status. Farabi claimed, on the contrary, that philosophy was not recognized in the cities of Plato's time, and Farabi's own method shows that there was even less freedom to philosophize during his own time.

From the first paragraph of the essay titled 'Persecution and the Art of Writing', we may glean this general definition of persecution: the suppression of the freedom of public discussion and the compulsion to co-ordinate speech with views held by a government. Persecution, then, may give rise to a kind of writing that is metaphorically referred to as 'writing between the lines'. This writing is meant to express heterodox views, but it is also meant to express them with caution. Not everyone is to be trusted. But how is it that an author is able to both reveal and conceal? Recall Aristotle's answer to Alexander: he has both published and not published the esoteric teachings.

Strauss sets down the axiom that thoughtless men are careless readers, and thoughtful men are careful readers. As it is clear that a clever-enough fellow who is not trustworthy may be capable of detecting the concealed teachings in a given text, Strauss admits that his axiom expresses, in another way, the Socratic dictum (from Plato's *Meno*, see Chapter 5) that virtue is knowledge. And anyway, to prove that an author has concealed views within his text would obviously be

difficult for a censor or prosecutor, who would be obliged to show that ambiguous or badly constructed sentences are such on purpose – flying in the face of the also-classical maxim that ‘even Homer nods’ from time to time.

Although it may then be possible that in the past, under times of the suppression of independent thought, many intelligent men employed a literary technique adapted to persecution, we are unable in general to consider this possibility today. Strauss blames this oversight on a fundamental principle of historical research: the only presentations of an author’s views which can be accepted are those ultimately borne out by his explicit statements. The problem is compounded by the recent tendency to ignore the fundamental differences in the political thought of the Middle Ages and antiquity on the one hand, and modernity on the other.

Whereas, for example, the great German intellectual Lessing believed that ‘all ancient philosophers’ distinguished between esoteric and exoteric teachings, it is now even claimed that the attribution of any private teaching to Aristotle’s ‘exoteric speeches’ is obviously a late invention originating in the spirit of Neo-Pythagoreanism. As this depicts a change in the intellectual climate, it ought not to affect the historian. The historian, Strauss challenges, must be able to look beyond the present trends in thought and take on as a task the possibility that earlier authors expressed their views implicitly. He offers the following guidelines that would be necessary for such a historian to maintain:

Reading between the lines is prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading . . . as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate. The context in which a statement occurs, and the literary character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate. . . . If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses . . . intentional blunders in writing. The real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages.<sup>15</sup>

Strauss reiterates that modern historical research was born in a time when persecution was a feeble recollection rather than a lived experience, and this fact has destroyed the earlier tendency of the learned to pay attention to the overall design of great authors – to read between the lines – rather than simply to the views stated most often. An attempt to restore the former way of reading is challenged by the problem of the criteria for legitimate or illegitimate reading. Strauss demonstrates these criteria in action in the remaining essays of his book.

In the third section of the essay, Strauss further delineates the meaning of the term persecution: it covers the most cruel type, like the Spanish Inquisition, and the mildest, like social ostracism. It is the cases between these two that are most interesting for literary investigation.

To pursue this literary investigation, it is prerequisite to realize that the attitude that people take toward freedom of public discussion is dependent essentially on their attitude toward popular education. After about the middle of the seventeenth century, many people published their work in an effort to contribute toward the abolition of persecution, believing that suppression of free inquiry was an accident of a badly constructed body politic and that the kingdom of darkness – as Thomas Hobbes used to say – could be replaced by the republic of universal light. These thinkers believed in a time when, through public education, people would not be harmed by expressing, or hearing, the truth. These thinkers concealed their views only as much as needed to protect themselves from persecution – what was referred to in Strauss' Introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing* as a 'crude' reason for 'writing between the lines' – but were in general bold, as their aim was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of the population. It is, therefore, relatively easy to read through the lines of these authors, such as Hobbes.

The pre-moderns, on the other hand, were much more skeptical about the benefits of popular education, believing the gulf between the wise and the vulgar to be a basic fact of human nature that cannot be bridged by any progress; for most of them, philosophy or science was a privilege of the few. These would conceal their opinions from all but the philosophers. All of their writings, accessible to any reader, would have to be exoteric; but as philosophers, hating 'the lie in the soul'<sup>16</sup> (Plato's *Republic*) more than anything, the exoteric writings would need to be noble, 'noble lies', concealing a still more noble



truth. Strauss includes philosophers such as Xenophon, Maimonides and Spinoza in this category.

An exoteric book, then, would contain two teachings: an edifying one on the face of it, and a philosophical one masked behind. A means of this masking is to put the philosophic teaching in the mouth of a disreputable character – such as Plato may be said to do with Thrasymachus in the *Republic* – which shows at the same time how much the author disapproves of espousing openly the truths in question. Strauss thus suggests the reason we find ‘so many interesting devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans and buffoons’<sup>17</sup> in literature and philosophy. Such books are addressed neither to the vulgar nor to the already wise, but to the potential philosophers, who are to be slowly led out of the popular views – useful for practical and political reasons – into philosophy, by way of obscurities, inexact repetitions, contradictions, pseudonyms, strange expressions and so on.

Exoteric literature, therefore, presupposes that there exist truths that are not always patently healthful and the consequence of the articulation of these truths may be public or private harm. It presupposes that the freedom of inquiry and to publish is not, at the time of writing, a basic right. It seems that this type of literature is outmoded in liberal societies, then. Strauss holds, however, that the work required to enter into the core of such a designed work was perhaps understood by the pre-modern thinkers as the always difficult, but at the same time always pleasing, work called education.

### A veritable sophistry of conspiracies

One of my longest-running infatuations with the English language is the lengthy list of animal collective nouns that exist. As a child, I had memorized one hundred of them. Some are common – e.g. a ‘gaggle’ of geese, a ‘school’ of fish, a ‘pride’ of lions, a ‘plague’ of locusts – but some are unbelievably colourful and should be introduced into conversation at every available opportunity – e.g. an ‘unkindness’ of ravens, a ‘charm’ of hummingbirds, a ‘romance’ of unicorns, an ‘intrusion’ of cockroaches, an ‘obstinacy’ of buffaloes. I mentioned that the conspiracies presented herein are not all of the same kind. Some are, as should now be at least partially understandable, Straussian conspiratorial readings, and some are not. Thus, I have coined a word to serve as a collective noun for all these various conspiracy theories: a ‘sophistry’ of conspiracies. This term has the advantage of indicating

a couple of things at once. First, it nicely reflects the subject matter of the second intermission, which is about a conspiracy of Sophists. Second, it gives the dismissive reader an immediate tool for condemning the arguments presented in this book in one stroke – the author has presented nothing other than a sophistry!

So, let's see what constitutes this sophistry. It takes shape in six chapters along with two intermissions, that we will now sketch.

## Chapter 1

### *The dramatic labyrinth: on Plato's Parmenides, page 1*

The first chapter draws out the supreme hyper-complexity of Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*, simply by presenting an extended meditation on and exposition about just how much Plato packed in to only its very first page. Plato's *Parmenides* is unique among his dialogues in the layered nature of the indirect discourse, that is, of the mode by which the events of the dialogue are narrated, as well as in the uncanny way that every interpreter seems to disagree about the fundamental point of this dialogue. The former is an internal aspect; the latter is an external one. But there is, I shall argue, a concrete relation between the two.

The relationship lies in the fact that the dialogue is a dramatic labyrinth, even more complex to negotiate than a Dan Brown mystery. What you will find, however, is that Plato also provides a host of hidden clues to guide the discerning, careful reader through it. This chapter will also begin to familiarize you with the technique employed to reread Plato throughout this book.

## Chapter 2

### *The love of laughter: on Plato's Republic 1.0*

We do not normally think of Plato as a great joker. And yet, terms for laughter, jeering, ridiculousness appear on the whole more often in Plato's works than in any other ancient author whose works we have, not even excepting the comic playwright Aristophanes. Plato does not employ these terms merely to deprecate the activity, but often to show his interlocutors laughing. Rather surprisingly, a disproportionately high share of the laughter occurs in Plato's *Republic*.

I argue that one of the main reasons that there is so much laughter in the *Republic* is because there is so much absurdity within the discussions there. In this chapter, I build a case to show that Plato subtly gives indications to readers and interpreters of the dialogue that there are several places in his text wherein he is simply not being serious. Bearing this in mind, I give a reading of the text that pays especial attention to the appearance of laughter and the laughable, and thus to determine how this may force us to reconsider how this classic, foundational text is traditionally (i.e. rather solemnly) interpreted.

## First intermission

### *Xenophon's Hiero – a Straussian rendition*

Why do we break for intermissions instead of continuing forth – as usual – with the orthodox column of chapters? The rationale is actually quite straight-forward. The main chapters are laying out an argument, or a series of arguments, based on the action of Platonic dialogues. The dramas therein unfold. The intermissions are breaks in that drama. But this does not mean that the intermissions do not themselves contain their own variety of drama. No indeed: the intermissions are breaks in Platonic dramas, but they are themselves little side shows. In these two side shows, it is not Plato and his work that is the centre of action, but rather Xenophon (in the first intermission) and the Sophists (in the second intermission, discussed later in text). However, like any really splendid side show, the intermissions have very direct bearing on the main cycle of dramas that this book seeks to try to uncover.

The first intermission turns to a little-known writing of one of Plato's contemporaries, another student of Socrates, named Xenophon. In Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero*, we find another treatment of tyranny, in some ways similar, and in some ways different, from that of Plato's *Republic* (which will also be dealt with in the immediately following Chapter 3). The *Republic* and the *Hiero* interestingly seem to agree about their assessment of the nature of the tyrannical soul, with the description of the tyrant in the last books of the *Republic* sounding just as dire as *Hiero*'s pathetic disparagement of the tyrant's life.

The first intermission will present a Straussian reading of Xenophon in order to look once again at the notion of esoteric writing and to

remind ourselves about what it can teach us regarding ‘against the grain’ interpretations of a classical text.

## Chapter 3

### *The joy of sex: on Plato’s Republic 2.0*

After the first intermission, we return to the standard chapters, and the Platonic drama continues to unfold. The third chapter presents another rereading of Plato’s *Republic*, a sort of reboot, a *Republic 2.0*. This time around, I approach the dialogue with only one special issue in mind: I focus upon uncovering how *eros* (erotic or sexual striving) and tyranny are presented and represented in the dialogue.

As Socrates shows, tyranny is consummate injustice, a great overreaching. This overreaching is unnatural, while moderation as shown through harmony or health, is naturally pleasing. Accordingly, there is a ‘right *eros*’, which is contributive of justice and the soul’s health, as well as – by contrast – the frenzied erotic soul of the tyrannical type. The tyrannical type is the most unhappy according to this treatment, where the state is the soul writ large: the state under tyranny is needy, poor, enslaved; so is the soul of the tyrant. This chapter, thus, attempts to expose the scandal of Plato’s *Republic* – we tease out the sexual politics, as well as the moral policing of the sexual instinct, and reread this classical text on justice in terms of erotic justice.

## Chapter 4

### *How to train your demon: on Plato’s Symposium*

Socrates claims to be a diviner. In Plato’s *Symposium*, he had also claimed to ‘know nothing except the erotic things’ (*Symposium* 177d7). These two things, divining and *eros*, are interrelated: Socrates’ great secret is that they are actually identical; they are, in a word, the *daimonion* – that inner demon – which Socrates claims to possess. This is both Socrates’ eroticism and his divining power.

The Socratic *daimonion* is usually interpreted as something like conscience, but that would mean that it is a widespread phenomenon, and the *daimonion* was clearly a peculiarity of Socrates. We receive a description of this ‘demon’ in Diotima’s teaching from the *Symposium*. This chapter will reinterpret the Socratic demon in the light of

the much-celebrated Platonic dialogue on love. The chapter is another exercise in Straussian interpretation.

## Second intermission

### *Plato's conspiracy against the Sophists*

We pause again for a break from the main line of action, for a second intermission, this time on the Sophists. Almost everything we know, or believe we know, about the Sophists derives from Plato's writings. Plato hated the Sophists. Since one of the main accusations against Plato's teacher, Socrates, was that Socrates was sophistical in the way he 'corrupted the youth', Plato spent his entire philosophical career trying to separate as strongly and starkly as possible the character, actions and teachings of Socrates from those of the Sophists. However, we must ask, were the Sophists really as sinister as Plato portrays them throughout his dialogues? This chapter investigates all of the most recent scholarship about the historical personages that Plato grouped together as Sophists. What this research exposes is that the mendicant philosophers known as Sophists were not, historically, the heinous, duplicitous, 'teachers of evil' as Plato feeds us. His representation of them, rather, was propaganda – a case of disinformation that has come down to all of us as historical fact.

In sum, then, the second intermission presents Plato's conspiracy to defame the Sophists, examines the reasons that motivated his deeds and probes into why it is that Plato's partial account has emerged as the dominant historical and philosophical paradigm even till today.

## Chapter 5

### *The morality of the master: on Plato's Meno*

This chapter begins with a lesson in basic philology, leading to an explanation of the etymology of the term 'virtue' as 'power' and especially 'manliness'. This is the classical 'master morality' that philosophers like Nietzsche spoke of. This understanding leads to a genealogy of the Greek term for virtue (*aretê*) as 'bellicosity' that may itself lend to a hauntology of human morality. What that means is that there is the risk that ethical life shall be forever subject to (haunted by) a basic instinct of self-sovereignty that entails mastery over others.

In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, it appears that Plato may himself have been haunted by the *aretêlares* (i.e. God of War) relation. But, in that dialogue, we will find a treatment of virtue that attempts to overcome the virtue-as-power problematic, replacing it by an entirely novel *aretology* focusing on virtue as a kind of knowledge.

## Chapter 6

### *Reading Plato through Homer's Odyssey: a conspiracy theory*

As Heather Reid has so brilliantly elaborated, Plato's ideal city in the *Republic* is ruled by philosopher-kings who had been trained in athletics. This training is meant to cultivate the full range of virtues necessary for the struggle out of the cave up toward the sun. Plato set up his Academy at a gymnasium. Such places traditionally were where the youth trained themselves physically. Plato re-envisioned this physical training, and at the same time, he revised the way that intellectual training also should occur. How so?

Plato saw education as the cultivation of wisdom and harmony in the soul that helped to move us away from common worldly desires, up toward ideals and the ideal realm of Forms. These are goals not to be achieved merely by mental gymnastics. Rather, the gymnastics should be real, physical: athletic souls trained in desiring the fitting and the proper things. Despite Plato's clear and persistent aristocratic tendencies, Plato's gymnasium, all told, seemed to embrace and promote so many of the real needs of a thriving democracy.

In this chapter, I tie together several of the diverse strands of this book by making an audacious suggestion. That is, I argue that the profoundly aristocratic conception of the philosopher-king – of the unity of intellectual and physical, of those who can self-master and self-overcome the rigour of both mental and physical training daily – might actually be a profoundly radical and revolutionary proposal put forward by Plato. A turn back to some passages from Homer's *Odyssey* helps us to unlock the key for this one final conspiracy theory proffered in the book.

Finally, the book will close with a rather contemplative *Exodos*, where I attempt to take stock of what, if anything, the student new to the study of Plato and the Greek world might be able to take away from this book. The *Exodos* also, like any good ending, hints toward the direction of new beginnings.

## Notes

- 1 Kenneth Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1987), p. vii.
- 2 See, Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Death Scene from Phaedo*, trans. George Maximilian Anthony Grube and ed. Madison Cooper (New York: Hackett Publishing, 2000).
- 3 Plutarch's, *Life of Alexander* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), p. xiv.
- 4 Once again, in case the association is not fully clear, it is assumed that ancient authors concealed their true teachings in part due to the inevitable conflict between philosophy and the society and the consequent, and quite legitimate, fear of punishment or even death.
- 5 An essay by Strauss titled 'The crisis of our time' appeared in *The Predicament of Modern Politics* (1964).
- 6 Edmund Husserl, 'Phenomenology and the crisis of philosophy: Philosophy as a rigorous science, and philosophy and the crisis of European man' (1965).
- 7 Leo Strauss, 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy', *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1971), pp. 1–9.
- 8 Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss, 'A Giving of Accounts', *The College* 25, no. 2 (1970), p. 3.
- 9 It is also worth mentioning that Heidegger's *destruktion* was of formative influence on Derrida *deconstruction*.
- 10 Leo Strauss, 'The Three Waves of Modernity', *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (1989), pp. 81–98.
- 11 Nathan Tarcov and Thomas L. Pangle, *Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy* (1987).
- 12 Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), p. 11.
- 13 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: The Free Press, 1952).
- 14 Not much that is known about Al Farabi's life could be considered completely reliable. While there has been dispute over his ethnicity, he is a renowned Islamic philosopher, often addressed as 'the Second Master', the first of course being Aristotle.
- 15 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 30.
- 16 The expression is from Plato's *Republic*, which we shall read in Chapters 2 and 3.
- 17 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 36.

# 1

## THE DRAMATIC LABYRINTH

### On Plato's *Parmenides*, page 1

Whether the One is or is not, the One and the others, in relation to themselves and to each other, all in every way are and in every way are not, and appear and do not appear.

– *Parmenides*, 166C

The title of this chapter mentions ‘page 1’. The fact that we are going to spend an entire chapter of a book reflecting on only the first page of Plato's *Parmenides* should already indicate that there is something labyrinthine about this dialogue. Nevertheless, I will shortly, and more fully, clarify what is exactly meant by the terms of the chapter title.

Plato's *Parmenides* is in certain respects unique among his dialogues. People point to it as being the only Platonic dialogue where Socrates loses an argument – this is, of course, inaccurate, because one may observe that Socrates lost, with mortal consequences, in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*.<sup>1</sup> This is not why the *Parmenides* is unique. In the case of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, which we shall have to take recourse to now and again throughout this study of page 1 of the *Parmenides*, we may observe that it is clearly unique insofar as it is the only dialogue of Plato's which has come down to us with Socrates' name in the title, *apologia Socratou*. The *Parmenides* is also not unique in respect of its title, which simply names an interlocutor, albeit an eminent philosopher, just as others do. For example, there is the *Charmides*, named after Plato's uncle, and the *Critias*, named after Plato's cousin,<sup>2</sup> or the *Alcibiades*, named after one of the most powerful Athenian aristocrats who sank the Athenian navy while leading the fateful Syracuse expedition, and who, as Plato depicts in the *Symposium*, was one of Socrates'



greatest admirers, that is, one of the youth that he had corrupted (an act for which Socrates was sentenced to death).

### The uniqueness of the dialogue

The true uniqueness of the *Parmenides* lies, rather, in (1) the layered nature of the indirect discourse, that is, of the form of the narration of the events that it presents us, and (2) the uncanny way every scholarly interpreter seems to disagree about the fundamental point of this dialogue. The former is an internal aspect of the dialogue itself; the latter is an external one. But there is, as we are going to see, a concrete relation between the two.

We can quickly illustrate the unprecedented lack of agreement over what exactly Plato was trying to teach in the *Parmenides*. A. E. Taylor regards the dialogue as hardly more than a joke<sup>3</sup>; Gilbert Ryle argues that the refutation of each argument and of each contrary argument which occurs is Plato's adumbration of Kant's transcendental dialectic, a sort of exposition of antinomies of reason.<sup>4</sup> F. M. Cornford argues that Plato gave credence to some of the arguments and held others to be invalid, and it is the task of the interpreter to determine which were which.<sup>5</sup>

There is no unanimity among any of the most illustrious Plato scholars of recent history, from Jowett, to Tayler, to Cornford, to Coplestone, to Vlastos, to Ross – they do not simply disagree on particulars, which is common for any Platonic dialogue; rather, they disagree on the *Parmenides*' very *raison d'être*, on why it was even written.

### Do 'real' philosophers agree on the nature of this dialogue?

But these people are only scholars after all, academics. Let's see if real philosophers have a better grasp of Plato's intention. Aristotle took up numerous threads of the dialogue in his *Metaphysics*<sup>6</sup> to lay out his own critique of the Platonic *eidos* (forms, ideas), but one certainly cannot hold that Plato's aim in the dialogue was to undo himself. So Aristotle's approach to the dialogue does not enlist a great deal of support from later philosophers.

The greatest neo-Platonist, Proclus, observes in his commentary<sup>7</sup> of the dialogue that the *Parmenides* stages the young prodigy Socrates

in his native Athens as a representation of the philosophical quarrel, that happened to be geographically situated, between the ancient Italians, champions of the intelligible ideas, over and against the ancient Ionians, who opted instead for empirical study, focusing on the natural, sensible realm. In some ways, the dispute between *being* and *becoming*.

Al Farabi (whom we have discussed in the Parodos), in his late medieval book titled *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*,<sup>8</sup> understands the *Parmenides* to be no more than an exercise in dialectic – it's a dialectician's handbook.

The great German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel presents the dialogue as a propaedeutic to his own *Logic*,<sup>9</sup> which shows the unity of Being and non-Being (i.e. Becoming). Needless to say, this is a deeply eccentric interpretation that does not have many sympathizers.

Friedrich Nietzsche read the *Parmenides* as a confrontation between a healthy soul (Parmenides in his old age) and a sick one (Socrates in his youth). This Nietzschean understanding is repeated, but not condoned, by Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger's famous *Seminar on Parmenides*,<sup>10</sup> he reads the dialogue, not surprisingly, as an authentic confrontation with the question of the meaning of Being, and possibly a great deal more, but it is profoundly difficult to determine precisely what.

It is, thus, fairly safe to conclude that the genuine philosophers get us no further than the academics and scholars with coming to a general consensus for understanding Plato's teaching in the *Parmenides*. In sum, the *Parmenides* is unique insofar as no other Platonic dialogue has lead its interpreters to be so deeply at variance with each other.

Why is this so? There are several reasons. The simplest to point to is that the *Parmenides*, like later dialogues, lacks a leading question. Other dialogues readily oblige us. Think of Plato's works like the *Euthyphro*'s: 'What is piety?'; or the *Laches*'s: 'What is manliness?'; or the *Republic*'s: 'What is justice?'. Another cause lies in the natural division of the dialogue into two parts: the first dramatic, and the second almost exclusively dialectical and highly complex. Further, whereas the first part of the dialogue is overwhelmingly Socrates centered, Socrates plays no role whatsoever in the second part of the dialogue – he does not utter a word, even at the end. Why did Plato compose the dialogue in this way? Every commentator wonders, but none has a solution that satisfies a majority.

The two apparently distinct parts of the dialogue just mentioned have come to be known in Platonic scholarship as *Parmenides I* and *Parmenides II*. In this chapter, we are dealing only with *Parmenides I*, and indeed, not even all of that. Nevertheless, in the ongoing dispute over whether it is necessary to understand the two parts as an organic whole, there would seem to be good reason to argue that the two parts ought not to be regarded as severable and that any adequate interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides* must be able to account for the inherent relation of the two parts. It is, after all, just one single Platonic dialogue, despite its baffling structure.

Naturally, these remarks go on to indicate that what is presented in this chapter is not a totally adequate interpretation of the entirety of Plato's *Parmenides*. It is not meant to be. Instead, what we seek to achieve is merely to sketch, for any student of Plato, how to begin to study any given Socratic dialogue in the light of the Platonic corpus that has come down to us. As I hope to show you over and over again in the course of this conspiratorial account of Plato's writings, the orthodox accounts of Plato to which we as university students are subjected are wholly inadequate. The *Parmenides* is a beautiful illustration of this fact.

### The dialogue form versus the treatise form

Let us return once again to the causes for why people have had so much trouble coming to any agreement on Plato's teaching in the *Parmenides*. Perhaps the main puzzle about the dialogue is that it seems to contain every manner of objection to that which we all believe Plato is trying to teach us in all his other works, that is, the so-called theory of Forms.

To complicate the matter further. It is quite clear that there is a significant difference between a dialogue and a treatise. We will not go deeply into this here, since in the upcoming first intermission we are going to discuss which topics Xenophon had selected as suitable for the dialogue form and which as befitting the treatise. To analyze this topic sufficiently, we would also need to read the Platonic Epistles<sup>11</sup> and additionally look at the traditions passed down to us about Aristotle's writing of dialogues. But here, we are going to take it simply as a matter of common sense to acknowledge that one must remain sensitive to the formal differences between a dialogue and a treatise, and we are here going to pass directly to the resulting operative

principle – determining *what* a person says or is teaching may largely be circumscribed by *how* or *to whom* he says it.

To illustrate, we all read *Romeo and Juliet* in a different way than we read Shakespeare's Sonnets, despite that many of the same ideas and insights seem to be expressed in these two differing forms. And moving along, none of us would in earnest say that it was certainly Shakespeare himself who believed or taught that there is no objective distinction between good and bad, but only subjective inclinations, despite the fact that it was Shakespeare who forced this sentiment out of the mouth of his character Hamlet.

No, then, it was not Plato who taught that justice is the advantage of the stronger (see Chapters 2 and 3), but Thrasymachus. Or, at the very least, if it was actually Plato's intention in the *Republic* to teach some of the readers that real justice in actual, really existing cities, is indeed nothing but the advantage of the stronger, then we must at least acknowledge that Plato plants this seed with the greatest caution and care, and attempts to wipe away all the evidence of this wicked kernel of wisdom by means of Socrates' morally admirable but logically invalid rebuttals. Socrates tames Thrasymachus, but he does not defeat him. If, assuming a certain esoteric teaching – as we discussed in the Parodos – distinct from the exoteric one in his *Republic*, Plato does subscribe to what Thrasymachus defends, injustice or *Realpolitik*, then at least he also teaches prudence along with it. Recall that prudence, care and caution were the very essence of the practice of esoteric writing.

But here we are not speaking of esoteric writing. Rather, we are discussing the distinctions between a dialogue and a straight-forward form of prose, like the treatise. What is the author of a dramatic form of literature or philosophy trying to show us exactly? Discovering this is obviously a much more complicated task than answering what the author of a straight-forward treatise is trying to teach us, whether we believe that text to have esoteric doctrines or not.

We need to repeatedly raise this complication – that is, the need to be attentive to the peculiarities of the dialogue in distinction to the treatise – because doing so helps to cautions us academics, students and teachers of philosophy and interpreters of texts, away from the analytic (that is, Anglo-American analytic) method of reading Plato's works. Obviously, analytic philosophy is not entirely impotent in the face of the labyrinth that constitutes the Platonic corpus, but it is in certain determinate respects blind to worlds of activity occurring

within each (often labyrinthine) dialogue, activity which itself bears heavily upon the content and value of Plato's teaching.

### The argument of the action

We may contrast the analytic philosopher's reading of a dialogue – who, perhaps, is perpetually cursing Plato for not having had the decency or good sense to write straight-forward Aristotelian treatises – with what, for want of a better term of contrast, we might call a 'synthetic' reading. That is to say, a method which takes into account, or better, tries to account for, the dramatic occurrences, Plato's choice of interlocutors, setting, title and so on. Only such a synthetic account could ever hope to uncover the numerous conspiracies hidden in the Platonic corpus.

We have already mentioned certain of the elements of a synthetic reading, insofar as early in this chapter we parenthetically mentioned how Plato's *Apology* is the only extant dialogue with Socrates' name in the title. We may add, for example, how some dialogues are named for people (*Alcibiades*), whereas some are named after events (*Symposium*). And certainly, it would be critical to also mention who some of the interlocutors of any given dialogue were; that is, what historical information we have about them. The analytic philosopher might retort in exasperation, 'Why on Earth do we suggest that such sundry data could possibly matter?'

To address this challenge, let's take the least contentious example first. Everyone agrees that Plato disapproved of Athens' decision to put Socrates to death. Everyone agrees that Plato thought the charges against Socrates were unmerited. And, as a result of Plato's opinions on these matters, we today also preponderantly tend to believe that Socrates' punishment was unjust and that the greatest philosopher of all times was basically martyred. That is to say, Plato composed the dialogues in such a way as to defend Socrates from the charges of impiety, corrupting the youth and introducing false gods into the city. It does not seem terribly contentious to say that Plato defended Socrates against the accusations, and to add that we today generally side with Plato on this as a result of how convincingly he portrayed that defense.

But notice, Plato's defense is a portrayal – he does not once burst in on the scene and shout: 'Socrates is innocent, he is the greatest philosopher, not an atheistic corruptor of the youth!' Rather, he shows us

through the ‘action’ of the dialogues, through what might be called the ‘argument’ of the action of the dialogues, that Socrates is beyond reproach.

To extend this specific example, in Plato’s *Symposium*, we see many of the youth that Socrates had been accused of corrupting (see Chapter 4). The banquet itself is pinned to around 416 BC, whereas the date of its narration is placed somewhere between 407 and 400 BC. This, by the way, is not contentious; there are several indicators in the text that permit confident dating. What is important is that many interpreters of this dialogue have drawn attention to the possible meanings behind the lapse of time that occurs between the date of the banquet itself and the date of narration. The primary reason given for this lapse of time is that this period witnessed the precipitous decline of Athens in the general context of the Peloponnesian war and saw the fall in particular of Alcibiades, along with the shaming of many others among the givers of erotic speeches. Agathon has fled the city for the court of the tyrant Archelaus; and Phaedrus and Eryximachus have been exiled for participating with Alcibiades in the mutilations of the sacred Hermae in Athens. But Socrates’ speech among them is salutary, not corrosive, and his rebuff of Alcibiades’ advances are made clear (again, see Chapter 4 for a full discussion of the *Symposium*).

To recap, then, the argument of the action matters at the very least insofar as it served as a vehicle for the Platonic defense of Socrates in the face of a hostile public. This is the non-contentious conclusion regarding the merits of a synthetic reading of the dialogues. But it gets us quite far, because it indicates the directions in which we might go in order to uncover Plato’s teaching – that is, everyone has to agree that there is an argument in the action of a Platonic dialogue. Or restated, as earlier stated, dialogues are not treatises.

### Two paths for the hermeneutic

At this point, we could easily choose to take either of two paths: we could go into a full description and defense of the synthetic approach to Platonic texts, which would be useful were this book addressing an audience of analytic philosophers, who would demand or at least much prefer to have more details for their consideration. Alternatively, we could simply take it for granted that such an approach is viable and begin to move more deeply into Plato’s *Parmenides*.

I suggest that we opt for the latter path, although there is clearly merit in the former. The latter is preferable because, assuming that pursuing this approach turns out to bear fruit, it will in itself serve in some sort of evidentiary capacity for the former. And, my intuition is that Plato's *Parmenides* is just the dialogue of Plato that is most ripe for such a proposed rereading. In fact, each and every chapter that comes henceforth sets a foundation stone in justification of this method.

### Synthetic-dramatic sensitivity

The *Parmenides*, like any Platonic dialogue, can be read in the Anglo-American analytic manner, and it can also be read in the so-called (and proposed) synthetic-dramatic manner. The problem, however, with the analytic reading of the *Parmenides*, possibly even more than with any other dialogue, is that it does not seem to get us anywhere at all. The *Parmenides* is a logical labyrinth where following each path first to the right leads to a dead-end, and then backtracking and instead following each path to the left also leads to a dead-end.

In the dialogue, Parmenides instructs Socrates to consider not only the consequences of the given hypothesis, but also the consequences of its contradictory. Further, he should 'consider the consequences of each hypothesis for the things supposed and for other things, both in relation to themselves and to each other' (136c). Why Socrates should follow wise Parmenides' instructions becomes rather enigmatic to the reader, since in every case, the pursuit of the argument leads to an absurd conclusion, and then the pursuit of the contradictory itself also leads to an absurd conclusion. Indeed, Parmenides, in *Parmenides I*, shows Socrates how absurd consequences follow from Socrates' hypothesis that there are Forms or *eide*. Then, throughout the intricate and complicated *Parmenides II*, Parmenides shows Aristoteles how absurd consequences follow from all the given hypotheses regarding the One and their contraries. This is why the *Parmenides* is a logical labyrinth where following each path first to the right leads to a dead-end, and then going back and following each path to the left also leads to a dead-end. It is a labyrinth of logic, and it is a maze that has puzzled commentators to such a degree that, as we have seen, there is no basic agreement as to even the very point that Plato is trying to convey.

This internal and completely baffling status of the dialogue is the cause for the complete lack of external consensus about the nature or meaning of the dialogue. But all of the major Plato scholars, who have recently made a mark, have neglected to take a serious look at the argument of the action, instead leaning toward the analytic method of exegesis. Obviously, Jowett, Tayler, Cornford, Coplestone, Vlastos or Ross will not have any basis for interpretative consensus, because they concentrate preponderantly on *what* is said, the content of statements as they may be symbolized into truth tables, rather than *how* the statements are made, *by whom*, *where*, *when* – these are in fact the best means by which we can discern the *why*. This is the conspiratorial nature of Plato's *Parmenides*.

### Getting textual<sup>12</sup>

It is easy enough to see why this should be so, simply by hearing the basic conclusion of the dialogue:

Whether the One is or is not, the One and the others, in relation to themselves and to each other, all in every way are and in every way are not, and appear and do not appear.

(166C)

Can a synthetic reading get us farther? Can it lead us out of the labyrinth, beyond the impasse of the enigma of such a 'conclusion'? Perhaps it can. But even if it cannot yet, at least it will point in a new direction for subsequent research, give students of the dialogue some inspiration to take up Plato's challenge, perhaps entice them into the labyrinth.

We had come from our home at Clazomenae to Athens and met Adeimantus and Glaucon in the Agora. Welcome Cephalus, said Adeimantus, taking me by the hand, is there anything we can do for you in Athens?

(126A)

The *name* Cephalus is familiar to us from the first book of the *Republic* (see Chapters 2 and 3). In that dialogue, the character of this name is a wealthy and pious man respected by Socrates. Cephalus himself seems to enjoy running into Socrates, despite being harangued



with difficult questions. However, it is noteworthy that in the *Republic*, the philosophizing (that is, inquiry into the inner nature of what merely seems to be) does not really begin until the pious man exits. Cephalus takes his leave to go perform the sacred rites, and only then do Socrates, Polemarches, Thrasymachus, Adeimantus and Glaucon launch their discussion on the nature of justice, which lasts throughout the night.

So, Adeimantus and Glaucon, too, were the interlocutors of the *Republic*. From the very beginning, then, there is an obvious relation developed between the dialogue on justice, the political dialogue par excellence and the dialogue on nobody-knows-what, the *Parmenides*.

We have some characters reappearing from the *Republic*, but who is 'this' Cephalus with? He says 'we' had come from Clazomenae, so he is clearly accompanied by other non-Athenians.

Then as we read, Cephalus replies to Adeimantus:

Yes, I am here to ask a favour of you. Tell me the name of your half-brother, which I have forgotten; he was only a child when I came here last time from Clazomenae, a long time ago. [Adeimantus] said: The name of our brother is Antiphon, but why do you ask?

(126B)

It is well known that Glaucon and Adeimantus are half-brothers of Plato. Now we are told of another one, Antiphon. Cephalus could not recall his name. But who is narrating, from memory, every single word of this dialogue of forty-seven pages? Cephalus. A person who admits of having a faulty memory. Perhaps this little hint about the faulty memory of the narrator should give us pause. Cephalus then says,

Let me introduce some countrymen of mine, lovers of philosophy. They have heard that your brother Antiphon was intimate with a certain Pythodorus, a friend of Zeno, and remembers a conversation which took place between Socrates, Zeno, and Parmenides many years ago, because Pythodorus often recited it to him. [Adeimantus said]: Quite true. And could we hear it? I asked. Nothing easier, he replied. When Antiphon was a youth he made a careful study of the piece; at present his thoughts run in another direction; like his grandfather he is devoted to horses. But, if that is what you want, let us go and

look for him; he dwells at Melita, which is quite near, and he has only just left us to go home.

(126B–126C)

Cephalus is with at least two people. They have heard that Antiphon has heard a conversation from Pythodorus, which occurred many years earlier. A conversation between Socrates, Zeno and Parmenides. So, Cephalus, who had admitted that he has a faulty memory, is reciting to us from memory, a conversation that was recited to him from Antiphon, who himself heard it in his childhood when he was interested in philosophy, although at the time of reciting it, he was interested in horses and not in philosophy, who heard it from Pythodorus, who presumably – although we do not yet know – was there, those many years ago. Talk about an oral tradition!

Cephalus and his at least two friends chase after Antiphon with his two brothers Adeimantus and Glaucon, to hear the conversation recited. Cephalus then says,

Antiphon was at home giving a horse's bridle to the smith to fit, and when he was finished, we asked him to repeat the dialogue. At first he was not willing, and complained of the trouble, but after our repeated demands he consented.

(127A)

So now we add to the fact that the dialogue is being narrated by a man with a bad memory, that the person who repeated it to him, who had heard it from someone else many years back, did not even want to repeat it, but was forced to under compulsion. Cephalus got him to repeat it, and then he tells us what Antiphon said,

He told us that Pythodorus told him that Parmenides and Zeno had come to Athens. That they stayed with Pythodorus at the Ceramicus which is outside the city walls, and that Socrates, then a very young man, came to see them there along with other people. They wanted to hear the writings of Zeno, which were available in Athens for the first time. Zeno read his book to them in the absence of Parmenides, and had very nearly finished when Pythodorus entered along with Parmenides and Aristoteles, who was later one of the Thirty [Tyrants].

(127B–127D)

Now a further question arises. Why does Plato make use of Aristoteles, one of the thirty tyrants, in his dialogue – what is the use of that? Here we have a first indication that the hint we had in the first few lines of the dialogue – that the appearance of Glaucon, Adeimantus and a Cephalus point to the dialogue on the regime (the *Republic*) – is not just an arbitrary decision on Plato's part. Aristoteles is young in the *Parmenides*, but he will ultimately become one of the thirty tyrants to overthrow the Athenian democracy (Plato was of course also invited to be one of them) – might this be one of the youth that Socrates had corrupted, and for which the Athenian democracy sentenced him to death?

### Who cares? The *ethos* and the *logos*

Notice that Plato reminds us in the dramatic frame of the *Parmenides* through the appearance of Glaucon and Adeimantus, Socrates' interlocutors in the later and much longer dialogue *Republic*, that Socrates had perfectly succeeded in igniting and preserving a passion for philosophy among his students. Zeno and Parmenides, as the *Parmenides* reveals, did not. There are two Athenians in the dialogue who had studied with Zeno (Antiphon and Pythodorus), and they have since given up philosophy and gone in for horses instead!

What the dramatic details uncover is that old Pythodorus was thus teaching philosophy to the youth, Antiphon, but apparently even he could not manage to inspire him, because Antiphon abandoned philosophy for horses – either Pythodorus was a bad philosopher, or Antiphon was not fit for philosophy. Either way, it reflects very poorly on the accuracy of the substance of the discussion between real philosophers like Socrates and Parmenides.

What does this observation about the effectiveness of the speaker further tell us about the dialogue? Recall that Aristotle observed in his *Rhetoric*,<sup>13</sup> the *ethos* appeal, that is, the character of the speaker is fundamental in arousing and sustaining the interest of his audience. It is as important as, if not more important than, the content of the argument, the *logos* appeal. The argument becomes more enticing to the extent to which it promises to benefit the listeners, or arouses their passions (the *pathos* appeal).

As Plato himself indicates in the dialogue *Euthydemus*, the refutative method represented by Zeno and later recommended by Parmenides

alienates potential students. Catherine H. Zuckert presents this hypothesis masterfully in an analysis that pays the closest possible attention to the argument of the action, to the dramatic frame of the dialogue. In her article, 'Plato's *Parmenides*: A Dramatic Reading'<sup>14</sup> upon which this current entire section (i.e. 'who cares?') almost completely relies, Zuckert points out that arguments that first affirm and then negate any proposition not only frustrate listeners, they also lead an audience to question the character of the speaker, because it becomes impossible to determine where the speaker actually stands. Ordinary Athenians like Crito<sup>15</sup> thus concluded that this *eristic* manner of argumentation constituted a futile exercise detrimental to the formation of a good character.

As Zuckert points out, because the Athenian followers of Zeno later lost interest in philosophy, the conversation recounted in the *Parmenides* is resuscitated only due to urging from the Clazomenaens. Plato explicitly states that they are interested in philosophy. And indeed, they have traveled a long way to hear about this exchange between Socrates and Parmenides.

But what about Socrates himself, the philosopher par excellence? Or what about the other interlocutors from the *Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus? As for the latter, they do not display any enduring interest in the exchange and do not indicate at any point that they had attempted to commit this particular discussion of their philosophical guru to memory. For his part, Socrates is never shown in any other dialogue of Plato (or of Xenophon) mentioning this philosophical discussion that he had had with Parmenides and his student Zeno. Is this simply because he lost the argument? After all, losing this argument did not only have an effect on Socrates, but also may have had an impact on Pythodorus, who turned away from philosophy. He became a general in the Peloponnesian War. And, as stated above, perhaps on the young Aristoteles too, whom Parmenides interrogates in the demonstration at the end of the dialogue. Remember that Aristoteles is explicitly mentioned to have become one of the Thirty Tyrants.

The Thirty Tyrants seized power in 404 BC, when Socrates was seventy-five. The dialogue took place in 450 BC, when Parmenides and Zeno visited Athens. Socrates would have been twenty-nine then. Parmenides was sixty-five, and Zeno was forty. So, while the dialogue itself is not an early one in Plato's corpus, it does present us with the first major discussion of a very young Socrates. Another way of

saying this is that while it is not an early Platonic dialogue, it is the first Socratic dialogue; that is, the first recorded dialogue of and about Socrates in the dramatic chronology, or dating of when the action took place.

In Plato's works overall, Socrates gives three autobiographical accounts of his personal education, where he explains which teachers and conversations had a lifelong impact on him. In none of these does he mention his early exchange with Parmenides. If Socrates did learn anything decisive from his early encounter with the older Eleatic philosophers, then the lesson was cautionary. That is, Socrates discovered their dead-end. He needed to make a new beginning.

### Why philosophize? (and where?)

If Cephalus is narrating this dialogue sometime after 404 BC, then Socrates has already been put to death (399 BC). After all, it does not seem sensible that Cephalus should seek Antiphon instead of going directly to the source. So, Cephalus is narrating events that took place following the death of Socrates. This means that the dialogue – inside and outside – is presenting a vastly sweeping commentary on the life of Socrates, from early education to death. And this not in *what* it presents (the positive statements to be placed into truth tables for analysis), but through the dramatic manner through which its labyrinth plays out (and synthetic-dramatic sensitivity to it).

If the Eleatic manner of philosophizing was driving students away from philosophy into the morass of politics and war, then the nature of the political – the nature of man, and not just the nature of nature – urgently needed philosophical scrutiny. The question could not be just the Parmenidean one, 'What is?' No, Socrates had to intervene in the political, had to philosophize in the heart of the city. Plato's *Republic*, which has a shown relationship to the *Parmenides* visible on its very first page, is narrated by Socrates. That conversation occurs within the city walls. Not so the *Parmenides*, which on the very first page is presented as occurring so distant from the city, way off in the pastoral countryside.

Thus, the *Parmenides* shows, not in what it says, but in how it presents it and the real political consequences of the unfolding drama and action, that the really engaging and urgent philosophical question is not a merely abstract one to be posed in idleness. It is

an existential one to be posed in the public realm: ‘What is the best and most choiceworthy way of life, and how ought we to live it?’ To begin to get some insight into this kind of questioning, we now turn to the *Republic*.

## Notes

- 1 The *Apology of Socrates* is a dialogue by Plato that presents an account of Socrates’ defense at his trial for impiety and corruption, specifically for corrupting the youth of Athens and not recognizing the gods recognized by the state, in 399 BC.
- 2 Incidentally, both Charmides and Critias were killed fighting the Democrits. We will soon see why such details may be important.
- 3 Alfred Edward Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (Courier Corporation, 1926), p. 351.
- 4 Gilbert Ryle, ‘II.: Plato’s “Parmenides” (II.)’, *Mind* 48, no. 191 (1939), pp. 302–325.
- 5 Francis Macdonald Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides’ Way of Truth and Plato’s Parmenides Translated, with an Introduction and a Running Commentary*, ed. K. Paul (Trench, Trubner & Company Limited, 1939).
- 6 *Metaphysics* is one of the principal philosophical works written by Plato’s student, the great philosopher Aristotle. It is also the first prominent work in the domain of metaphysics probing systematically into the fundamental question of being.
- 7 For an English translation of the commentary by Proclus, see Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon, *Proclus’ Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 8 For more on this, refer to Al Farabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* with Muhsin Mahdi’s substantial original introduction: Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
- 9 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel presented his idea of logic, which is a dialectical system of being and becoming, in his work titled *Science of Logic*.
- 10 A 1930–1931 seminar in which Heidegger reads Plato’s *Parmenides* can be found in the book *Four Seminars*: see Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars* (Indiana University Press, 2012). Three of these seminars (1966, 1968, 1969) are the ones Heidegger participated in at Le Thor, France, and the fourth one is the Zähringen seminar (1973). Thus, they are very late reflections of the mature Heidegger.
- 11 Platonic Epistles refer to thirteen letters which have traditionally been listed among works by Plato. There has been a debate over the authenticity of these, with each letter, except perhaps the first, having its own set of defenders.
- 12 Here we cover stephanus page 126a to 126e; the Greek text is the comparative critical edition used in the Loeb classical library.

- 13 *Rhetoric* is a treatise by Aristotle is credited with influencing the development of the art or system of rhetoric.
- 14 Catherine H. Zuckert, 'Plato's Parmenides: A Dramatic Reading', *The Review of Metaphysics* (1998), pp. 875–906, [www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=revmetaph&id=revmetaph\\_1998\\_51\\_4\\_0874\\_0905](http://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=revmetaph&id=revmetaph_1998_51_4_0874_0905)
- 15 Crito is another interlocutor after whom a Platonic dialogue is named.

## 2

# THE LOVE OF LAUGHTER

## On Plato's *Republic* 1.0

[The Guardians] must not be laughter-loving. For ordinarily when anyone abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction.

– *Republic*, 388e

Plato is not normally thought of as a great joker. Yet, the terms for laughter, jeering, ridiculousness appear more often in Plato's works than in any other ancient author whose works we have, even including the comic playwright Aristophanes.<sup>1</sup> Plato does not employ the terms merely to deprecate the activity, as in the cited epigraph above, but often to show his own interlocutors themselves indulging in laughter. The laughter and laughing of dialogue interlocutors constitutes a central ingredient of the dramatic action of a Platonic dialogue. That certain speakers, such as Socrates, actually laugh while they are in the process of articulating philosophical arguments should give us pause. A strictly analytic reading of Plato's dialogues (in distinction to the synthetic-dramatic reading that we employ), then, has got to be called into question if it is unable to take into account the way – jokingly, for example – an argument or a so-called theory (e.g. theory of *forms*, or of *recollection*) is presented within the argumentation of a dialogue.

Now, you might be quite surprised to learn that a disproportionately high share of all the cases of laughter throughout Plato's dialogues occurs in what is supposed to be an extremely serious political-philosophical text, the *Republic*.

Of the fifty-three instances of *gelan* (to laugh) in Plato's entire corpus, seven are in the *Republic*. Of the thirty-six appearances of *gelôs*



(laughter), nine are in the *Republic*. One of Plato's four used of *epigelaō* (to laugh approvingly) is in the *Republic*. For every twelve times he employed the verb *katagelaō* (to laugh, jeer at, deride), one of them was in the *Republic*. This great political dialogue also contains the only instances of *ekgelan* (to burst out laughing), *prosgelan* (smile upon), *philogelōs* (prone to laughter) and *anakankazein* (to laugh out) in Plato's writings.

Not just the laughter, but the absurd and comic also occur disproportionately often in the *Republic*. Out of all of Plato's writings, the *Republic* includes thirty-four out of the 132 appearances of *gelois* (laughable, absurd), one of the two uses of *pengelois* (entirely laughable), seven of the forty-seven uses of *katagelastos* (ridiculous), the only appearance of *gelōtopoios* (jester), three out of four uses of *gelōtopoiein* (buffoon), one of five uses of *skōmma* (a jest, joke), one of two uses of *tōthazein* (jeer); and of eighteen instances of words built on the base *kômôd-* (e.g. *kômôdos*, a comic), five of them appear in the *Republic*.

The presence of these terms cannot be dismissed as insignificant and calls for an inquiry. What is so funny in/about this dialogue? There must be something funny going on, as it were, because in Plato's timeless work on the nature of political justice, the main interlocutors Cephalus, Thrasymachus, Glaucon, Adeimantus and Socrates all laugh at one time or another and in some cases, several times.

The occasions of scornful laughter towards the end of the dialogue, when Socrates has seemingly sealed the victory of justice over injustice, call one to laugh at cheaters and the unjust (*Republic* 613c1, d8).<sup>2</sup> But there is little laughing in the last one-third of the text. The fun seems to end at the close of Book Seven, although *geloian* appears once (620a1) in Book Ten as well as *gelōtopoios* (620c3); both in the myth of Er. Far more telling are the occasions of laughter, the ridiculous or the absurd within the discussion of mathematics in Book Seven with respect to the education of the guardians. Here Socrates is seen frequently appealing to a sort of *argumentum ad absurdum* whereby he disqualifies certain absurd (literally, laughable) possibilities and arrives at answers that accord better with common sense. Several passages (529d8, e8, 530a2, 531a5) show rather clearly that Socrates occasionally equates what is laughable with what is untrue. On such occasions, we translate *geloios*, laughable, as absurd. Let us see the what the presence of these terms and the instances in which they occur may come to signify.

## You can't be serious

I believe that one of the main reasons that there is so much laughter in the *Republic* is because there is so much absurdity within the discussions there. Cephalus, as we shall see, laughs at the outset of the discussion itself, while Thrasymachus laughs at Socrates' manipulations of that discussion. Some parts of the talks are explicitly referred to as funny and some conclusions as absurd. More subtly, I think Plato gives some indications to us, readers and interpreters of the dialogue, that there are several places in his text that he is simply not being serious. Bearing this in mind, I will attempt to give a conspiratorial reading of the text in this chapter. This conspiratorial reading is a synthetic one (as opposed to an Anglo-American analytic one); that is, it will pay especial attention to the dramatic action, such as the appearance of laughter and the laughable, giving us a possibility to determine how this may force us to reconsider and reevaluate the way that this seminal Platonic dialogue is traditionally, also meaning rather solemnly, interpreted and taught.

Remember, Plato's *Republic* is a dialogue, not a treatise. There is drama, dramatic action in it. Thus, a synthetic reading may be helpful for giving an account of that dramatic action, allowing us properly to frame the analytic, positive doctrines put forth. But is it also an esoteric dialogue? This chapter does not necessarily assume that it is. In other words, this is not a Straussian presentation of the text. However, the conspiratorial rereading that I present here is not incompatible with a Straussian reading either. My reading is simply focusing on other things – to be specific, on laughter.

## The first laugh

The first mention of laughter in the dialogue occurs early on (330d9), when Cephalus explains to Socrates the concerns of aged men, and that although they may laugh at, or laugh down (*katagelan*) the tales of the afterlife, something about the punishments meted out there tends to nag at them. Cephalus thus prefers to go off for the sacred rites rather than sit around with Socrates and debate justice – Cephalus goes off laughing (*hos gelasas*, 331d9).

Polemarchus, defending his father Cephalus' common sense definition of justice, says, 'It is just to render to each his due' (331e). Of course, Polemarchus leaves out the requirement of his father that

truth must be told – for Cephalus had said that justice is: ‘to tell the truth and return what one has received’ (331c). While the conclusion of the discussion between Socrates and Polemarchus is that no wise man could have meant by justice to render to each his due, to benefit friends and harm enemies, perhaps more important are the following two unjustified premises used: (a) justice is the virtue of men; and (b) the just is the good (335c, d).

But what evidence supports the two premises, or perhaps they are axiomatic? Whether indeed worthy to be accepted or not, the scene is prepared for the entrance of one character who flatly rejects these premises, at least initially. The preparation occurs through Socrates’ jesting jingoism – since Socrates and Polemarchus have uncovered that in no case is it just to harm anyone, they will take up arms (*machoumetha*) against anyone who tries to defend the erroneous definition of justice, and Polemarchus declares himself ready to do battle (*maches*) along with Socrates. This *machoumetha* and *maches* prepare the entry of Thrasymachus (335e, 336b).

### Sophistical distrust of Socrates

Thrasymachus is the next to laugh. He does so derisively and sardonically (337a2), pointing out the irony of Socrates, as he formulates his definition: ‘I posit that the just is no other than the advantage of the stronger’. When Socrates misapprehends, or at least pretends to misapprehend, his meaning, Thrasymachus calls Socrates a fool, cad or buffoon (338d). Thrasymachus says injustice when consummate is prudent and good, and the unjust man gains power over all, overreaching, seeking – as Hobbes would later say of all of us – power after power.<sup>3</sup> But here is where Socrates trips him up. Overreaching, is it not in some way unnatural? At least, the physician will not overprescribe medicines, but only moderately, if he will achieve health; the musician will not over-tune his lyre, but harmoniously, if he wants to produce beautiful music. Excellence seems to consist of moderation and harmony, not overreaching. Thus, it will be the just man, not overreaching and using good judgement, who is prudent and good, and not the overreaching unjust man.

While Socrates would call justice both choiceworthy in itself and for its fruits, Glaucon intervenes. Recall that we have already met Glaucon (and his brother Adeimantus, who will speak up later) in Chapter 1, on the *Parmenides*. Now, Glaucon raises the challenge that

the multitude see justice rather as an evil, but one which is necessary to bear for the rewards it brings. Thrasymachus had suggested this, and Glaucon intends to take up this position. But curiously, Glaucon leaves aside the issue of rewards, of the consequences of justice and rather seeks to learn what potency and effect justice and injustice have in the soul. He then praises injustice and undermines justice, desirous to hear Socrates rush to the defense of justice, to hear an encomium on justice.

Glaucon begins claiming that the nature of justice is merely a convention, a means by which the many weak can prevent suffering injustice at the hands of real men, while all agree that it is good to commit injustice, but bad to suffer it. Indeed, the fable of the magic ring of Gyges<sup>4</sup> shows that anyone who could do injustice with impunity would certainly do so – a just man with a magic ring would do the same deeds as an unjust man. Either type – just or unjust – would make use of his special condition to have sex with whomever he wanted, to kill whomsoever he pleased, and in short to be equal to a god among men. It becomes clear that anyone with the means to be so unjust would laugh (*gelan*) when he heard justice praised (366c2).

### A city fit for pigs

Laughter gets prohibited, almost. Socrates, with Adeimantes' help, begins to design a city in his great quest to discover the nature of justice and uncover its inherent superiority to injustice. The construction of this city depends on a curious premise that our natures are not alike, but are different, the upshot of which is that one man is naturally fitted for one task, another for another. Having divided all labour and duties and so on, Socrates and Adeimantus regard the city as complete and then wonder where justice and injustice are to be found in it. But while the guess is put forth that justice may be found in this city in the network of relations, in each citizen's interaction with the other, Glaucon breaks in to object to their city; it lacks relishes; it is only a city fit for pigs (372c–d).

Socrates thought the city has already been described to be true and healthy, but since their project is to uncover the origin of justice and injustice, it is just as well to construct a luxurious city, what he calls a 'fevered', or phlegmatic, city. With it comes in immoderation, power seeking and ultimately war. War and protection of the city require a suitable body of citizens fit for the task, and these are called the

guardians. Now, the guardians must not be laughter loving, or prone to laughter (*philogelôtas*), since violent laughter (*ischurôi gelôti*) provokes too strong a reaction (388e). These proclamations remind one of the first Book of Cephalus' leaving to perform the sacred rites, laughingly (*hos gelasas*, 331d).

Socrates and Adeimantus practically prohibit laughter in the city, at least among the guardians, and fill it with lies and the manipulations of myths. Are Plato's dialogues teaching us all to lie? Welcome to Plato's dramatic labyrinth, which appears to be teaching us that for the sake of justice, we should not laugh, but we should lie.

After this, Socrates and Adeimantus move along to the banishment of songs and singers, but at this point Glaucon interrupts, laughing (*epigelasas*, 388e) – he is not a party to all of these decisions. Indeed, Glaucon's luxurious city has been purged by Socrates and Adeimantus, who anyway had taken no objection to the city of pigs. But the latter two carry on, and put the scalpel to the subject of music, then discuss gymnastics and lay down the full education of the guardian class.

### The Panopticon instead of the magic ring

Like the Presidium of the Soviet states, Socrates' city needs a permanent overseer. This idea anticipates the Nocturnal Council of Plato's later book, *Laws*. More strikingly, the idea was realized in the Soviet Constitution of 1977, through what was called the Presidium, the body that never sleeps (art. 119), pulling the Parliament's strings from behind the scenes. The Parliament itself was much more than a legislature. It was 'the highest body of state authority' (arts. 108, 137), formed the 'executive-administrative' bodies (art. 91), 'control bodies' (art. 92), taking 'decisions and ensuring their execution, and verifying their implementation' (art. 93). One wonders if the Soviet Union's totalitarian Presidium had humorlessly read Plato's *Laws*.

Returning to the *Republic*, various tests are contrived under Socrates' Presidium to determine whether the guardians are truly guardians in their soul, or mere workers. The true guardians must care for the city, they must love it. Of course, the love spoken of here is *philia* and not *eros*, and Socrates points out that one loves, above all, whose interests correspond with his own. Along with the talk of self-interest comes the idea of a noble lie, a lie to keep order in the city. For above all it must be seen to that the guardians, the helpers of the city, not convert themselves from benign assistants to savage masters. In addition to

the lies, the guardians will live in common as the Greek Spartans did. They will have no intercourse with jewels and jewelers since, as per the noble lie, their gold and silver are within.

With the factors contributing to corruption removed, there is less likelihood for corruption – otherwise stated, justice depends on removing the opportunity for injustice. By living in common, all can be completely, clearly seen. But wait, is this not the polar opposite of Gyges' magic ring?

### Death camps

Now, it is interesting to note that after the discussion of education, a harmonious and right – if not perfect – education, we shift to self-interest, noble lies and potential tyranny. It is clear, then, that education is not sufficient to form a just city. Socrates and Glaucon agreed that putting certain people, the chronic evil natured, to death would best serve the ends of the city, despite the tentative conclusion in the first Book that the just man would harm no one.

So, what is happening in this city? Why is Plato putting forward, through the mouth of Socrates, all of these sophistries and lies – is it a conspiracy?

### Two possible interpretations

I see essentially two possibilities of interpretation of this ideal city of Socrates. One would be that taken by Karl Popper, that Plato is an enemy of 'open societies', that he undervalues our liberal world's core conceptions of freedom, equality and right to life, that he is an elitist advocating Stalinist government and so on. Of course, if the city Socrates constructs were meant in earnest then we could not disagree with Popper – at any rate we know that Plato's era was one of elitism (even in its democracy), rejection of freedom (slavery), tyrannical government was not unusual, etc. (See the second intermission on the Sophists for more on all of this.) However, the key supposition according to this interpretation is that Socrates is in earnest.

The second possibility, the correct one I believe, is to understand the many contradictions and twists of the argument in the construction of the city to show that Socrates is not entirely serious. This is of course not to say that the *Republic* is not a serious text – it is one of the most serious texts precisely because it jests about certain profoundly

serious points. We might say that Plato shows us what would be the result of trying to change human nature to the extent as required to develop an entirely just city – it is ridiculous. It is here then that we may uncover the reason that so much attention is paid to laughter. Some of the moves that Socrates makes while constructing the ‘ideal city’ are designed to amuse – you might want to consider in this light the discussion of the dog’s philosophical nature.

The ridiculousness overall is best seen in the several contradictions – as, for example, in the fact that with Thrasymachus, Socrates wanted to bring out other faces of human life not reducible to the political while in the constructed city all sides, private or public, of human life are subsumed under the political. But there is one fundamental contradiction which shows this best. This is that Plato could in no way be understood to advocate a city wherein the possibility of a Socrates is precluded. However, the ideal city of the text is just such a city. This is essentially the reason for the frequency of laughter in the text.

However, if this can be discerned as early as the third of ten books, it is difficult to understand why Plato should carry on constructing the city for so long? Consider the Platonic dialogue called the *Statesman*. The divisions in the dialogue, already too tedious, lead to a more tedious speech by the Stranger on the length at which he speaks, followed by ever more divisions. Still no denying there are highly philosophically important passages and episodes in the *Statesman*. And the same is obviously true for the *Republic*. At the same time, the farcical passages of these and other dialogues are equally informative. As the *Statesman* demonstrates, philosophy cannot be done with a metre-stick. And of course, Plato could have established this – as he does, for example, in the *Meno* – in a couple of pages. Similarly, and in a word, the *Republic* shows through its long and laughable quest for the ideal city that an ideal city is impossible – perfect, absolute justice is at any rate not humanly possible. Thus, the recurrent motif of laughter.<sup>5</sup>

### Begging the question

Be this as it may, the modern reader delights in the fact that early in the fourth book, the city is complete. What remains, then, is to find justice in the city to determine, as was the original task, whether the just life is more choiceworthy than the unjust. Socrates begins by begging the question, just as he did in Book One with Thrasymachus. He states that if the city they have created is good, then wisdom, bravery,

temperance and justice should be found there; but the very question was whether justice is good. Nevertheless, they set off and observe that wisdom is to be found in the rulers. Then, of course, bravery can be found in the guards. Temperance – as stated before – is found in the relations of the classes of the city, where the inferior heed the superior, and where, within an individual, one is in control of his desires and so on. Then, where is justice?

Justice, it turns out, has been tumbling about at their feet all along, and they were laughable or ludicrous not to see it (*katagelastos*, 432d9). It is found in the early axiom (from 370b) in the construction of the city that our natures are not alike, but different and that one man is naturally fit for one task, while another for another. Justice is grounded in our being by nature different, in some being naturally superior, in a person's activity being fit to his nature, in natural right. But if justice in the city is each performing his natural task, what would it be in the individual? An answer to this requires a bit of understanding of the components of the soul.

The soul consists of three parts analogous to those found in the city: a ruling part, and this is where wisdom is found in the soul as well as the city; a spirited or thumotic part, the locus of bravery, the guards in the city; and, the desirous part, pinned to the money-makers of the city, and the part which should be obedient to its superior, reason, for a city or body to be temperate. Justice in the soul, then, as in the city, is for each part to perform its task – is for the naturally superior, reason, to rule. It is, of course, difficult to distinguish justice and temperance in this context, but we shall leave this point aside.

To determine whether the just life is inherently choiceworthy also requires determining what injustice is, or where it is to be found in the city and consequently the soul. In the city, it would obviously amount to civil war, and just so in the soul – if justice is a sort of health or natural harmony among the parts of the soul, then injustice would be disease, just as civil war is the city's greatest disease.

The last step would be to determine whether it is better to be just or unjust, even supposing that others think the just man unjust, etc. – that is, the original question sparked by Thrasymachus and supported by the ring of Gyges and Glaucon and Adeimantus' other arguments must now be faced. Glaucon, however, thinks it laughable, ridiculous or 'absurd' (*geloios*, 445a5), and Socrates agrees that 'it is absurd' (445b6) to take the final step – with justice established as the soul's health and injustice as a sickness of soul, what need is there to develop



further how the just life is the more choiceworthy? Nevertheless, Socrates presses forward.

### Erotic politics

Before Socrates can execute what should be the final step of the argument, there is an insurrection among the interlocutors, forcing Socrates to digress, to flesh out what he had earlier hinted about having property, wives and children in common in the ideal city. The discussion provokes much talk of laughter and ridiculousness (451b2, 452b5, 457b3), primarily but not exclusively due to the idea that the women would exercise in the nude along with the men. Glaucon laughs (*gelasas*, 451b2) at Socrates' trepidation, just after Socrates says he hesitates to speak not for fear of being laughed at (*gelôta*, 451a1), but for fear of being in error. This co-ed gymnastics solves the problem of sexual union, toward which all are compelled by innate necessity – what Glaucon calls erotic, as opposed to geometric, necessity, adding that this necessity is keener and more potent to persuade and constrain the many (458d).

But there can be no promiscuity, rulers will not suffer such disorder, and so marriages must be arranged; the people will be bred like dogs or cocks. For this, the rulers will have to make considerable use of falsehoods and deception, eugenics will be practiced, the offspring of the inferior will be murdered secretly and disposed of, all to maintain purity (460c). Incest must be avoided, so certain mathematics will be employed to avoid any man procreating with any woman to whom he is closely related – but what of erotic versus geometric necessity? Do we run the risk of sex, the more potent of the two, riding roughshod over math leading to a polis of incest, a Sodom? However that be, the interlocutors agree to destroy any child born of incest – unless the Delphic oracle happens to approve of the union.

Socrates hesitates to say how he thinks the polis could come in any way near to realization because he knows that his notion would be met with laughter and incredulity (*ekgelôn kai adoxiai*, 473c). The answer is of course that philosophers must become kings or that the present rulers must take to philosophy – in no other way could the present city in speech ever come close to realization and see the light of the sun. Glaucon thinks laughter and incredulity are not accurate to describe the reaction the many would have to this suggestion; rather, Socrates would be scorned and flouted, and suffer dreadful deeds (474a).

Socrates, in attempting to defend himself, clarifies and fleshes out his suggestion. It is in this context that the ideas or forms are discussed, and it is the apprehension and contemplation of these forms, eternal and unchanging, that is the mark of distinction for the philosopher.

### The cosmology of justice

Adeimantus is the next to poke fun while discussing the issue of philosophers becoming rulers. Socrates says to Adeimantus, ‘You are making fun of me after driving me into an impasse of argument’ (*skôptein*, 487e8). Whether or not the philosophers should rule, it would be nearly impossible to persuade the multitude to accept the rule of philosophers, and impossible to persuade philosophers to rule. In line with these predicaments, Socrates makes use of the allegory of the sun, the famous divided line, and the simile of the cave to explain not only the true nature of the philosopher – and, incidentally, why he would not condescend to rule – but also the true nature of the multitude (about whom it is laughable or ridiculous (*katagelan*, 493e1) to believe they would accept philosophers as their rulers), the unwitting spelunkers, and situates these ‘natures’ within the fabric of nature herself, which springs out of the Good, or perhaps the Idea of the Good.

Again, it is mentioned several times that he who would propose philosophers as kings would be justly laughed at or ridiculed (*katagelôimetha*, 499c5). Even Socrates’ attempt to detail these thoughts in relation to the good runs the risk of making him a laughing stock (*gelôta*, 506d9) and forces Glaucon to let out ludicrous appeals to Apollo (*geloîôs*, 509c1).

While Book Seven opens with the description of the cave, of how much laughter he who had left the cave would provoke upon his return (*geloios*, 517a3), and how he too would laugh at those within (*gelôi, gelan, katagelastos, gelôs*, 517d6, 518a8, b4–5), or in other words with weighty evidence that the philosopher would never willingly rule, the book concludes by the suggestion that the just city may in fact be possible if (1) philosophers are compelled to rule, (2) the education of future rulers is strictly regimented and orientated toward the correct goals, war hand in hand with contemplation of the ideas etc. and (3) if – as the Book closes – all citizens over the age of ten are banished from the city so that the founders of the city can get to work creating the truly just city out of a given one. There is, in short, a great tension visible between what Socrates tells us about the only truly just man,

the philosopher and the just city – a city employing lies, deceit, killing and so forth. At one point, Socrates remarks that he ‘forgot that they were jesting’ and that he has made himself ridiculous – although trying to avoid bringing a great flood of laughs or ridicule upon philosophy – speaking with too great intensity (*gelôta*, 536b7–8, c1).

Book Eight then picks up where the conversation digressed at the opening of Book Five. Intriguingly, the laughing and ludicrousness and absurdity basically end here. There are few further mentions of related terms, perhaps the most interesting being that where Socrates describes the tyrant as having ‘smiled’ at everyone early in his career. I believe that the joking ends because the subject changes in a very broad or general way from the ideal city to actual regimes. *Realpolitik* is nothing to laugh at. Remember that Thrasymachean laughter was always a kind of scorn.

But whether or not the lull in laughter may be used as gauge for a rise in earnestness, it is certainly commonsensical to see heightened concentrations of instances of laughter as indications of comic material, such as exaggeration, jest and irony. Justice in the *Republic* always remains axiomatic; at least in the first seven books, it always sneaks in as a stated premise and does not appear as a conclusion arrived at. The effort to prove the inherent choiceworthiness of justice within the parameters set down by Glaucon and Adeimantus is as impossible as the effort to construct an ideal, perfectly just city. The ideal city constructed under Socrates’ lead is not only a tyranny of lies and deception, eugenics and murder, a Bradburian/Orwellian nightmare, but it is even more significantly (for Plato’s concern) one where a Socrates would be *a priori* impossible.

The development of such a city, then, could not have been Plato’s serious teaching, and the fact that everyone in the dialogue laughs gives us a strong hint that even Plato regarded the project as absurd.

## Notes

- 1 Aristophanes was a prolific comic playwright of ancient Athens, having produced numerous hilarious and satirical plays. He also wrote the famous play, *Clouds*, that mocked Socrates and presented him as just another Sophist or teacher of impious doctrines that corrupt the youth. He is often addressed as the Father of Comedy and the Prince of Ancient Comedy.
- 2 All citations from Plato’s *Republic* refer to the Stephanus pagination, and the Greek text to the Loeb Classical Library edition, see *The Republic*, No. 237, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

- 3 See Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* I.11: 'I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death'.
- 4 As a thought experiment, Plato mentions the Ring of Gyges in Book Two of the *Republic* (2:359a–2:360d). Wearing the ring made its owner invisible, allowing him to perform an action without being discovered.
- 5 See, *inter alia*, 331d, 388e, 398c, 451b2, 452b5, 457b3, 473c.

## FIRST INTERMISSION

### Xenophon's *Hiero*: a Straussian rendition

The tyrant strives to see that all his own affairs are secret, but that nothing is kept hidden of what any subject says or does, and everywhere he will be spied upon. . . . It is part of the tyrannical measures to impoverish the nation so as to bolster the funds available for military defense, and so that the common citizens will be occupied with earning their livelihood and will have neither leisure nor opportunity to engage in conspiracy. . . . Thus, the tyrant is inclined constantly to foment wars in order to preserve his own monopoly of power.

– Aristotle, *Politics* bk v, 11

Xenophon's original Greek text, *ΙΕΡΩΝ Η ΤΥΡΑΝΝΙΚΟΣ*, is available in Jean Luccioni's *Hiéron: Texte et traduction avec une introduction et un commentaire*.<sup>1</sup> In the dialogue *Hiero*, the tyrant Hiero and the poet Simonides discuss whether love (*eros*) or honour (*thumos*) is more determinative for the tyrant's behaviour. The *Hiero* is important because it predicts or adumbrates what Plato fully develops in the *Republic*: the interrelation of *eros* and tyranny. This is an intermission from conspiratorial Platonic readings, a foray instead, into another student of Socrates, Xenophon. Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero* will here be presented according to Leo Strauss' rendition of the text (see the Parodos to refresh your memory about the importance of Straussian readings). Thus, in the first intermission, we present a reading of the *Hiero* that characterizes Xenophon's writing as one that masks esoteric doctrines behind an exoteric facade.

Turning to the dialogue itself, the *Hiero* begins with Simonides the poet coming for a visit to Hiero the tyrant. Hiero is in fact referred

to as a tyrant (*turannos*), a term of Lydian origin. While authors like Herodotus seem to use the term as a synonym for *mounarchos*, many scholars (including Strauss) understand the term to have a preponderantly pejorative meaning.

Simonides, whom Hiero considers to be a very wise man (*sophos aner*), asks Hiero to explain how the tyrannical life (*turannikos bios*) differs from the private life, specifically with respect to joys and pains. Such an examination of the differences between rulers and private people was not an uncommon subject in classical writings. For example, this was the subject of Isocrates' *Nicocles*,<sup>2</sup> and Plato's *Republic* itself compares the tyrant and the philosopher with respect to happiness, which we are going to explore in the Chapter 3. Hiero is willing to reply, but he needs Simonides to remind him of the things of private life, after which Hiero will point out the distinctions between the two kinds of lives.

Simonides offers that private men feel pleasure and distress through their various senses, although sometimes through the soul alone and, for example, that they enjoy sleep. Well, Hiero can see no difference in these matters between a tyrant and private man, but Simonides himself states that it lies in this: tyrants have the pleasures far more and the pains far less.

Hiero avers the opposite: tyrants have fewer pleasures and greater pains than private men. Simonides thinks that Hiero's claim is dubious on the grounds that so many people are jealous of tyrants and many able men want to become them. Hiero replies that this desire derives from their inexperience and demonstrates his position, moving from sense to sense, beginning with sight, as Simonides himself had.

As to the pleasures of sight, private men can travel in pursuit of attractive spectacles or see them at common festivals. The tyrant, however, is restricted in where he goes – on the one hand, he cannot go where he is not stronger than others, for this is unsafe; on the other hand, he cannot leave his affairs unattended at home, lest he lose his rule altogether. Thus, the tyrant is in perpetual fear (*phoberon*); he would fear for good reason, when we consider what Aristotle writes in the *Politics* with respect to the great number of tyrants deposed – basically, if Aristotle is correct, a tyrant cannot expect to last very long in his position, or indeed, even expect to live too long. Hiero adds that the sights which come to the tyrant levy a disproportionately high price.

Simonides states that if the tyrant is worse with respect to sight, this is compensated through aural pleasure – he is always sweetly praised and never abused. Hiero retorts, however, that sycophancy is no true pleasure, especially when the tyrant knows that the praise-giver's private thoughts wish the tyrant evil. Simonides concurs, as it is clear that: 'the sweetest praise comes from those who are free in the highest degree'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the poet thinks that with respect to nourishment, the tyrant must be at a great advantage over private men.

Hiero replies that the majority (*pleistoi*)<sup>4</sup> think that tyrants eat and drink with greater pleasure than all; however, this derives from a false analogy. People anticipate feasts, and consequently feasts give them great joy. But a tyrant feasts daily, and there is thus no anticipation to heighten the joy. The tyrant's table is blasé.

Simonides grants Hiero's point, admitting that tyrants never joyfully approach the table. The foods served a tyrant are unnatural, meant for a soft and sick soul. In short, the joys of food, as of odours, are limited to those who cannot have their fill – for those who can have what they want, the pleasure in it dissipates.

Simonides sees the reason in all of Hiero's arguments, but there is still the pleasure of sex, which may be the most compelling motive for aspirants to tyranny. But here Hiero again offers the argument regarding hope: the tyrant has no longing. Further, loveless sex – and the tyrant can have no other – is no truly sweet pleasure. As regards marriage, the finest is with one's superior, the next best is with one's equal, and the worst is with an inferior – the tyrant is condemned to the last, or he must marry a foreign woman.

Simonides laughed upon Hiero's reply, pointing out that Hiero is known to love Dailochus, the fairest boy in the land. (Keeping in mind Chapter 2, we take special note of Simonides' laughter. He laughs just when Hiero claims to know less than a private person the pleasures of pederasty, for the reason stated – Dailochus, Hiero's beautiful lover.) Hiero however explains that what he seeks after is *philia*, a love returned by the other, but he achieves only *eros*. Again, those who pretend to love are sycophants only, and as everyone knows, they are the prime agents of treachery.

Simonides accepts the arguments, but notes that these are trivial. Many have sacrificed any or all of these pleasures to achieve things. The tyrant, anyway, Simonides says to Hiero, exhibits his superiority to private men in the following things,

You devise great enterprises, you execute them swiftly, you have the greatest amount of superfluous things, you own horses surpassing in virtue, arms surpassing in beauty, superior adornment for your women, the most magnificent houses . . . furnished with what is of the most value; moreover, the servants you possess are the best in their numbers and knowledge, and you are the ones most capable of harming your private enemies and benefiting your friends.<sup>5</sup>

To this barrage of enviable opportunities and possessions, Hiero replies philosophically, observing that the many regard happiness to derive from their perception of goods such as these, but man's true happiness (or unhappiness) is lodged in the soul. We may notice that Xenophon makes a similar point in his own *Symposium* (not to be confused with the *Symposium* of Plato, with which we deal with in Chapter 4), where Antisthenes suggests that the wealth or poverty of men is stored up not in their houses, but in their souls. Hiero is surprised that Simonides is fooled just like the many to believe the tyrant is made happy by all these external things – this recalls a scene in Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates has established that the tyrant is both the most wicked and the most unhappy of men, whereupon he adds that this is the truth of the matter, to be distinguished from the opinions of the vulgar.

Hiero continues, the tyrant has the least share of the greatest goods and the greatest share of evils. He gives his own examples: tyrants have no peace, a great good, but war only, a great evil; further, the war for the tyrant never ceases, as it does for private men, because it goes on for him not only without the city, but also within – indeed, above all at home; the tyrant also gains no honour, fame and reward from the wars, as the private man does, but merely brings troubles upon himself. The tyrant cannot benefit from war as can the private man because the war for the tyrant never ends; it is perpetual insofar as his insecurity is perpetual.

Nor does the tyrant enjoy the universally recognized great good of friendship (*philia*). Friendship is strongest among brothers, children for parents and vice versa, and among husbands and wives – but everyone knows that tyrants are destroyed by their children, or plots in their marriage and so on. The tyrant cannot enjoy the great good of trust either, nor can he enjoy the protection of the fatherland, nor can he really enjoy his great many possessions (just as



an athlete does not enjoy his strength in comparison to a common man, but only in comparison to another athlete), and his riches are anyway not enough for his expenditures, thus requiring that he plunder temples and rob people, which certainly does not provide for happiness.

Moreover, tyrants cannot take pleasure in the decent, wise and just, as can the private man, but must fear them. If the tyrant should destroy such men, that leaves him only the unjust, incontinent and slavish for company. And indeed, Hiero recounts how happy he was as a private man, with great pleasures in song, festivals, banquets and enjoying true friends, although now he has only slaves. In short, the tyrant's soul is one of fear and not of joy, like a soldier perpetually on the war front.

It is also not true, says Hiero, that the tyrant can best help his friends and harm his enemies. The friend who receives the most departs as soon as possible so that which he has remains his own, and the enemy – well, all the citizens are the enemies of the tyrant, and he cannot kill or enchain them all.

Simonides makes another counter-argument, stating that at least honour (*timee*) is a great desert the tyrant enjoys, and it is highly important. In fact, Simonides regards striving for honour as the *differentia specifica* of man from animals. Here once again the conversation moves up a rung, climbing above the aspirants to wealth up to the aspirants for honour, just as the former had surpassed seekers of pleasure. Honour not only distinguishes man from animals, but also implies the distinction between ordinary men (*anthropoi*) and real men (*andres*).

It is probably for honour, Simonides presumes, that Hiero puts up with all of the other troubles of the tyrant's life. Hiero replies that the honour a tyrant receives, in accordance with what he has said regarding friendship and sex (*aphrodisia*), is not a genuine one, and so gives no pleasure. He concludes that the tyrant, far from being honoured, is merely awaiting the revenge he faces from the people, to die for his injustice.

If all that Hiero says is true, one is led to ask, as Simonides does, why Hiero puts up with such a wretched life – indeed, no tyrant has willingly given up his tyranny once attained. Hiero's answer is that because the tyrant could never repay the property he has stolen or bring back to life those he has murdered, there is no point to become a private man again. We might observe here that according to

Thucydides, Pericles (see the second intermission on the Sophists for more on Pericles) compared Athenian hegemony to a tyranny, which although apparently unjust to maintain, was too dangerous to undo. It is thus interesting that the statesman Pericles and the tyrant Hiero should express themselves in such a similar manner. But Hiero's conclusion is far more dramatic, for he states that the only real alternative for the tyrant is to hang himself.

Now, Simonides offers to instruct Hiero.

Hiero, it is clear, desires above all else to be loved by men, and Simonides thinks that the tyrant can in fact surpass the private man in enjoying this. For, the tyrant gives others greater pleasure than the ordinary, private man does when he greets them, honours them, attends to them, gives them gifts and so on. Indeed, it seems to Simonides that the very gods smile upon rulers, that their friends delight in speaking with men more when they are rulers than when before they came to rule. Even the boys whom Hiero would like to attract despise less the old age or the ugliness of rulers than of private men.

Still, Hiero objects that to give any gifts or to support his regime, the tyrant must do harm, and so these benefits are not compensatory. But Simonides shows Hiero a way out of these problems – the tyrant should leave punishment to others and give rewards himself. Indeed, the tyrant should make a regime of award giving, promoting great prowess and deeds among the citizens, production among farmers and generally keeping the city active and busy. This advice, incidentally, is in perfect accord with Machiavelli's advice in the *Prince*, in the section 'Of Avoiding Contempt and Hatred'.<sup>6</sup>

The suggestion seems sound to Hiero, but he objects that it leaves out of account that he will still need bodyguards, mercenaries who raise the enmity of the people. Simonides, believing some men naturally corrupt even when satisfied, suggests that the fear of bodyguards may always be necessary to protect against such men. As for the gentlemen of the city, they could be won over to the decency of bodyguards if the tyrant used them as a general police force rather than merely a private force – they should go to the aid of anyone who is in need, and then the citizens would appreciate and not despise them. Further, this force could protect the city from attack, the people from theft, and thereby generally allow the citizenry more leisure.

If the tyrant is to be loved, he must look to the common good rather than to his private good. By contrast, since we have already

raised the topic, in the *Prince*, when considering 'Whether It Is Better to Be Loved Than Feared', Machiavelli suggests that being both loved and feared would be best, but given that this is nearly impossible, it is better to settle for being feared. Of course, looking to the common good is not the means to achieve this according to Machiavelli. But Simonides does advocate this, and he continues, the tyrant should not live in a rich and decked out house, but the city should be richly ornamented and beautified; he should not arm himself but rather the city's artillery; the property of all should be enriched, not his alone. The tyrant should not compete with his citizens, but with other cities. He should make his city the best among all. In this way, the tyrant could secure his subjects' love – all would sing of the ruler's virtue. Thus could the tyrant travel freely and safely take in the spectacles of the world. He would be loved and would not have to seduce others or force them. Rather, he would be pursued by them. Fear he would not know, but others would fear his harm and serve to protect him faithfully.

Hiero listens silently, having spoken nothing further since he had pointed out the problem regarding mercenaries. Then Simonides concludes, and Xenophon closes the dialogue, thus,

But enrich your friends with confidence, Hiero; for you will enrich yourself. Augment the city, for you will attach power to yourself. Acquire allies for it. Consider the fatherland to be your estate, the citizens your comrades, friends your own children, your sons the same as your life, and try to surpass all these in benefactions. For if you prove superior to your friends in beneficence, your enemies will be utterly unable to resist you. And if you do all these things, know well, of all things you will acquire the most noble and most blessed possession to be met with among human beings, for while being happy, you will not be envied for being happy.<sup>7</sup>

### The problem, title and form of *Hiero*

The problem an interpreter of the *Hiero* faces may be stated simply: What, exactly, is Xenophon trying to teach his readers? It seems that the basic conclusion is that the life of the tyrant is superior to private life. That is, that Xenophon is exhorting those who are able to strive

for tyrannical power! This would mean that Xenophon is teaching the exact opposite of what Socrates claims to be advocating in Plato's *Republic*. However, we must take into account that it is not Xenophon, but Simonides and Hiero who speak. That is, this is a dialogue and not a treatise. Thus, we cannot easily conclude that Simonides' position is the same as Xenophon's. And anyway, Simonides addresses himself to a particular tyrant, one who is fed up with the tyrant's life. Must we not take into account these particularities when interpreting the text – indeed, who speaks sincerely to a tyrant? In short, all of the 'action' of the dialogue must be taken into account when trying to determine what it is trying to teach us.

The title of the dialogue, *Hieron he Turannikos*, with the proper name in the nominative case, shows that the dialogue is devoted to a Greek ruler, while the adjective of the alternative title suggests that the dialogue teaches the skill of the tyrant – that is, just as Xenophon's dialogues *Hipparchus*, the *Oeconomicus* and the *Cynegeticus* teach the skills of cavalry, domestic economy and hunting, respectively. Why does Xenophon present his teaching on tyranny without Socrates, outside of Athens, and why does Xenophon not use the first person – unlike the *Oeconomicus*, for example, which Xenophon begins with the word 'I'? And, why does Xenophon choose the dialogue form rather than the treatise? We shall answer these questions by means of focusing on the title and form of the dialogue, as opposed to simply its content.

By comparing the title and form of the *Hiero* with each of the other works in the *Corpus Xenophonteum*, we may conclude that with Athens absolutely opposed to tyranny, and with the teaching of tyranny having been one of the charges against Socrates, Xenophon could not maintain his defense of Socrates if he had chosen Socrates for the position of 'wise man' (rather than Simonides, who fills this role) in the dialogue. Xenophon wanted to avoid any connection between the topics 'tyranny' and 'Athens'. However, as the subject of the dialogue, teaching the skill of ruling, is philosophical – indeed, it is more philosophical than teaching the skill of cavalry or hunting. For this reason, Xenophon selects the form that he believes to be best fitted to philosophical topics, the dialogue. After all, philosophy is a discursive and dialogical discipline.

Both the *Hiero* and the *Oeconomicus*, which are on the skill of ruling, are in the dialogue form, while the skills of cavalry and hunting are taught as treatises. However, the *Hiero* is not simply on ruling, it

is on tyranny. Being on tyranny precludes the dialogue's author from advocating his own views in the first person: the form in which the dialogue is presented 'characterizes it as a philosophic teaching of the sort that a truly wise man would not care to present in his own name'.<sup>8</sup>

This would seem to suggest that there is a certain affinity between the dialogue form and esoteric writing. Leo Strauss certainly seems to think so.

### The setting of the dialogue

Simonides opens the dialogue with the apparent intention of learning something from Hiero, the tyrant. But what is there that a wise man can learn from a man who is not wise? He may know in what way the life of a tyrant and that of a private man differ. But can he know in what way they differ, for example, with respect to virtue and vice? It would seem that a person would need to be in a position of virtue to know this, at least to know it well enough to teach a wise man. Thus, Simonides asks rather how the two lives differ with respect to pleasure and pain – an issue characteristic to tyrants, while virtue/vice is an issue characteristic to kings. As Aristotle states in the *Politics*, the aim of a tyrant is his own pleasure; the aim of a king is the good. Since pleasure and pain are the only criteria for making an evaluation discussed in the *Hiero*, Simonides' question is in effect equivalent to asking which life is better, the tyrant's or the private man's.

Hiero is surprised at Simonides' question, as a wise man needn't have been a tyrant to be able to evaluate or judge upon the happiness or misery, the relative worth, of the tyrant's life. He is the more surprised that Simonides would seem to believe that the tyrant's life is so much more pleasurable and less painful than the private life. Either Simonides is not so wise, or he has a different motive in asking Hiero his question. Hiero, however, thought Simonides to really be wise. This raises the question of Simonides' deeper motive.

From the second main part of the dialogue, it is apparent that Simonides intends to teach Hiero how to rule well as a tyrant. But to teach a ruler to rule well, it should be clear that the ruler is in fact not ruling well. Simonides had observed that Hiero was not ruling well in the time before they sat down to their discussion – but who is willing to speak against a tyrant in his presence? Again, we may consider this in

the light of Machiavelli. Recall his 'Dedicatory Letter' to Lorenzo de' Medici<sup>9</sup> which precedes *The Prince*, 'Nor do I want it to be thought presumption if a man from a low and mean state dares to discuss and give rules for the government of princes'.

Simonides, thus, poses his question in such a way that he may seem the inferior, the less wise, thereby placing the tyrant in the role of the wiser man, the teacher. In this role, the tyrant will be led to refute the common or vulgar opinion that the tyrant's life is more desirable than the private life, the position which Simonides seemed very early to defend. But when Hiero, as wise, refutes the crude notion that the tyrant's life is superior to the private, Simonides will have achieved the necessary condition for teaching Hiero how to rule well – that is, for Hiero to realize that he is at present not ruling well (apparent by the fact that his life as a tyrant is so miserable). Further, the moment that Hiero will declare the misery of being a tyrant, Simonides will be compelled to give soothing advice to the tyrant on how to rule, and it will not seem like the imposition that it really was. Of course, as soon as Hiero realizes that he has walked right into Simonides' trap, he will all the more be certain of Simonides' wisdom.

Now, Hiero cannot know from the beginning that Simonides' intention is to help him to rule better. As Hiero states, tyrants fear the wise. Hiero will then be on some guard with Simonides, and this makes the issue of Simonides' intention all the more pressing for Hiero. Tyrants fear the wise because 'they might contrive something'. A wise man may perhaps contrive an overthrow, seeking himself to become the tyrant. Hiero cannot know whether this is what the wise man might contrive, not necessarily being wise himself; but if he is in fact wise, as Simonides is leading him to believe, then it goes to show that wise men may indeed be tyrants. Is this the reason Simonides wishes to learn about the tyrant's pleasures and pains? That might help to explain Simonides' apparent belief in the attractiveness of the tyrant's life. Hiero attempts to dissuade Simonides from his attraction to the tyrant's life by criticizing in the strongest terms the life of the tyrant. Again, in doing so, Hiero walks right into Simonides' trap.

Because Hiero claims to be unable to recall just what it is that private men find pleasure in, he asks Simonides, still a private man, to remind him. Simonides gives a list of eight pleasurable things: (1) sights, (2) sounds, (3) odours, (4) food and drink, (5) sex, (6) objects

perceived by the whole body, (7) good and bad things, and (8) sleep. However, Hiero quickly dismisses the first three, stating that the private man, or at least the private man of moderate means, gets more pleasure from these things than the tyrant. As for food, which Simonides appears to be especially fond of, Hiero manages to convince Simonides after some struggle that in this respect as well the private man is better off than the tyrant. When the subject of sex is raised, all the subsequent pleasurable things that Simonides enumerated are forgotten.

Indeed, Simonides suggests about sex that the pleasure derived from sex seems to be the only motive which excites in tyrants the desire for tyrannical rule! Thus, when Hiero has proven that in the domain of sex, tyrants are unconditionally worse off than private men, there is basically no point in moving on to the other bodily pleasures. Simonides changes tack entirely, declaring that real men (*andres*) despise bodily pleasures, aspiring rather to greater things, like wealth and power.

Simonides may indeed be one such real man, as he himself brushes aside the importance of bodily pleasure when compared to these loftier things. Hiero, thus, perhaps more frightened than before of Simonides' appetite for tyranny, condemns the tyrant's life in a more thorough-going way than before (although not in a more forceful way, since it was the subject of *eros* during which, as Simonides points out later, Hiero was at his most animate). Hiero laments – the tyrant has no peace, friendship, confidence, lives in perpetual fear for his life, cannot enjoy his wealth or power, but is compelled to commit grave crimes against the gods and men, robbing temples, murdering etc.

Interestingly, Simonides hardly replies to Hiero. His silence, it soon becomes evident, leads Hiero in his anxiety to proclaim soon enough that the tyrant is better off hanging himself. But before this declaration, Simonides changes the course of discussion away from wealth and power, as well as the even loftier subjects Hiero himself introduced, to the greatest boon of all – honour.

Simonides states that this honour, the most divine of human pleasures, is worthy to be sought after even in spite of the fact that the tyrant must commit heinous crimes and suffer great unrest and danger. Thus, Simonides may seem to Hiero as not only wise enough to contrive something, but also daring and amoral enough. This realization of Hiero's pushes him to his final assertion that it is better to

hang oneself, but after that submission, Hiero is also equally cognizant of the fact that Simonides is clearly competent to give advice to a tyrant.

The wise man who wishes to instruct a tyrant must appear beyond good and evil, and this fact might account for many of Machiavelli's more shocking statements in the *Prince*. However, Machiavelli is far less politic than Xenophon's Simonides, as the evidence for Simonides' unscrupulousness derives from his silence and not from his shouting.

Hiero's collapse is not without some advantage to Hiero, since it forces Simonides out of his secrecy. Now Hiero learns what Simonides had been up to all along. Thus, as Simonides continues to praise tyranny – or better, beneficent tyranny – Hiero need no longer be anxious about what Simonides, the wise man, may be contriving. But does this mean that Simonides is actually advocating tyranny, or more importantly, that the Socratic philosopher Xenophon is himself advocating tyranny?

Simonides' praise of tyranny in the last parts of the dialogue serve as a comfort to the shattered Hiero, ensuring that his teaching will be followed, which in turn would lead to the correction of the mistakes which Simonides had seen Hiero make, and the improvement of the citizens' lot. Simonides focuses his attention on love (*philia*), as this is a compromise between what real men (*andres*) seek, honour, and what Hiero appears most deeply to seek, the pleasures of sex (*eros*). Hiero's misery results from feeling that love and tyranny are mutually exclusive. In fact, Simonides assures Hiero that if he would only follow the wise man's advice, then he would be in a position to secure them both.

Simonides' advice is based on an assertion of Hiero's own regarding sex. Hiero had stated that the tyrant tries to love but is not really loved in return – his lovers merely have sex out of compulsion or to gain something thereby. Simonides, in now raising the standard of pleasure from simply sex to the common aspect of sex and honour – love – widens the application of Hiero's earlier words. He who would be loved by his subjects and genuinely honoured must love first; to gain favors, he must show favors; to receive gifts, he must first bestow them and so on. He urges the tyrant to think not of his own pleasure, but of others'; not in being served, but in serving others. Indeed, the tyrant's acts of kindness are more esteemed than the private man's as the tyrant's social standing is so much higher.



Simonides has earned the respect of Hiero, it appears, as the latter poses a question to him now on how to properly conduct his tyranny. He asks if he can dispense with his personal bodyguard and how he can make the citizens not hate him for the mercenaries he is forced to hire. Simonides answers that a bodyguard is necessary so long as the regime is tyrannical. As for the mercenaries, Simonides knows of a way to make the subjects pay for them cheerfully, have

‘these mercenaries do no harm at all to one who commits no injustice . . . ; restrain those who wish to do evil . . . ; come to the aid of those unjustly wronged; and . . . take counsel for and incur danger on behalf of the citizens’.<sup>10</sup>

Simonides then offers advice which was not asked for of him – Hiero should not compete with other men in the chariot races, but he should take care that his subjects should compete in them. He should spend freely his own money for the city, considering his friends’ wealth his wealth and so on. We have already seen how the dialogue ends. Hiero does not reply to Simonides.

### The teaching concerning tyranny

Xenophon seems to give more weight in the dialogue to the praise of tyranny than to the critique of it. Is this simply a side effect of the dramatic structure of the dialogue, or was it intended? From the perspective of Simonides, we may see that his praise of tyranny is undermined by his criticisms of it; that is, despite Simonides attempts to present tyranny at its best, there is still the stronger suggestion that even the best tyranny is a defective regime. Tyranny is a monarchic rule without laws, or in other words without freedom, without rights. But while we know that Simonides favors freedom and thus is fully aware of the defects of tyranny, what does the Socratic philosopher Xenophon think of the lack of freedom in the tyrannical regime?

Freedom, of course, is the aim of democracy, while virtue that of aristocracy. Aristotle is quite clear in this respect, ‘virtue is the principle of aristocracy . . . and freedom of democracy’ (*Politics* 1294a10); ‘democrats identify merit with the status of freeman, supporters of aristocracy with virtue’ (*Ethics* 1131a26); ‘the end of democracy is freedom, of aristocracy, education and institutions, but of tyranny, the

protection of the tyrant' (*Rhetoric* 1366b35). Xenophon was surely no democrat. Thus, rather than focusing on the fact that there is no freedom in the beneficent tyranny, we should look after the possibility of virtue there.

Xenophon believed virtue to be possible under a tyranny, or without freedom. He suggests that Socrates' life shows this, and that Xenophon's praise of the younger Cyrus establishes it beyond a doubt – for Xenophon would refer to Cyrus as virtuous but, at the same time, also as a slave. Thus, it may be possible that the beneficent tyranny, the tyranny suggested by Simonides, does in fact represent Xenophon's ideal regime.

But if indeed beneficent tyranny lives up to Xenophon's top political standard, he clearly thought it impossible to realize. Xenophon can point to no actual beneficent tyranny, and in any case where Xenophon seems to desire to advocate tyranny, as in the *Hiero*, the tyrant is always in need of a teacher, that is, he is imperfect. Consequently, the tyrannical teaching is purely a theoretical teaching, and in fact it seems that for all practical purposes, Xenophon preferred the rule of law to tyranny.

### The two ways of life

The dialogue occurs between a tyrant (thus, a political man) and a wise man (thus, a philosophic man). The action of the dialogue quite clearly suggests Xenophon's preference for the philosophic, or Socratic, life to the political one. Hiero desires to be loved not only by the men who are just or virtuous (*andres*), but by everyone (*anthropoi*). On the other hand, Simonides praises honour above everything else, and he speaks especially of being praised by those 'who are free in the highest degree'.

What is specifically borne out by Hiero's preference for sex (communal) and Simonides' preference for food (solitary)? The philosopher is more self-sufficient, while the political man is slave to all the citizens. To highlight the independence of the philosopher, Xenophon's wise man, Simonides, is a stranger to the city. While justice to the ruler is political justice – helping friends and hurting enemies – the philosopher, a stranger to the people and thus detached and capable of level-headed decisions, practices a life of transpolitical justice – irreconcilable with hurting anyone. So, as Xenophon shows, the superior life is clearly the philosophical life over the political, where the higher form

of justice is practiced, founded on the greatest self-sufficiency that is humanly possible.

### Pleasure and virtue

While Simonides attempts to teach Hiero the tyrannical art, or how to rule well, he uses not virtue, but pleasure as the guide. Indeed, virtue seems only the means for gaining the end, pleasure. This notion seems corroborated by one of the historical Simonides' extant poems: 'For what life of mortals, or what tyranny, is desirable without pleasure? Without her not even the lasting life of gods is to be envied'.

But Simonides is not necessarily a hedonist. Rather, he seemed to believe, along with Socrates, that wisdom, the highest good, was intrinsically pleasant. Since no man is completely wise, man's highest good is the progress toward wisdom. As wisdom is inseparable from knowledge of oneself, the philosopher will be aware of his progress in knowledge, and that awareness is pleasant. But this leaves unanswered the problem of whether the demand for virtue can be substituted by the quest for pleasure, even the pleasure deriving from the highest good for man.

Of course, this is only one of several questions the answer to which is not to be found in any dialogue, whether written by Xenophon or by Plato.

### Notes

- 1 Jean Luccioni, *Hieron: Texte et traduction avec une introduction et un commentaire* (Paris: Ophrys, 1949).
- 2 Isocrates was an orator, teacher and rhetorician who wrote a collection of ten known orations. Three of these were directed to the rulers of Salamis on Cyprus, including Nicocles. He is further discussed in the second intermission on the Sophists.
- 3 *Hiero*, I.I5–I6.
- 4 *Hiero* I.17. The mention of the misunderstanding of the masses raises an important point. While tyranny is an imposed regime and thus some sort of a degenerate one – as in Plato's and also Aristotle's accounts of the transformation of regimes – it is clearly not for the reasons that we generally hold to today, for example, the equality of all. This is encapsulated in the way that the many, *hoi polloi*, will be referred to in the dialogue, 'first they are harmlessly dubbed a crowd, *pleethos*, but soon they are called, and remain, the rowdier *ochlos*'.
- 5 *Hiero* II.2. The list moves the conversation up a level, from those pleasures which many people would be willing to sacrifice, to those goods that people would make the sacrifices for. This view, rather than the level of the

- pure pleasure seeker view just before, now takes into account the ambitious and seekers after wealth.
- 6 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Touchstone Books, 1990).
  - 7 *Hiero* XI.13–15. Notice that while the happiness and prosperity of the city and its citizens seem to be a concern to Simonides, these things are only a means, the end being the happiness of the tyrant. As for being happy without being envied, compare Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (IV.25).
  - 8 Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 35.
  - 9 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Letters of Machiavelli*, trans. Allan Gillbert (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961).
  - 10 *Hiero* 10.

### 3

## THE JOY OF SEX

### On Plato's *Republic* 2.0

Is this not why Love has since long ago been called tyrant?  
– *Republic*, 573b7–8

The *Republic* identifies two loci of tyranny – tyranny in the soul, and tyranny in the *polis*, or city. Explicitly, the text, then, proceeds at two levels simultaneously. This analogy between the *psyche* and *polis* is used by Plato in his other dialogues also, such as in the *Timaeus* (75d) and even in the *Parmenides* (133a). Implicitly as well, the *Republic* works at two levels, as we will see.<sup>1</sup> This chapter is going to reboot our reading of the *Republic*. We will start over right from the beginning and reread it with an entirely different focus from that of Chapter 2, which was also on a reading of the *Republic*. There will be repetition, of course. However, the same ‘facts’ about what happens within the dialogue will be repeated, but with a new framework of interpretation. The new framework is informed by what we have learned from Xenophon during the first intermission.

As a chapter on this very same dialogue has just closed, I should reiterate that here we approach the text with only one special issue in mind; that is, to focus upon and in some respects uncover how the specific presence of *eros* and tyranny in the dialogue enable a different reading of the precisely identical text. The hermeneutic attends not to the love of laughter, as in Chapter 2, but rather to the anxieties surrounding what we may humourously reference as the joy of sex. (By ‘joy’, of course, I am being facetious – for it is the tyrannic component of sexuality, in both being controlled and dominated by passion and the passion to dominate and control, that constitutes that rather perverse ‘joy’, as hinted at in the headnote to this chapter.) That such a

reboot, a completely new reading, is both possible and plausible is of course a main part of the joy of this text.

### *Eros and tyranny*

Plato's *Republic*, especially in the ninth and tenth books, speaks of the upbringing of the tyrant who, in part due to his natural talents and in part due to his upbringing, ultimately winds up engulfed in the fiery passion of his soul, leading him to consummate injustice on account of his overreaching – *eros turannos*.

These same considerations were also reflected in Xenophon's *Hiero* (see the first intermission). Xenophon points out that the instinct toward tyranny presses especially hard upon those who are neither moderate of spirit (internally) nor restrained by piety (externally). We can think about this claim in Socratic terms. Man feels some reluctance to overreach when he recognizes some sort of limiting principle. That man is merely one part among the whole that humbles him, but he is that special part open to the whole – yet, being limited, he cannot know the whole, he cannot be wise simply, but at best a philosopher. With no external restraint, man's love to know the whole flairs into a lust after the whole. His craving to know within the limits of the possible transforms into a mad craving without limit – thus, the necessarily erotic element of tyranny, recognized by Xenophon and Plato. For these thinkers, tyranny cannot be a noble aspiration, the tyrant is consumed by desire, or as Plato says, he is 'eros incarnate'.

In the *Republic*, Socrates shows that tyranny is consummate injustice, a great overreaching. This overreaching is unnatural, while moderation as shown through harmony or health, is naturally pleasing. There is a 'right eros', *orthos eros*, contributive of justice and the soul's health, and there is a frenzied erotic soul of the tyrannical type. The tyrannical type is the most unhappy according to this treatment, where the city is the soul writ large – the city under tyranny is needy, poor, enslaved etc., and so is the soul of the tyrant. The *Republic* and the *Hiero* agree in this respect, with the description of the tyrant in the last books of the *Republic* sounding just as dire as the pathetic disparagement of the tyrant's life in the *Hiero*.

To achieve our present aim of understanding how *eros* and tyranny function within the ecosystem of the *Republic* and thereby to offer a supplementary reading of the same text that we treated in Chapter 2, one

introductory remark on Plato's work is necessary. The scholarly tradition places the dramatic date of the *Republic* at somewhere between 421 and 411 BCE, which thus would have been during one of the most unstable periods for the constitution of Athens in the course of its history. The *Constitution of Athens*, sometimes attributed to Aristotle, discusses various eras of relative stability or instability of the constitution.<sup>2</sup> Athens had eleven of them in its history, up to the time of the composition of Aristotle's work. The dramatic date of the *Republic*, then, occurs within the backdrop of a terribly unstable political constitution.

Remember that for a dramatic-synthetic reading of a dialogue, in contrast to an analytic one, contextualizations (such as datings of the dramatic scenes) provide us with clues to help guide us in our way through the Platonic labyrinth. Once again, an Anglo-American analytic orientation is eschewed for a synthetic one because of its aptness for the dialogue form, which differs markedly from the treatise form of philosophical text. This is not to say, however, that we are here reading the *Republic* as an esoteric work; this is not a Straussian chapter; but the next one (Chapter 4) will be.

### Here we go again

The first definition of justice in the *Republic*, if we accept that Polemarchus defends his father Cephalus' position, is supported by the citation of Simonides the poet, 'It is just to render to each his due' (*Republic* 331e). Polemarchus' definition not only rests on the words of the poet, he interprets the poet militarily and conceives of justice as helping friends and hurting enemies. Friends (*philoï*) owe it to their friends to do them good and no harm; but one should render to enemies what enemies deserve, harm.

Socrates' discussion with Polemarchus involves several assumptions. While the conclusion of the episode is that no wise man could have meant by justice to render to each his due, to benefit friends and harm enemies (implying that either Simonides is not wise or Polemarchus misinterprets), perhaps more important are the following two premises used: (a) justice is the virtue of men; and (b) the just is the good. There is also the very Socratic premise that men who are harmed – as in the case of horses<sup>3</sup> – become less just.

Going further we must observe that Thrasymachus' remarks should not be taken in isolation from how he makes them – violently, savagely

or blushing. He formulates his definition thus, 'I posit that the just is no other than the advantage of the stronger'. Here, while clarifying his position, Thrasymachus mentions tyrants for the first time in the dialogue, as we will see in a bit. Justice being the advantage of the stronger suggests convention; it is not a Darwinian notion of the naturally stronger or fittest. It is a conception grounded on the regime, on legitimacy and on the law. Each regime – democratic, tyrannic etc. – enacts laws to its own advantage and justice consists of the many following these laws, lest they should be regarded as lawbreakers and wrongdoers, as unjust men.

Now, if justice is the advantage of the stronger (the ruler, in this case), and just are the ones who follow the laws or obey the rulers, then those who obey must benefit those who rule when they follow the laws – as laws are designed by the rulers for their own benefit. But, Socrates objects, what if the rulers are mistaken about what will benefit them? It might result in creation of laws that harm them rather than benefit them, and they just would consist of those who obey the laws which actually harm the rulers – justice would be the *disadvantage* of the stronger. Thrasymachus, the wolf, is trapped.

But the snarl does not necessarily undermine justice as the advantage of the stronger. It undermines only the emphasized aspect of it that it is just to obey the orders of the ruler. Thrasymachus contrives a counter-argument: the stronger is not stronger when it is mistaken; the physician is not physician when he makes sick and does not heal; etc., so the ruler *qua* ruler is infallible. Of course, this opens the door to Socrates' analogies of the arts with ruling, and Socrates can retort that the artist *qua* artist practices his art and does not merely seek his advantage.

If the physician is a physician because he heals and not because he charges fees (the latter he does in his capacity as money-maker), then the ruler is a ruler because he rules and not because he seeks his advantage. In this respect, Socrates attempts to extract the notion of ruling-for-ones-own-advantage out from the notion of ruling itself. Further, by various analogies, Socrates attempts to show that the ruler *qua* ruler seeks the advantage of those he rules and not his own advantage simply.

Thrasymachus abuses Socrates most coarsely for his child-like naïveté. Socrates would imagine that the shepherd fattens the sheep for the good of the sheep and not with an eye to their sheering and slaughter. He then moves on to an encomium of injustice, stating that



the just man is always at a disadvantage in relation to the unjust man, who is most profited by his injustice. Thrasymachus praises the tyrant above all, the man who is most able to overreach greatly.

*Pleonexia*, or overreaching, is presented by Socrates to Thrasymachus as the opposite of justice (349b–350d, 351d). Socrates maintains this with Glaucon and Adeimantus later in the dialogue (359c, 362b), and Socrates continually argues that, while *pleonexia* sickens the psyche's *politeia*, justice heals it (352a, 440b–444b). The tyrant has done the most wrong, is consummately unjust and is most happy, while those who would not willingly do wrong and will follow his laws are most miserable. In short, tyranny is Thrasymachus' strongest evidence that justice is the advantage of the stronger, and the tyrant his strongest evidence that injustice pays and justice is unprofitable.

Socrates, however, is not convinced, even by Thrasymachus' passionate speech about the benefits accruing to the unjust man. Thrasymachus, exasperated, asks how he can possibly persuade Socrates if he has not taken to heart what he has said already – is he going to have to take his argument and cram it right into Socrates' soul (*he eis ten psuchen ton logon*)? These words cause Socrates to swear (*ma Di*), and the animated nature of the exchange is obvious to the reader. Socrates asks incredulously if Thrasymachus really believes that the rulers in the cities willingly hold office and rule. He replies to Socrates, 'By God no [I do not just think it], I very well know [they want to rule]' (345e, *ma Di ouk, ephe, all' eu oida*).

Thrasymachus must be wondering, can Socrates not see his very hand in front of his face? What on earth could Socrates be thinking? Thrasymachus sees how the rulers seek to rule, seek power and influence. Perhaps in his usual circle, as in our times, it is merely enough to mention politicians to evoke notions of ambition, corruption and greed. If one cannot see it, one is not looking – Thrasymachus, thus, has no alternative but to ram this obvious fact into Socrates' soul. But Socrates begs him not to do this. For, Socrates perhaps does know that what Thrasymachus describes is, in fact, the condition of the city, the real-politics. But Socrates wants to suspend this real state of things and focus attention elsewhere, deeper; that justice is the advantage of the superior will be reserved for another investigation, Socrates says. He wants to turn to the weightier matter of whether the life of the unjust man is truly better than that of the just. That is, Socrates wants to table the everyday workings of the *polis* and investigate the prior issue, the case of the interior, the order of the soul.

Let's recall one of the fundamental assumptions brought out in Socrates' discussion with Polemarchus – that the virtue of the soul is justice. This will help us understand Socrates' turn away from the city *status quo* to the soul of man as a sort of turning away from the objects upon which light is reflected, to the source of light itself. The soul is the seat of life. While life makes its appearance in the city, in the public, it also appears in the private, in the family or in solitude. The political is not the exclusive medium for the soul's expression, although it is of course a condition for this expression. Thus, Platonic dialogues are not exclusively devoted to politics, but also to beauty, poetry, manliness, love, cosmology, piety, virtue and so on. Each of these reflect upon life, the soul of man, in some way. To reduce these heterogeneous media of the soul's articulation to one, to the political, permits real-politics to dominate and ultimately to crush what is other to it.<sup>4</sup>

Thrasymachus' error is analogous to the efforts of contemporary epistemologists to understand the human mind on the basis of computer models. The mind is not a processor simply. It is, in its organic interrelation with the *soma* and *psyche*, alive – it is artist, poet, warrior, lover and beloved, scientist, faithful, magnanimous and so on. Thrasymachus may be right in holding that political life always tends toward tyranny. His mistake is to generalize from the condition of things political that consummate injustice is choiceworthy in itself.

### The blush of conspiracy

Socrates, thus, turns away from real-politics to the deeper level of life – to the question of inquiring whose life is better, the life of the just or the unjust? But Thrasymachus – political man par excellence, the reductionist – does not fare too well in this strange climate, the pre-political. He calls Socrates foul names, he hedges, hems, sweats profusely and then he blushes.

It needs to be pointed out here that Thrasymachus is not the only example of an interlocutor in Plato's works who is forced to blush in front of Socrates. It happens to Hippocrates in the *Protagoras*, to Hippolathes in the *Lysis* and to Cleinias in the *Euthydemes*. The former two occasions especially (since these are cases where interlocutors blush during discussion with Socrates) shed light on the episode with Thrasymachus. In the *Protagoras* (312a), when Socrates asks

Hippocrates why he is so eager to study with the sophist Protagoras ('Who will you become after you go to Protagoras?'), Hippocrates blushes (*eruthriasas*). Socrates sees through Hippocrates, who is eager for political power. In the *Lysis*, Socrates asks Hippolathes to tell him who is the most beautiful boy in the gymnasium. Hippolathes blushes. Socrates then tells Hippolathes that he must have received the skill of recognizing a lover and a beloved from the gods (240bc), which makes him blush again. Hippolathes' *erotic nature* stands out, and when pointed out by Socrates, it raises embarrassment.

We may infer that through the technique of dramatically introducing blushing, Plato conspires to show, but not explicitly states, that there is a natural union between the sophistic-tyrannic (Thrasymachus), the erotic (Hippolathes) and the sophistic-political (Hippocrates).

Thrasymachus will remain in the realm of the political when he answers the questions posed him, for he is no innocent. Thus justice, he says, is a sort of simplicity of heart, while injustice is good judgement. Injustice, when consummate, is prudent and good, and the unjust man gains power over all, overreaching (*pleonexia*). But here is where Socrates trips him up. Overreaching, is it not in some way unnatural?

Thrasymachus blushes, naturally, because harmony and moderation are natural, while his thesis is contrary to nature. His thesis overreaches: the notion that injustice be virtuous and prudent is unnatural. Of course, his prior, softer thesis that injustice is profitable is simply conventional, and the state of things political indeed seems to prove it. But, with Socrates' turn away from the conventional, the status quo of the political, toward life and the soul, we do see how deeply convention pales against natural harmony and moderation.

With this inward turn having brought something basic, fundamental and prior to light – namely, an appeal to harmony and moderation, an apprehension of harmony and moderation in the soul – Socrates can now turn back to things political, and this he does explicitly by using the city as the first example in asking anew the earlier question of whether injustice is more potent and stronger than justice. Of course, Thrasymachus refuses to proceed – he will now not argue, but only answer to please Socrates. He has become gentle, tame, and not fiery and angry. After the point when he blushes, he will not call Socrates another foul name; in short, he is no longer in earnest.

## The work of the soul

Socrates wishes to show not simply that justice triumphs over injustice, for this follows of necessity by the admission that justice is the true virtue, while injustice is merely profitable. Rather, Socrates will show that the very power of injustice is parasitic on justice. This means that injustice requires making use of virtue and prudence, which are the characteristics of justice, in order to be powerful in the first place.

To be able to show this requires accepting two axioms: (a) injustice brings about enmity and conflict, while (b) justice brings unity of mind and friendship. Here we find the famous explanation of the necessary justice among a gang of thieves, who cannot function as thieves did they not agree and avoid internecine conflict. But Socrates, ever with one eye fixed firmly on the soul, moves from the justice of the gang to justice within oneself – injustice brings a discord within one, preventing one from executing any action due to this inner faction and lack of self-agreement.<sup>5</sup> Following on the aforementioned axioms to reach the conclusion that the very power of injustice is parasitic on justice, Socrates intends to examine the issue more closely. He, thus, delves further to determine whether the just man is happier than the unjust, or whether it is in fact more profitable to be just. To answer this, he does not rely on the earlier notions of harmony and moderation, but from the specific function of the soul.

The soul has a work or function that it can carry out well or badly, and that is life in general terms, or more concretely, managing, ruling, deliberating and so on. A bad soul will manage and rule things badly, while the good soul will do it well. Again, importing the key premise from Socrates' earlier discussion with Polemarchus, that the virtue of the soul is justice and its defect injustice, Socrates can conclude that injustice cannot be more profitable than justice, as it cannot be more profitable to manage things badly with a defective soul than to manage things well with a virtuous one. The upshot, then, is that true profit is in the soul, and justice pays because justice is in the soul – or, again, that injustice could only pay if there were justice in the soul.

But, notice that while Socrates claimed to want to examine more closely, or to start the inquiry anew, he actually imports a premise from a prior debate. Indeed, a debate that did not even occur with the same interlocutor. Was it then truly a closer examination? I say, not at all.

And Socrates seems to admit as much in the closing lines of the first book, when he undermines the premise he has exploited, 'For if I don't know what the just is, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not, and whether its possessor is or is not happy' (354c). In other words, the refutation of Thrasymachus was provisional, not definitive. Thus, the inquiry into the just does not end with the first book of the *Republic*, but as Glaucon will make clear in the beginning of book two, it has only just begun.

### Glaucon speaks up for Sophists

Glaucon begins with a sort of social compact theory, claiming that the nature of justice is merely a convention, a means by which the many weak can prevent suffering injustice at the hands of real men, while all agree that it is good to commit injustice but bad to suffer it. Remember the magic ring of Gyges – a just man with a magic ring would do the same deeds as an unjust man, that is, make use of his special condition to have sex with anyone he wanted, to kill whomsoever he pleased, and in short to be equal to a god among men (360c).

To radicalize the scenario, Glaucon thinks it necessary that when arguing the case for the just man, the just man should seem unjust to all but in spite of this still choose justice. For, how else could we be sure that the just man is just for the sake of justice and not for the attendant gifts and honours? Socrates must show that despite being thought unjust by all, the just man is yet the happier man than the unjust.

The first step Socrates takes is to look for justice and injustice where it is larger, more readily seen – the city. The question is whether justice is unconditionally, or in and of itself, good for the soul. Thus, this turning to the 'large letters' of the city is a *means* for determining what is good for the soul. This seems to suggest that psychology, an account of the good or happiness of the soul, is the priority over politics, the good of the city. This is to say, again, that the Thrasymachean reduction and subordination of all things to the political is undermined in the very turn toward the political. Since the city is larger than the man, it should be easier to draw conclusions regarding justice in the city and then to extend these conclusions by analogy to the man.

Socrates begins with the coming into being of the city, or as otherwise stated, the coming into being of justice in the city. As Jonathan Lear has argued,<sup>6</sup> Socrates' politics is grounded in 'psychology', but

the *psyche* of an individual largely depends on the nature of the *politeia*, or the constitution. In this respect also, then, the inquiry into justice has to occur at both the level of the city and the soul.

The city is born, Socrates suggests, out of our lack of self-sufficiency and our needs. Notice that justice and *eros* have a common origin – our lack. Socrates, with Adeimantes' help, begins to design a city which can fill in this human lack by providing for every basic human need – although surprisingly sex is not mentioned. Glaucon of course calls this a city only fit for pigs.

So, Socrates starts again, building the fevered city. It is here that girls are mentioned for the first time in the dialogue. (Perhaps the better translation for *hetairai* (373a) would be 'courtesans'; the term appears again at 573d, where these girls/courtesans accompany those whose souls are driven by the indwelling tyrant *eros*, *eros turannos*.)

Next enter immoderation, power seeking and, ultimately, war. This suggests, of course, that Socrates does not hold that war springs out of our basic needs, but rather originates in overreaching. Here, as Socrates speaks of war, he states that an army will be necessary, and not just a part-time militia, if we keep in mind that the division of labour requires that one man does one job. Further, since we recall that there are natural differences and abilities among men, it is necessary to choose for this army – the guardians – those who are by nature best fit to the task. The guardians must be high-spirited or have souls characterized by *thymos*.

### Educating the guardians about sex

Socrates moves next to the task of educating the guardians. There should be courses in music and gymnastics – music first, stories both true and false; the false first. Indeed, the false being so important, stories must be censored to ensure that the false be fittingly beautiful. But also the truth should be censored, if it is potentially dangerous; it should be told only to a very few who have vowed to keep silent about it.

To details, no fables about the gods can claim that the gods may be in any way responsible for bad things, only for good. Thus, even when the gods must punish, it must be published that this benefited those punished, who were wicked. Recall, however, in book one of the *Republic* when Socrates argued against Thrasymachus that punishing only serves to harm, based on the example of the horse. This seeming

contradiction characterizes this part of the dialogue, full of excess, foulness and violence. Indeed, Socrates himself lays down that what we all hate most of all is the lie in the soul.

Nevertheless, there is some use, it seems, for the lie-in-words, against enemies, for example, or against friends who are mad – medicinal lies, perhaps?

Only the rulers of the city may lie, for ‘medicinal reasons’; if the others lie they will run into trouble. Again, the youth will certainly need to have self-restraint, which means – for the multitude – to follow the rule of their superiors and to rule over their own bodies, not to indulge in the pleasures, drink and passions. Thus, the youth clearly mustn’t hear about Zeus being overcome by passion and wanting to have sex with Hera right on the ground instead of wasting time by shifting to the bedroom. We must never hear of the gods or their offspring committing rapes. A boy, if he is to become a good man, must never imitate a woman who is sick, in love or in labour, or a man upset by sickness, love (*eros*) or drunkenness. *Eros* is affiliated here with illness rather than aspiration.

### Sexual digression

Socrates is speaking of the lovability of the soul of beauty, and on the model of harmony and disharmony, of the incommensurability of temperance and extravagant pleasure, and of the greatest and most acute pleasure of sex (*hedonen tes peri ta aphrodisia*). Adeimantus calls sex not only the greatest pleasure but also the most mad (*manikoteran*). But Socrates suggests that nothing like madness should seep into ‘right love’ (*orthos eros*), which should be a temperate and harmonious love of the orderly and beautiful. This being so, the city will have a law requiring that the lover may only kiss and touch the beloved as a father would a son, and the flaring up of any passion would be stigmatized. This contrasts strikingly with Socrates’ opening remarks in his great speech in the *Phaedrus* (243e–245b), where he shows that madness (*mania*) is not in every case a bad thing.

Here I urge you to recall from Chapter 2 the way I described the insurrection among the interlocutors. It forced Socrates to digress, to flesh out what he had earlier hinted about having property, wives and children in common in the ideal city. The group of discussants were awaiting clarification on the procreation and bringing up of children, procreation being an issue Socrates has tended to avoid. The discussion

includes the commonality of women and children, and provokes much talk of laughter.

The next subject dealt with after the sexual digression is war which follows a direct address on whether such a polity is at all possible. For it to be so, philosophers must become kings – ‘Kings’ (*basileis*) and not ‘tyrants’ (*turranoi*) – or that the present rulers must take to philosophy. In no other way could the present city in speech ever come close to realization and see the light of the sun. Socrates clarifies and fleshes out his suggestion, but interestingly, he chooses the analogy of lovers (*erotiko*) for his first argument on the nature of the philosopher. It is also in this context that the ideas or forms are discussed, and it is the apprehension and contemplation of these forms, eternal and unchanging, that is the mark of distinction for the philosopher.

### The philosopher – and the sun, line and cave

As the sixth book opens, the nature of the true philosopher becomes more clear. He is, of course, a striver after truth; concerned more with the pleasures of the mind than body; temperate and not greedy for wealth or preoccupied with great expenditures, or illiberal either; his mind is habituated to grand thoughts, eternity and existence, and so death does not alarm him; he is never unjust; he is quick to learn, and his memory is sharp. He is, in short, the best man for the job – the true ruler.

Nevertheless, it is clear that whether or not philosophers should rule, it would be nearly impossible to persuade the multitude to accept the rule of philosophers, and impossible to persuade philosophers to rule. In line with these predicaments, Socrates explains through the allegory of the sun, the famous divided line, and the simile of the cave not only the true nature of the philosopher – and, incidentally, why he would not condescend to rule – but also the true nature of the multitude, unwitting spelunkers, and situates these ‘natures’ within the fabric of nature herself, which springs out of the Good, or perhaps the Idea of the Good.

### Tyranny and democracy

Book Eight picks up where the conversation digressed at the opening of Book Five. By the end of Book Four, justice in the city and in the soul had been discovered, and so the types of faulty regimes and



corresponding faulty souls were to be enumerated in order to determine whether the life of the just man is inherently superior and more choiceworthy than that of the unjust man. So here Socrates picks up, describing the five types of regimes and corresponding types of souls: (1) Aristocracy; (2) Timocracy; (3) Oligarchy; (4) Democracy; and (5) Tyranny.

Aristocracy was the fine, just and good regime, and the other four are degenerate forms, in order not only of decline, but also in temporal sequence. That is, aristocracy declines into timocracy, timocracy into oligarchy, oligarchy into democracy and democracy into tyranny.<sup>7</sup> We need to focus only on democracy and its degeneration into the most unjust regime, tyranny. After tyranny and the tyrannical soul are examined, the interlocutors will be in a position to choose between the life of the just man (corresponding to the aristocratic polity) or the life of the unjust man (corresponding to tyranny), or between Socrates and Thrasymachus.

It must be noted that while democracy in Athens permitted a Socrates for seventy years, democracy in speech is castigated to the highest degree. We have observed the tension between justice and the ideal city in speech – that is, the ideal city in speech would never permit a Socrates for an instant, and so we seem at an impasse in respect to which regime to prefer: the democracy in deed, in spite of what is said about democracy in speech, or the ideal city in speech, despite what we know about it in fact: that no Socrates could survive there.

While the ideal city in speech is characterized by justice – that is, each citizen having and doing what fits his nature and not overreaching etc., democracy is characterized as a city of freedom and license. It is a city where one may say or do as he likes, but which has arisen out of terrorism, where the poor have taken an opportunity to master the rich, killing some, exiling others and then take over power giving all who remain an equal share in citizenship. Since democracy is characterized by freedom, one finds the most variety within it. And this variety is perfectly acceptable there, making the state somewhat anarchic, where equality is granted to all, whether equal or unequal in respect to virtue.

The democratic regime corresponds to a democratic soul – characterized by freedom and license, anarchic, with unequal quests treated equally. The democratic man is soft and prodigal, ever changing, one day wine bibbing, another fasting, one day a gymnast, the next a philosopher; in short, while he calls his life a noble one, one of freedom

and blessedness, he is in fact a sort of lotus-eater, ever changing but getting nowhere.

Tyranny is an outgrowth of democracy, and the tyrannical soul that of the democratic soul. Democracy is liberty. This liberty tends to degenerate into license, as when the role of father and son reverses, the father afraid rather of the child, teachers fear their pupils and the pupils pay no heed to their teachers, the old imitate the young, and the young have no reverence for their elders, and so on, such that liberty bursts its seams, with the outcome of too much freedom being slavery.<sup>8</sup> To clarify this reversal of liberty (via license) turning into slavery, Socrates divides democratic society into three parts: (1) the dominating class, the administrators, seekers after wealth who, being idle and without talent, constitute a kind of bourgeoisie; (2) a smaller class, capitalists, who are cunning and thrifty and become rich; and (3) the largest class, the property-less people, who cause turbulence unless and until bought off or bribed by those richer than they.

Now, this third class accuses the rich of forming an oligarchic class, of hating democracy, and struggles against it. Socrates regards extreme differences in wealth among the citizens as one of the principle causes of *stasis* – incidentally, two millennia later, James Madison (publishing under the name Publius) will argue the same point in his defense of the new U.S. Constitution in the *Federalist Papers*.<sup>9</sup> The rich, naturally, attempt to defend themselves, but in so doing actually become oligarchic. Thus follow clashes between the rich and poor, with the latter putting forward one great man to champion their cause – this man is cherished and magnified by the people. The tyrant, therefore, tends to arise always out of the protectorate root. The protector develops into the tyrant due to the ‘power corrupts’ maxim; Socrates calls this process turning from a man to a wolf. The reference to the wolf recalls the description of Thrasymachus from the first book, when he enters the conversation with such force that Socrates is frightened (336d). And indeed, in the present discussion the choice between Thrasymachus, advocate of the unjust man, that is, the tyrant or wolf, and Socrates, advocate of the just man, the philosopher, must be made.

Commonly, if the rich manage to exile the protector of the people, he returns armed in defiance of his enemies – then he asks the people for bodyguards to make the city safe and to rescue democracy, and this protector now becomes wolf begins his purges, and tyranny thus takes root. The tyrant in the early days smiles and denies being a tyrant; he makes promises publicly and privately, redistributes land and wealth,

and behaves graciously and gently. However, after the purges, he stirs up war, insuring thereby that the people still require a leader. This war mongering invites criticism, which in turn leads to more purges, until the tyrant is left with no friend or foe of any worth, having now become enemy of the brave, the magnanimous, the wise and the rich. Incurring the hatred of the injured, the tyrant is thus in more and more urgent need of mercenaries. To pay them, and to feed his ever-grander growing pleasures, he will waste the city's resources. The description of the tyrant here so closely resembles Hiero's own words – as we saw in the first intermission – that either Xenophon read Plato, Plato read Xenophon, or tyrants generally behaved in the manner described.

If, then, the people – and not simply the erstwhile enemies of the people – themselves take objection, the tyrant's hold upon the city will have by now become too strong to undo. The tyranny is complete, the democracy that gave birth to it finished.

### The (erotic) soul of the tyrant

The tyrant himself is discussed in Book Nine, and his character and development are first contextualized by the terrible, fierce and lawless desires that each of us house somewhere within us, but strive to lessen and control. In Socrates' account, the creation of the tyrannic type begins in childhood, where one is persuaded to pursue lawlessness under the name of democratic freedom. The father pushes the child in directions contrary to others, and the pushing and pulling between prodigality and constraint produce an utterly uncontrollable and impassioned (*erota*) personality – which, however, the mentors attempt to govern through some ruling protectorate passion. At first this 'ruling passion' is called *epithumos*, but subsequently is referred to as *eros* (e.g., 574a, 574d, 575a). This attempt backfires, however, with the passions of the lad overwhelming all his more comely aspirations, the soul suffering madness runs amok and purges its noble instincts, 'Is this not why Love has since long ago been called tyrant?'

The tyrant is like a man maddened by drink or deranged, so impassioned that he seeks to rule not only over men, but also over the gods – the man is tyrannical when either by nature or by habit, he has become like a drunk man, or like an erotic or maniac. The manner of life for this tyrant-in-the-making will of course include feasts and carousals, and where girls/courtesans accompany those whose souls are driven by the indwelling tyrant *Eros* (*Eros turannos*). The passions plaguing

him day and night ultimately put great strain on his purse, and soon he is led to beg, borrow and steal, from his friends and from his parents – he would even stoop to parricide if his father resisted him – or even to plunder the temples. Notice that the reference to the plundering of temples may refer to Socrates' student, the disgraced charismatic Alcibiades, who was convicted of plundering and mutilating sacred places (this will be further discussed in Chapter 4, on Plato's *Symposium*, where Alcibiades makes a dramatic entrance).

The tyrant, ruled by *eros*, lives in utter anarchy and lawlessness, and the man who has the greatest and mightiest tyrant in his soul wreaks havoc in the city. Before coming to power, such a man is characterized as one who surrounds himself with yes-men, or if he is subordinate to another, he will behave in a servile and fawning manner – thus, the tyrannical nature is always only master or slave, never knowing true friendship or freedom.

The similitude of the soul and the city is reiterated. It is determined that there is no regime more miserable than tyranny, as no man's soul is as miserably composed as the tyrant's; and no regime more happy than the one governed by the true, that is, philosopher, king, as there is no soul better ordered, more virtuous and happy than his. This unhappiness of the tyrant follows by analogy from the unhappiness of the regime. As the regime consists of utterly enslaved citizens, just so the tyrant's soul teems with illiberality and servility, reason enslaved to frenzied passions; as the tyrannic city is poor, not affluent, the tyrannic soul must be needy and unfulfilled; as the state is full of terrors and alarms, so too the soul; as the state is full of lamentation and wailing, thus so too the tyrant, whose soul is maddened by its desires and passions.

It is pointed out that the only man more miserable than one with a tyrannical soul would be the one so unfortunate as to actually be a tyrant. For, just as a person with many slaves would forever fear his slaves if he had no certain means of controlling them, the tyrant must ever fear his many subjects, and is, further, consequently unable to travel abroad, lest he be ousted while away, thus becoming a prisoner in his own home. While the man with a tyrant's nature, a soul filled with many, multitudinous fears and desires, is necessarily unhappy, the actual tyrant harvests ills all the more, and is summed up as being – on account of his rule – envious, faithless, unjust, friendless, impious and a host of everything bad, and in being himself unhappy makes all others so.

## Q.E.D., the philosopher's soul reigns supreme

In wrapping up the victory of the just man over the unjust man, what Socrates pursued from the opening events of the dialogue, Socrates deftly shows that the life of the philosopher far surpasses in pleasure the lives of those who seek honour or wealth. Indeed, the philosopher knows the other pleasures and dismisses them, while those living the inferior lives know not the pleasure of learning for its own sake. Of course, what is presupposed in this argument is the assumption that the philosopher is necessarily a just man, a suppressed premise which has by no means been definitively established. But Plato does next attempt to show this, when he argues that when the whole soul accepts the guidance of the wisdom-loving part, then each part will keep to its own task – which is, of course, the recurrent definition of justice in the dialogue – and each part will enjoy its own proper pleasure. In short, the philosopher will live the just life, possessing the soul of justice. Just so, the true king, just in soul, experiences the greatest pleasure as does the philosopher – which Socrates works out to be 729 times happier than the tyrant!<sup>10</sup>

It is concluded that the just life is more profitable and good than the unjust, or if you will, the just speech of Socrates has defeated the unjust speech of Thrasyarchus. But as reasoned persuasion is not sufficient, Socrates supports the arguments with a myth defending the just life and closes the tenth book with a story of the afterlife, the famous myth of Er, as it is called in English, or Eros, as is the name in Greek (*Ἠρως*, so with a big *e* [η] and small *o*, rather than *εἶρος*, with a small *e* [ε] and big *o* [ω]). In this story, the tyrants fare rather badly, suffering heinous torture without relief. The status of the philosophers here – as there has yet to be any philosopher-king (of course the city constructed by Socrates and his interlocutors is nothing more than a city-in-speech, *polei legeis*) – is not given explicit description.

## Notes

- 1 Indeed, it works at even more than two levels, but following up on the others does not concern us here and now.
- 2 Due to the difference in style from the rest of his works, there has been a debate over attribution of the *Constitution of the Athenians* to Aristotle. Nevertheless, it remains a treasured source of Athens' cultural history. Unlike the modern-day understanding of the term constitution, the *Constitution of the Athenians* does not create or lay down principles for

- the creation of political and legal institutions, but instead consists of the history of these institutions in Athens down to 403 BC. It was probably composed in the 330s–320s.
- 3 Socrates had argued analogically that if we hurt a horse, we make that horse a worse horse.
  - 4 However, in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1094a25–b12), Aristotle perhaps lays the foundation for such a reductionism. Aristotle, searching for what knowledge-discipline is concerned with the highest good, calls politology the most controlling one, as it prescribes within the *polis* which other sciences ought to be pursued and how far. Other capacities like generalship, domestic economy etc. are subordinate to politology, which legislates what must be done and what avoided, and so it includes the ends of all other disciplines within itself. Therein, he also points out that the good of the *polis* is greater and more complete than the good of an individual, and that it is finer and more divine to pursue and maintain the good of a city or people than that of an individual.
  - 5 The internecine conflict being referred to here is *stasis*. This term is coupled with what I have been translating as ‘overreaching’, *pleonexia*. Conflict (*stasis*) is a frequent result of *pleonexia*. But while *pleonexia* harms the *psyche*’s *politeia*, *stasis* undermines the *polis*’ *politeia*. Justice is what resolves both of these ill effects. The Greek historian Thucydides states that *stasis* was one of the principle reasons for Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian war (III.69–85, II.65.12). But the term *stasis* is complex. See, for example, Dirk Loenen, *Stasis: enige aspecten van de begrippen partij-en klassestrijd in Oud-Griekenland* (Noord-Hollandsche uitgevers mij., 1953); and Moses I. Finley, ‘Athenian Demagogues’, *Past & Present* 21 (1962), pp. 3–24, p. 44ff., “‘Stasis’ literally means standing, suggesting that various factions stand firm (*stasis*) in their positions, and thus prevent pluralistic decisions from occurring, leading instead to fractional conflict (*stasis*) or even civil war (*stasis*)”. The German jurist Carl Schmitt was taken by the term and discussed it on several occasions. See, Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 29; and Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II. Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder politischen Theologie* (D & H, 1970), pp. 117–118.
  - 6 Jonathan Lear, ‘Inside and Outside the Republic’, *Phronesis* 37, no. 2 (1992), pp. 184–215.
  - 7 Aristotle criticized this scheme as it suggests that tyranny would then directly precede the best-known regime, aristocracy. See, Shorey’s note to the Loeb edition of the *Republic*, Vol. 2, p. 243.
  - 8 See Robert Bly, *The Sibling Society* (Perseus Books, 1996), where he argues that in today’s democracies the old tend to imitate the young. This seems to be an extended meditation and updating of Plato’s arguments. From the back-cover excerpt, one may notice, of course, that Bly is less systematic than Plato, ‘Having become jaded by the abuses of authority, the [baby] boomers of North America have torn down the traditional hierarchy within their families and within their communities. What is left is

- a “cultural flatness”, where adults cling to self-absorbed adolescent values, television talk shows have more clout than elders, children are spiritually abandoned to fend for themselves, and in the place of community we have built shopping malls’.
- 9 James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers: Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay*, ed. Michael A. Genovese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
  - 10 Socrates’ calculation here serves the same function as an episode in the *Phaedrus* (245b–257b). There, the highest type of man, the philosopher, is contrasted to the lowest type, the tyrant. Seven middling types widen the gulf between these two very distinct and different souls, and thus, they would seem to have absolutely nothing in common.

## 4

# HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DEMON

## On Plato's *Symposium*

Something divine and daemonic comes to me. . . . From my childhood on it has come to me as a sort of voice. And whenever it comes, it always holds me back from something that I am about to do – it never pushes me forward.

– *The Apology of Socrates*

Like the first intermission on Xenophon, this chapter is preponderantly a Straussian rendition of Plato's *Symposium*. I do not fully comprehend what it means to be a Straussian, but whatever it is, I am pretty sure that I am not one. The reason I present Strauss' rendition, rather, is because his is by far the best and most profound reading of the dialogue that I know. It is indeed in an entire class above and beyond even that account that I was fortunate enough to hear from Jacques Derrida.

The only other reading of the *Symposium* that I am aware of that even comes close to the genius of Strauss is that of another dear teacher of mine, Mark Moes. His book on the *Symposium* and other dialogues, *Plato's Dialogue Form and the Care of the Soul*,<sup>1</sup> is nothing short of a masterpiece. Neither the book nor its author has received the attention that they merit. Perhaps this is, alas, because of the deeply anti-Anglo-American analytic manner according to which Moes deciphered the cryptic symmetries and paradoxes of Plato's labyrinthine corpus. As much as I do support and subscribe to most of Moes' interpretative framework (one, for those who are interested, that bears certain resonances with the now classic, but controversial, work of Cushman, and also the work of Keenehan),<sup>2</sup> I have nevertheless preferred Strauss'



reading for this chapter because it fits better with the conspiratorial account(s) that I am pursuing in this book. Moes' technique of approaching Platonic texts as *psyche*-analytic dramas, however, is clearly influential throughout.

### Strauss' *Symposium*

In 1959, while at the University of Chicago, Leo Strauss taught a class in the Political Science department, a series of fourteen lectures, on Plato's *Symposium*. He spent much of his first lecture justifying the teachings of Plato, rather than a contemporary thinker, within the Political Science department. His argument turned on the insufficiency of modern Political Science to treat the great questions that have been facing contemporaries and to acknowledge the superior wisdom of the ancients who have something to offer as a supplement to the insufficient modern Political Science. While studying Plato may be justified on the grounds of the inadequacy of modern political science to handle the issues that face it, Strauss must also justify why he should teach Plato's *Symposium* in particular, rather than, say, the *Republic* or the *Laws*.

The topic of the dialogue is *eros*, and prima facie not political. Where Plato's *Republic* holds prominence as a political dialogue, the *Symposium* seems to be the most emphatically nonpolitical dialogue, since Plato deals with that element in man which is in essential tension with the political. But why exactly is *eros* in essential tension with the political?

Strauss mentions important points from the *Republic* in illustration. In that dialogue, the tyrant, who is the most abominable ruler, both justice and injustice incarnate, is presented as *eros* incarnate. What Strauss claims here is corroborated in our own reading of the dialogue in the previous chapter. But beyond what we laid out in Chapter 3, Strauss adds the supposition that the *Republic* is based on a deliberate demotion of the position of *eros*, because there is a tension between the political passion, which is *thumos* or spiritedness, and *eros*, which corresponds to desire or *epithumos* in the division of the soul.

In sum, according to Strauss, the *Republic* promotes *thumos* at the expense of *eros* (necessitated by politics); in the *Symposium*, *eros* rules (thus it is apparently the most nonpolitical dialogue). But, again, then why study the *Symposium* in a Political Science course?

The nonpolitical, as politically relevant, is the foundation of the political, either as condition or as the ultimate end. In both meanings, the nonpolitical was called traditionally the natural. There may be something natural which transcends the political in dignity and which gives politics its guidance. That is what was meant by . . . natural right. . . . The foundation of the political is, somehow, nature, and nature may be understood in different ways. . . : it is somehow the contention of Plato that the nature of man and, in a way, the nature of the whole, is *eros*.<sup>3</sup>

Strauss himself seems dissatisfied with his account of why a ‘non-political’ dialogue should be studied in a political science course, as is apparent from his frequent hesitations – his recurrent ‘somehow’. I believe that this hesitation results from the daringness of his basic claim – that *eros* is somehow nature, perhaps even natural right.

If Strauss were suggesting this, it would seem to contradict the theses of his own work of a decade prior, *Natural Right and History*. In that work, Strauss links – at times, even identifies – reason and natural right: ‘Natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe . . . : reason determines what is by nature right with ultimate regard to man’s natural end’.<sup>4</sup> It is because ‘savages’ lack reason that one cannot even expect real knowledge of natural right among them. Obviously, while savages may not possess reason, no one would refuse them *eros*.

But knowledge of natural right and natural right are different things. Perhaps *logos* is truly *logos* because it knows *eros*? Clarification of this possibility, or similar arguments, could harmonize the teaching of *Natural Right and History* with Strauss’ lectures on the *Symposium*. But I do not think this would be sufficient, and perhaps it is not even necessary. According to Strauss’ *Preface to the 7th Impression* (1971) of *Natural Right and History*, it is clear that Strauss has changed his conception of natural right since the original writing of that book. Strauss writes in the *Preface*:

It almost goes without saying that if I were to write this book again, I would write it differently. . . . Since the time when I wrote the book, I have, I believe, deepened my understanding of “natural right and history.” . . . Nothing I have learned has shaken my inclination to prefer “natural right,” especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism, positivist or

historicist. . . . To avoid a common misunderstanding, I should add the remark that . . . the divine law is not the natural law, let alone natural right.<sup>5</sup>

However, to change one's conception of natural right is one thing, and to change it to such a radical and unusual claim that *eros* is somehow nature or natural right is altogether another.

### The metaphysics of *eros*

On the other hand, perhaps the claim is not as unusual as it seems at first glance. While Aristotle certainly does not use these terms, the compelling status of the unmoved mover and the directedness of the whole of nature toward it is analogous to the claim that *eros* is natural right; as *eros*, we shall learn, proves to be a sort of activity, *energeian*, a being-at-work, directed toward beauty/the good; beauty/the good itself is unmoved, but attracts the whole of nature toward it – at the very least that part of the whole of nature that is open to the whole: the human person.

Consider Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The first mover is an eternal, fully actual substance that moves without itself being moved, either self-moved or moved by something else. Objects of desire and thought move in this way, for they cause motion in those who desire and think, but do not themselves move: 'For the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of rational wish' (*Metaphysics*, 1072a27). Thus, the unmoved mover moves by being the final cause of the motion of the first heaven, insofar as it is the object of love: 'The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved' (1072b4). Thereby *eros* is analogous to that principle by which all are attracted by the unmoved mover in Aristotle.<sup>6</sup>

But Strauss never explicitly appeals to this analogy, although he does state that the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle both posit a self-sufficient principle, which is a beloved and not a lover, a principle not in need of anything, which therefore does not love or long for anything else. Strauss argues that toward which desire is oriented is higher than desire itself, and divine. He suggests that there must be something divine, immortal, unchanging, as the end toward which desire is directed. For Plato, this is satisfied by the Ideas: 'The beloved is higher than the loving, than *eros*, and the beloved may very well be the ideas'.<sup>7</sup> It is widely known how Aristotle develops upon the

Platonic ideas, and so I have mentioned Aristotle in this context only to dampen the initial shock of the claim with respect to *eros* and natural right.

It is also important to mention that Strauss' hesitant claim regarding *eros* and nature or natural right only implicitly binds *eros* to natural right, while it explicitly binds it to nature – we will have to determine which if either of these Strauss intends. While Strauss' own position needs to be clarified, we do know that he understands Plato's position to be the one where *eros* is bound to or identified with nature:

In a way *eros* is, for Plato, nature in the sense in which we commonly mean the word – things come into being and perish. *Eros*, we can say, is the heart of coming into being and perishing. *Eros*, we can say, is the nature of nature, the essence of nature. This is at least part of the Platonic argument.<sup>8</sup>

Strauss, again, offers the Platonic argument with much hesitation and condition (the duplicated 'we can say', *inter alia*). But what is the Straussian argument? Let us turn to Strauss' teaching on *eros* in order to more clearly understand what he holds *eros* to be, and why he finds a dialogue devoted to it essential to the discipline of Political Science.

### The argument of the action

Strauss as usual pays particular attention to the dramatic aspects of the dialogue – its action, as well as its argument. Application of significance to the setting of the *Symposium* is not unusual in this case, unlike Strauss' stress on the setting for all of the other dialogues. Most interpreters of this dialogue have drawn attention to the possible meanings behind the date of the banquet itself (416 BC) in respect to the presumed date of its narration (estimates range between 407 and 400 BC). The primary reason given for this lapse of time is that this period witnessed the precipitous decline of Athens in the general context of the Peloponnesian war and saw the fall in particular of Alcibiades, along with the shaming of many others among the givers of speeches – Agathon has fled the city for the court of the tyrant Archelaus; and, Phaedrus and Eryximachus have been exiled for participating with Alcibiades in the mutilations of the Hermae in Athens.<sup>9</sup>

The setting itself, then, serves to link the subject (*eros*) to politics, if not to Political Science. The action also shows interrelations with the *Republic* in a great number of subtle ways. At the beginning of the dialogue is of course the simple mentioning of Glaucon – a main interlocutor of the *Republic* – as one who had only a few days earlier requested Apollodorus (the narrator of the *Symposium*) to describe a certain ‘dinner-party, the erotic speeches given there’ (172a). Then, again, in contrast, there is explicit mention of the fact of actually eating dinner there – the meal which the interlocutors are promised in the *Republic* is never served. This provides some kind of indication that the *Symposium* is a less ascetic dialogue than the *Republic*, and of course the theme of *eros* for the former dialogue, as opposed to that of justice for the latter, verifies this (on the other hand, Socrates himself misses most of the meal by standing outside enraptured in contemplation, which later Alcibiades will describe as a mark of Socrates’ great endurance – it seems that Socrates is always ascetic).

The psychology of the *Republic* also corresponds to that of the *Symposium*, although the specific terms of the tripartite soul differ. The *Republic*’s *logos*, *thumos* and *epithumia/eros* – reason, spiritedness and desire – in the *Symposium* take form as three expressions of simply *eros* (albeit a much more complex *eros* than that which appears in the *Republic*): love of wisdom (*logos*), love of immortal fame (*thumos*) and love for the end of procreation (*epithumos*). Again, the contrast between the two dialogues is essential. The non-political dialogue goes in depth into *eros*, sings its praises; the political dialogue abstracts from *eros*, insults and despises it. The erotic life is essentially private, not public. The political dialogue contrives a city that all but abolishes the private realm, with everything – including women – held in common. There is clearly a tension between the value attributed to *eros* in the two works; there is, indeed, a tension between the two works.

The tension within each dialogue itself, or the problem of every dialogue in which Socrates appears, has always one underlying, or perhaps over-arching, solution, and that is philosophy. Not rhetoric, not poetry, not mathematics, not medicine, not generalship, etc. – only philosophy. The *Republic* attempts to uncover justice, it attempts to find the just city – it cannot be done; all attempts at justice are faulty, only philosophy itself exhibits perfect justice (see, Chapters 2 and 3). There is the problem of freedom – only the philosopher is truly free

(see, the first intermission on Xenophon's *Hiero*). Then the problem of virtue – virtue is knowledge, a knowledge that cannot be taught, thus wisdom, leading back to philosophy (see Chapter 5). It is the same for *eros*, and the *Symposium* basically shows that, as Strauss states, only with philosophy does *eros* come fully into its own.

### The esoteric Strauss

We still require more clarification of what Strauss regards *eros* to be, so for the time being we will leave to one side the task of determining the relevance of *eros* to Political Science and first permit *eros* to come fully into its own. Strauss makes a clear statement with respect to the nature of *eros* while interpreting the speech of Eryximachus. Of course, all of Strauss' reflections upon *eros* in his lectures occur within his interpretations of the speeches, and so it is at times difficult to pin down Strauss' own position. However, a consistent notion of *eros* can be generated out of the lectures, and the filling in of lacuna within his arguments is essentially no different from the reading and interpretation of any text. Therefore, let us not shrink back from striving to sift out Strauss' teaching on *eros*, simply since his style is a slippery one, a sort of speaking with a forked tongue, as some critics have said.

It is true that the situation becomes more complicated when we try to read Strauss in the light of his own hermeneutical principles (for details on the hermeneutics of esoteric interpretation, refer back to the Parodos). According to these principles, there is only one correct understanding of a text; that is, the author's self-understanding, or in short, her intention(s). Thus, according to Strauss, a reader has to take pains to understand the texts as their authors understood them themselves. When this principle is applied to Strauss' own writings, and when one reading of Strauss is opposed to another reading, the difficulty becomes manifest. And of course, the question of which understanding of Strauss is the true one, that is, the one Strauss understood himself, has to be answered if one strictly follows Strauss' hermeneutical principle. Otherwise, by denying that there is one true teaching of a text as the author taught, one can either enjoy the pleasure of freely interpreting some given text, or more moderately claim that a text is open to be read from many perspectives. But then, understanding Strauss according to this multi-interpretation hypothesis runs the risk of negating Strauss' own avowed hermeneutic principle. But this

problem would arise for us only were our reading to be countered by another – it may thus be tabled for now, and so we carry on in the effort to extract Strauss' understanding of *eros* from his discussion of the speeches.

### Heeding the speeches on *eros*

Eryximachus' defense of pederasty prompted Strauss to speculate on the nature of *eros*. *Eros*, commonly understood as bodily desire between the sexes, is not exhausted in procreation, and so man is not completely satisfied by procreation. This is because man's *telos* is not simply to engage in sexual activity and to procreate: Pederasty, Strauss believes, may be understood as a divination of this fact, and looked at from this point of view, pederasty seems to better divine the *telos* of human beings than does self-satisfied heterosexuality.

Now, pederasty is not defended by all of the speech-makers, and Strauss himself argues that Plato and Socrates themselves give it rather a cold reception. But however that may be, the point to notice is the motive force of *eros*, that it does not exhaust itself in mere sexuality of whatever type. It is deeper than desire for procreation – in fact, Strauss claims that one cannot understand *eros* without seeing in it the element of rebellion. But rebellion against what, exactly?

The issue of rebellion comes up explicitly in the speech of Aristophanes. Aristophanes begins his entertaining praise of *eros* by pointing to the original nature of the human genders. In forgotten times, he states, there were three human genders: male, female and an androgynous gender. As these humans were created by the cosmic gods, sun, earth and moon, they were shaped according to the planets. So they got a round, circular shape, two pairs of legs and arms, two faces, two sets of genitals, etc. They were of enormous vigor and strength. But when they challenged the Gods of Mount Olympus, Zeus decided to weaken them by cutting each of them into two pieces.

Now, the craving to find one's matching half in order to restore the original state of unity is what is commonly called love, or *eros*. In other words, *eros* is the desire to regain one's wholeness. The sexual act indeed does not primarily serve sexual reproduction, but it is the physical expression of this desire to reunite. Finally, if humans find their matching halves and *eros* is fulfilled, they can each achieve

happiness. It is not a perfect happiness, since the reunification is only a temporary one, nevertheless it is the greatest happiness man can aspire toward. In consequence, *eros* is essentially longing for wholeness, and sexual desire is only an expression of a deeper desire the end of which is happiness.

Cut into half by the Olympian gods, we long to be whole again, and this longing is *eros*. Thus, as Strauss reads Aristophanes' speech, *eros* is a natural or visceral rebellion against the Olympian gods, since we strive to become whole despite the scission they imposed upon us. The Olympian gods are, however, the cause and guard of our humanity, our human shape. The Olympian gods civilized us, so to speak. Strauss thus understands these gods to represent *nomos*, but in its signification as 'law' rather than as 'custom' (the Greek word can mean either). The civilizing law bears a human shape; it is anthropomorphic. But by nature we rebel against this law – this rebellion is *eros*.

Strauss states that as the desire for the restitution of the cosmic, the globular shape, *eros* belongs to the cosmic gods. *Eros*, then, is a movement of nature, actually of impaired nature, against law. But in this respect, with the trajectory of *eros* running counter to the will of the Olympian gods, *eros* is impious. Strauss attempts to trace the same thought to the book of *Genesis*, where Adam's disobedience is in some way related to the loss of sexual innocence.

Interestingly, Aristophanes' speech gives a clear indication that sexual desire is not exhaustive of *eros*, since the two halves cut out of the globular whole were attracted and clung to one another before Zeus repositioned their genitals to make procreation possible. They did not cling together to procreate, but procreated after already having longed to be reunited. But while *eros* is not exhausted by sexual intercourse, man in his human form is clearly inclined toward sex; indeed, he has difficulty controlling this impulse toward sex, being so inclined toward it.

Reflecting on Aristophanes' speech, Strauss quotes Aristotle: 'man is most impious and most savage without virtue, and worst with regard to sexual things and food'.<sup>10</sup> This is then where the Olympian gods come in – man has a natural latitude regarding sex, and he needs limitation, limitation by *nomos*, the most authoritative of which is the divine law.

In short, then, the Olympian gods serve as a limit to man, to man's striving, to his *eros* which is a striving for lofty things, for overturning



even the realm of the gods – at least in Aristophanes’ speech – and thus, according to Strauss, *eros* is a rebellion against *nomos*. But the *eros* is consequently much more than lust; it is, rather, desire for oneness, wholeness, and – given that Zeus rules – it is a desire that cannot be fulfilled.

### The demon speaks

Socrates’ speech modifies and improves upon that of Aristophanes, and for Strauss, it is where the truth about *eros* lies. More precisely, the truth about *eros* lies not simply in Socrates’ speech, but rather in Socrates himself. This is illustrated, for example, by Socrates having, as he himself claims, mantically predicted that Agathon would speak in an amazing way and that he shrinks back from having to give his own speech on *eros* directly afterwards (*Symposium*, 198a). That is, Socrates claims to be a diviner. He had also claimed to ‘know nothing except the erotic things’ (177d7). According to Strauss, these two things, divining and *eros*, are interrelated: Socrates’ great secret is that they are actually identical; they are, in a word, the *daimonion* which Socrates claims to possess; this is both Socrates’ eroticism and his divining power.

Strauss points out that the *daimonion* is usually interpreted as something like conscience, but that would mean that it is a widespread phenomenon, and the *daimonion* was clearly a peculiarity only of Socrates. The *daimonion* of Socrates is discussed in Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* and also motivates Socrates’ action in the *Phaedrus*. We receive a description of it in Diotima’s teaching from the *Symposium*: it occurs within debate over the notion of ‘being intermediate’, which casts light on the spiritual nature of *eros*. It is shown there that Love is not, properly speaking, a god; for if it were then it would be both good and beautiful since the possession of these attributes belong to the very nature of a deity. Yet these attributes are precisely what Love ‘lacks’ and what Love ‘strives’ for.

However, it does not necessarily follow that *eros* must then be human or merely mortal. Rather, as an intermediate, it is in between gods and mortals. The nature of a *daimonion* is intermediate, and as such, *eros* is most appropriately to be conceived of as a *daimonion*.

Strauss understands it to be an aspect of the erotic character of Socrates, that he was attracted to some, and that he was so attractive to

others. In speculating on the inner meaning of the *daimonion*, Strauss states that it is surely an excess beyond the philosophic nature as such. This is shown by the fact that there are philosophic natures, such as Parmenides, who did not have a *daimonion*. Strauss offers the notion that this demonic element sums up the educating nature of Socrates; it links pure *theoria*, the philosophic desire for the contemplative, with human beings as objects of concern.

But Strauss' lectures on the *Symposium* go no further into the idea that *eros* and the *daimonion* form some kind of unity. If we turn to an essay he wrote later in honour of Jacob Klein, *On Plato's Apology of Socrates and Crito*, we find the following important 'Note' on this issue:

The most intelligible account of the *daimonion* is found in the *Theages* . . . regarded as spurious. [There] . . . Theages and his father try to persuade Socrates to 'be together' with young Theages who wishes to become an outstanding Athenian Statesman. Socrates declares that he is useless for that purpose since he understands nothing of the blessed and noble things which Theages needs; he understands only . . . the erotic things. Theages finds that Socrates is jesting: he simply does not wish to spend his time with Theages. . . . Thereupon Socrates ceases at once to speak of his being an *erotikos* . . . instead he speaks of his *daimonion*. The *daimonion* intimates to him . . . with which (young) people he should not spend his time. . . . Socrates has recourse to his *daimonion* after the recourse to his being *erotikos* was of no avail; his *daimonion* replaces his being *erotikos* because it fulfills the same function – because it is the same.<sup>11</sup>

Like Diotima's teaching, *eros* is not a god, nor is it mortal man, but something in between, a demon. But does this help us to understand how *eros* could 'somehow' be nature? I believe that the only way to solve this riddle is to see that Strauss himself approaches the problem(s) of nature, of *eros*, of the soul or of the whole, in a manner reflecting Plato's own approach. Plato addresses the whole, and the parts that in some way, if only dimly, constitute that whole, by breaking up the whole into many, or dividing the basic problem of the whole into many philosophical dialogues. As Strauss said, Plato's dialogues constitute an imitation of the whole, or what we call reality: It means the

imitation of the riddle of reality; Plato imitates the riddle by writing a plurality of dialogues, each articulating just a part. The greatest possible articulation of any part cannot, of course, provide more than partial truth. Strauss himself imitates this imitation of the whole by the nature of his interpretations: in nearly every case these concentrate on one dialogue or text at a time; while there are numerous references to other writings, Strauss often mentions that these are provisional, and that the cited text of another dialogue can only properly be understood when read in the light of the whole dialogue of which it is a part.

### Noetic heterogeneity

Now I attempt to piece together Strauss' scattered suggestions, claims, arguments into a sketch that serves to indicate the way the whole forms its 'heterogeneous unity', a term that seems to be one way of understanding Strauss' own conception of Platonic ideas.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to Strauss' first lecture, his defense of teaching the *Symposium* in a Political Science course, he had stated that *eros* is in essential tension with the political. In his penultimate lecture, he dilates on the theme of the *Symposium* as a nonpolitical dialogue, focusing on the nonpolitical nature of Socrates: Since Socrates was not politically active, we may assume that he lacked *thumos*, spiritedness. Socrates defended his withdrawal from politics by pointing to his *daimonion*. Can Socrates' nonpolitical orientation result from his erotic nature? This seems to fly in the face of the characterization of the tyrant in the *Republic* as *eros* incarnate. Or, does it? The paradigmatic man in the political realm is not the tyrant, but the statesman. The statesman is not characterized by *eros*, but by *thumos*. As Strauss argued in a lecture titled 'The Problem of Socrates', spiritedness in the sense of the *Republic* is radically distinguished from *eros*; it is anerotic, anti-erotic.

Socrates lacks spiritedness, or *thumos*, and thus he is not sufficiently political to participate in Plato's *Laws*. Indeed, Strauss suggests that Socrates' absence from and/or silence in the *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Sophist*, *Statesman* and *Laws* express Plato's assessment of Socrates' limitation with respect to his lack of *thumos*. Socrates, or the philosopher, is characterized by *logos* and by *eros*. In a way, this articulates the kinship of the highest and the lowest, a phenomenon prevalent in both nature and history. One might recall, in this context, Aristotle's

critique of Plato's schema wherein the best regime would bizarrely succeed a tyranny. In fact, sociologists have often marked the kinship of the highest and the lowest.

Returning to Strauss' position, while the philosopher's soul is dominated by *logos* and *eros*, the statesman's is essentially *thumos*, but with the addition of the rational laws, or the *logos* that is present in the *nomos* – the statesman's soul is dominated by *thumos* with *logos*. The tyrant, the lowest, bastard statesman, takes anger, spiritedness, from the nature of his domain, the political, thus he has *thumos*, but he is characterized as *eros* incarnate.<sup>13</sup>

If we called this technique of focusing on various parts of the soul the psychological view, then we could try to align this with another perspective apparent in Strauss' lectures, which I'll call the cosmological view. Here, the parts of the soul are related to the cosmos, *nomos* and chaos. As presented in Strauss' retelling of Aristophanes' myth, the cosmos, the heavenly gods in the form of spheres, are the objects of contemplation of the philosophers who thus despise the anthropomorphic gods and are accused of atheism. The anthropomorphic gods bring man the law; thus, the Olympian gods represent *nomos*. Convention is in opposition to nature, and nature is *eros*. *Eros* is both the highest and the lowest. It is cosmos and chaos. The tyrant is chaos incarnate. But while the statesman governs by *nomos*, the tyrant and philosopher, chaos and cosmos, have nature – that is, *eros* – in common. The tyrant despises the law, the Olympian gods.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the ancient distinction between *physis* and *nomos*, nature and law/convention, we can uncover a physiological perspective in addition to the cosmological and psychological. Here, the tyrant shares nature with the philosopher, but he knows neither justice nor moderation – these the philosopher does know, as apparent in Alcibiades' speech on Socrates. The philosopher shares justice and moderation with the statesman. As the statesman tends toward the higher, the *logos*, he rules more justly and philosophically; as he tends toward the lower, *eros* as craving need, he rules more tyrannically. When the philosopher is overcome by *eros* untempered by his justice and moderation (*logos*), he falls to the level of tyrant (Alcibiades – who carried as the emblem on his shield *Eros* wielding a thunderbolt). The tyrant learning moderation and justice can become a statesman, but he will lose his *eros*. I often wonder whether the philosopher would in fact be capable of becoming a statesman, or rather only a tyrant!

Then theologically, the philosopher is associated with the cosmic gods, while the statesman with the Olympic ones. The tyrant is unquestionably atheistic. The one who lives outside of the city is either a beast or a god. The philosopher is god-like through divine *logos*. The tyrant is a beast with base *eros*. But *eros* drives the philosopher toward divine *logos*, toward the sun (cosmic god). And so *eros* is double, 'base and noble', and the philosopher is both beast and god. The tyrant lives outside the city insofar as tyranny is coeval with man and predates the polis. Philosophy is post-political; tyranny is pre-political. But tyranny is, therefore, also eternal (or has always been with man and will always be with man), while the political is only as long as the polis is, and perhaps, this is also true of philosophy. Does *eros* outlive *logos*, is he the youngest of all gods or the oldest?

Nature is *eros*. *Eros* at its highest is cosmos and at its lowest is chaos. In between is man, tending toward philosopher – as it were, a beast and a god – or *daimonion*. But man as philosopher is a cosmos formed out of the chaos, through the *nomos* – he is civilized. Thus the philosopher needs the *polis* (or Olympian gods, or *nomos*). This explains why the philosopher is characterized by justice and moderation, in contrast to the tyrant. Again, while philosophy is post-political, tyranny is pre-political. Tyranny (as for example in patriarchy) is coeval with man even from the time of the family, before the development of the polis (e.g. *pater familias*).

### How to train your demon

To summarize, we discern in Strauss' interpretation the development of a schema, an image of the whole composed of parts of the whole, which overlap and develop a sort of unity in the manifold. With specific concern for the nature or determination of what the philosopher, the statesman and the tyrant are with respect to *eros*, we identify the psychological, cosmological, physiological and theological strata.

Psychologically, the philosopher is characterized by *logos* (+*eros*), the Statesman by *thumos* (+*logos*) and the Tyrant by *eros* (+*thumos*). Cosmologically, the philosopher is representative of the cosmos, the Statesman *nomos* and the Tyrant chaos. Physiologically, the Philosopher represents nature, or *physis* (as cosmos, that is, order), the Statesmen *nomos*, that is convention as opposed to nature, and the Tyrant

nature, *physis* (as chaos). Theologically, the Philosopher is oriented toward the cosmic gods, the Statesman toward the Olympian gods (*nomos*) and the Tyrant toward atheism (chaos).

This schema provides the basis not only for understanding sundry remarks of Strauss' but also, if we applied it more broadly, could explain the tension between Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium*. Finally, Strauss' puzzling and daring remark that '*eros* is somehow nature' is also comprehensible through these divisions. If there is any truth in this Straussian/Platonic schemata, then it is basically meant to be the roadmap for teaching you how to train your demon.

## Notes

- 1 Mark Moes, *Plato's Dialogue Form and the Care of the Soul* (Peter Lang, 2000).
- 2 See Robert Cushman, *Therapeia: Plato's Conception of Philosophy* (Transaction Publishers, 1958), and Kenneth Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).
- 3 Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, ed. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), OPS 10; henceforth cited as OPS plus page number.
- 4 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 7 (henceforth cited as NRH plus page number).
- 5 NRH vii.
- 6 Regarding *energeian*, notice that in Agathon's speech in the *Symposium*, *eros* is *eran* – Love is loving, and not some self-subsisting entity. The discussion about beauty/the good remaining unmoved introduces a fundamental difference between *eros* and *agape*. Strauss explains that in the biblical understanding of *agape*, 'love out of abundance comes down' (OPS 56). *Eros* is a moving of the lover, not the beloved (which can be an unmoved mover), and is thus incomplete, or impoverished. *Eros* is a lack loving, and *agape* is a loving abundance. As Diotima will describe, *eros* is a mediator between men and gods. Strauss focuses on this as a main difference between Christianity and Plato: 'the mediator is not Christ, it is *eros*' (OPS 191).
- 7 OPS 197. See OPS 234–235 for Strauss' discussion of the meaning of *eidos*: 'the *eidos* means also the completeness and, therefore, the goal of aspiration' (OPS 235). Also cf. the discussion of the Platonic ideas in Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), pp. 119–121.
- 8 OPS 196.
- 9 See for example, Mark Moes, *Plato's Dialogue Form and the Care of the Soul*, Vol. 13 (Peter Lang Pub Incorporated, 2000), pp. 61–63; Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1989), pp. 65, 99; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck*

and *Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 165–171.

While the majority of interpreters understand the setting to indicate that Alcibiades has betrayed the city, fled and is shamed in declining Athens, Strauss argues that this is not exactly the case (OPS 20). Thus, he does not date the narration year of the dialogue as later than 407 BC, while most date it from 404 to 400 BC. That is, in 407, Alcibiades is actually back in Athens. Strauss' evidence for this is the exchange between Glaucon and Apollodorus which the latter relates (for us to overhear) to his comrade. Glaucon had only recently learned of that symposium involving, as he himself says, 'Socrates, Agathon, and Alcibiades', and thought that the symposium had only recently occurred. But Apollodorus remarks that it could not possibly have occurred recently considering that 'it has been many years now since Agathon has been in residence here' (173a). Apollodorus does not mention Socrates, who is still of course in Athens, but he also doesn't mention Alcibiades, whom Strauss thus also believes to still be in Athens. Alcibiades had returned to Athens in 407 after reconciliation with the city. Of course, this is not the end of that story.

- 10 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 125a39.
- 11 Leo Strauss, 'On Plato's *Apology of Socrates and Crito*', *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983), pp. 46–47.
- 12 In a letter to Alexandre Kojève, replying to his claim that there is a deep dissimilarity between Plato and Aristotle, Strauss argues on the contrary that both Plato and Aristotle accept 'the doctrine of ideas, i.e., the doctrine that the whole is characterized neither by noetic homogeneity . . . nor by sensible heterogeneity . . . but by noetic heterogeneity'. For more, you can see Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- 13 Alcibiades is referred to as the 'typical tyrant' by Strauss (OPS 258), as evidenced by his statement in the *Symposium*: 'I fulfill what all of you want'; the eternal claim of the tyrant in his justification of his regime. Strauss believes that Alcibiades has a 'tyrannical nature, he disregards the law . . . the law is of no interest' (OPS 272). 'Alcibiades has no sense for the just', 'there is no justice in him' (OPS 274), and this underscores the difference between the tyrannical and philosophical *eros*. But cf. Strauss' claim in *The City and Man*, 'The difference between Thrasymachus and Socrates is then merely this: according to Thrasymachus, justice is an unnecessary evil whereas according to Socrates it is a necessary evil' (83). Of course, Strauss calls this a 'terrible result' and strives to see that this is not the true teaching of the interaction between Socrates and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*.
- 14 Thus Alcibiades' coming role as mutilator of the Hermae. As Seth Benardete writes, 'It is one year before the Sicilian expedition, on which occasion, Thucydides tells us, *eros* swooped down upon all the Athenians; and before the fleet departed, Hermae throughout Athens were defaced, which

so terrified the Athenians, as if the defacement were a signal for a tyrannical conspiracy, that they disregarded all legal safeguards and executed numerous Athenians on rumor, and summoned Alcibiades back from Sicily to face the charge of chief instigator of the mutilation as well as of profaning the Eleusinian mysteries at the same time' ('On Plato's *Symposium*', a commentary to Benardete's translation of *Plato's Symposium* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993], p. 181).



## SECOND INTERMISSION

### Plato's conspiracy against the Sophists

The things from which the law deters humans are no more in accord with nature than the things which the law promotes. The advantages established by nature are free, but those established by the law are bonds. For, laws have been established for the eyes, as to what they must see and for what they must not. And for the ears, as to what they must hear and what they must not. And for the tongue, as to what it must say and what it must not. And for the hands, as to what they must do and what they must not. And for the feet, as to where they must go and where they must not. And for the mind, as to what it must will and what it must not.

– Antiphon, *On Truth*

Thanks to the voluminous writings of Plato, the Sophists are widely known to more or less anyone with a basic knowledge of the classical world. Their portrayal by Plato, which is unquestionably negative if not even diabolical at times, has seeped into the general understanding. This portrayal consists of a common cluster of characteristics, which immediately come to mind for any student of philosophy. For example, the avaricious motives of the Sophists are well known, since they demanded payment for their teaching – in the starkest of contrasts to the noble Socrates, who philosophized only for the sheer passion of doing so. There is also the famous assessment that the Sophists were moral relativists, teachers of evil doctrines. And of course, there is the mockery by the comic playwright Aristophanes, who reinforced the common stereotype that the Sophists undertook to make weaker arguments appear stronger,

and taught sons to disrespect, and even physically abuse, their own fathers.

Some of these claims are simply facts. The Sophists did indeed accept payment for their teaching. The Sophists did advertise the possibility of making weaker arguments stronger through specialized rhetorical techniques. The Sophists did espouse doctrines that undermined certain universalist assumptions, that served to relativise what had been assumed as fixed and absolute.

But these facts in themselves need to be contextualized. For, just because Sophists took money for their work does not necessarily make them avaricious – after all, do not we expect compensation for our own labour? Just because Sophists relativised certain universalist assumptions does not necessarily mean that they were diabolical immoralists – after all, do not we ourselves also identify with anti-essentialist positions, like feminism or anti-caste movements, not for the purpose of undermining morality, but rather with the aim to liberate people?

So why is it that we understand the motives of the Sophists to be so sinister, when we ourselves generally engage in similar attitudes and practices? This second intermission has been written to put forth another conspiracy which will explain the reason for such a sinister understanding of the Sophists. Yet again, for you, a conspiracy. But this time, it is not directly on one of Plato's dialogues, but rather on the propaganda related to Sophists that one finds all throughout his prolific works.

Plato hatched a conspiracy to destroy the reputation of the Sophists, and fully succeeded. For, Plato convinced his student Aristotle to toe the same line as he did, to spew out the same propaganda, and together – due to their profound influence over the ensuing 2,000 years – they managed to fairly well convince the world.

A few obvious questions arise immediately. Why did Plato (and Aristotle) set out to systematically destroy the reputation and legacy of the Sophists? If our portrait of the Sophists is the product of conspiracies and intrigues, then who were the Sophists really, and what did they actually teach? The aim of this second intermission is to provide some answers to these questions. This is, then, something of a side show. But as I hope you will eventually realize, when reflecting back on the book and the permutations of arguments that are unfolding within it as a whole, it is a side show that sheds some light, however obliquely, on what is actually happening on the main stage.

### Plato's Sophists

It is not terribly unfair to characterize Plato as being obsessed with the Sophists. The Sophists Aeschines (present at Socrates' trial in the *Apology*), Agathocles and Antimoerus (mentioned in the *Protagoras*), Callicles (mentioned in the *Gorgias*) and numerous others (Thrasymachus, Euthydemus, Antiphon, et al.) appear or are mentioned in the Platonic dialogues. And many Platonic dialogues (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias*, etc.) are named after Sophists. All in all, we know the names and at least a few details of some twenty-six Sophists. Although various fragments and writings and biographies and other works by and about the Sophists exist, it is because of the scale of their appearance in Plato, and Plato's characterization of them (and Aristotle's continuation in his own way) that the Sophists live on in our popular imagination. And this characterization is not at all favourable.

Plato speaks of the Sophists quite explicitly as predators upon rich young men, as men who make merchandise of – or as we would say today, who commodify – virtue. Plato refers to Sophists derogatorily as mere 'retailers' of virtue. The Sophists, further, are presented as those who profit off of the difficulties of distinguishing right from wrong. And finally, of course, there is the long-lasting impression – that lives on to this day – that the Sophists are counterfeit philosophers, fakes, wiseguys who deal in the fakes and duplicates of opinion, rather than in the real goods of truth.

The way Plato puts it, these greedy buggers – mostly foreigners – came to prosperous Athens, the cultural and intellectual centre of Greece, as parasites upon its wealth, prestige, its beautiful boys and vibrant and diverse public life. He seems to suggest that, had there not been a glorious Athens, there would not have been the plague of Sophists.

However, this argument cuts both ways. Why are Plato's dialogues so totally replete with Sophists? Could he even have produced such rich tapestries, his layered and interwoven dialogues, without them? Perhaps it is true that had there not been an Athens, then there would not have been a Sophistic movement. However, it is also true that had there not been a Sophistic movement, there also would not have been that glorious Athens that we all now revere and study.

### The utility of sophistry

The parasitic depiction we get from Plato is a highly moralized one and entails not just a critique of the Sophists as such, but equally a

critique of the direction of Periclean Athens – that is, Athens under the thirty years of dominance by the brilliant statesman Pericles. This was an Athens with ever-increasing importance externally (in fact, consolidating and expanding its empire), and socio-political complexity internally. A large part of this internal complexity was on account of the democratic order. There were juries to take part in, rotational offices to fill, temples and treasuries to administer, and of course, assemblies to debate in and create legislation. To successfully take up such positions and effectively perform in them required skills – skill in reasoning, skill in debate; the ability to persuade and dissuade. It was the Sophists who could teach these skills. The Sophists were crucial for educating young future political dynamos into virtue.

Which young, future dynamos? That's the rub. For they would teach to anyone who could afford it. That is, the teachings of the Sophists were accessible for hire by all and sundry; if you could pay, you could be educated into virtue. This teaching of virtue was part of the Periclean conception of the political as democratic and agonistic, as meritocratic, as opposed to merely dynastic and aristocratic.

If this virtue that had for ages been the prerogative of the aristocrat, the master and not the many, was now accessible to a wider cache of persons, this was bound to have an effect on the social order. The Sophists were a key to the social mobility of non-Aristocrats. And for aristocrats, that tends to be pretty unpalatable. If virtue can be taught, if it is something that is teachable, then it opens up the possibility of a meritocratic democratic polis. If, on the other hand, it comes by nature, which is to say by birth, then we have the classical foundation of aristocracy. The Sophists generally believed that virtue can be taught. What Plato believed, as we shall see in Chapter 5, was much more ambiguous.

### The cost of taking fees

For the aristocracy, the true cost of the willingness of the Sophists to teach everybody the secrets of their excellence was loss of status, the loss of the monopoly of control on the institutions and offices of the city. It also meant undermining the aristocracy's privileged access to hitherto 'inside' information, esoteric teachings, the monopoly on education. The Sophists taught aloud in public earshot the secrets that before them had only been spoken to a select few in private.

Within this context, we might turn back to a passage cited very near the opening of this book, in the Parodos. Recall the famous letter of Alexander – the archetypal aristocrat – written to his teacher of every kind of esoteric knowledge, Aristotle. Again, these are passages from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*:

It would appear that Alexander not only received from Aristotle his ethical and political doctrines, but also participated in those secret and more profound teachings which philosophers designate by the special terms 'acroamatic' and 'epoptic', [i.e. fit for oral teaching only, and for the initiated, esoteric, as opposed to exoteric doctrines] and do not impart to many. For after Alexander had already crossed into Asia, and when he learned that certain treatises on these recondite matters had been published in books by Aristotle, he wrote him a letter on behalf of philosophy, and put it in plain language. And this is a copy of the letter:

*Alexander, to Aristotle, greeting. You have not done well to publish your acroamatic doctrines; for in what shall I surpass other men if those doctrines wherein I have been trained are to be all men's common property? But I had rather excel in my acquaintance with the best things than in my power. Farewell.*

Accordingly, in defending himself, Aristotle encourages this ambition of Alexander by saying that the doctrines of which he spoke were both published and not published; for in truth his treatise on metaphysics is of no use for those who would either teach or learn the science, but is written as a memorandum for those already initiated.<sup>1</sup>

Within the Parodos, we focused attention on the Straussian interpretation of Aristotle's reply; to wit, that any treatise that Aristotle published both revealed and concealed at the same time, so the esoteric teachings were safe and accessible only to the initiated. Here, however, let us foreground instead a line from Alexander: 'for in what shall I surpass other men if those doctrines wherein I have been trained are to be all men's common property?' And this is indeed a legitimate concern. How will I be special, exclusive, elite and maintain my privilege if the people in general, and not just the few, have access to the same education in theoretical, practical and ethical virtues as I have?

Of course, the Sophists were expensive teachers, ridiculously expensive by Plato's account, so it was not just anyone from anywhere who could study under them. You had to have plenty of money. For the most part, it was only the aristocrats themselves who had access to that kind of purchasing power. However, there were also plenty of *nouveau riche* in a burgeoning economic power like Athens – traders, merchants and other 'vulgar' sorts – who could afford to engage the services of the Sophists and begin to encroach on the domain of the aristocracy. For this is precisely what the Sophists taught, as Plato has the great Sophist Protagoras explain:

If a student applies to me, he will learn precisely and solely that for which he has come. That learning consists of good judgement in his own affairs . . . and in the affairs of his city, showing how he may have most influence on public affairs both in speech and in action.

(*Protagoras* 318e–319a)

Plato was an aristocrat. Aristotle explicitly aligned his moral philosophy, centering crucially on virtue, with aristocracy: 'virtue is the principle of aristocracy . . . and freedom of democracy' (*Politics* 1294a10); 'democrats identify merit with the status of freeman, supporters of aristocracy with virtue' (*Ethics* 1131a26). There is a great deal of evidence that Socrates was an aristocrat, despite the usual biographical account of his being the son of a stonemason. While none of these three can be said to have comfortably represented the privileged, entitled, brain-dead-ish comportment of average Greek aristocracy, there were very apparently class sympathies visible in the Platonic and Aristotelean writings. And what about the Sophists themselves? Were they generally of noble birth, from the aristocracy?

### Flouting pedigree

It is first very important for us to note that the Sophists were not a particular class or caste and did not all espouse the same doctrines<sup>2</sup> – some were politically conservative, some less so. Some championed ideas consistent with aristocracy, some progressive democratic ideas. Some were from Athens, most were from other Greek cities. These twenty to thirty learned and charismatic teachers are grouped together due, most properly, to sharing the same profession. They do not

necessarily have a common ideology or a uniform teaching between them. That said, considering the hostility that Sophists faced from conservative aristocrats such as the comic playwright Aristophanes, and of course Plato (and Aristotle), the pedigree of many of the Sophists, as well as – as further discussed below – some of the doctrines that some of the Sophists espoused, takes on an even greater significance than it usually would.

About this, we can take a lesson from a wonderful ancient book titled *Lives of the Sophists* by Philostratus (who lived circa 170–250 CE), a self-styled Sophist from the Roman imperial era. In his Preface, Philostratus says that he will provide the patronymic (i.e. the father's name, which exhibits pedigree) only for the sons of illustrious men, and otherwise leave out such marks of caste and class identification. He rather facetiously writes,

Their fathers' names I have not added in all cases – *God forbid!* – but only for those who were the sons of illustrious men. After all, the Sophist Critias never announced his own or any others' father's names as a rule.<sup>3</sup>

And in this text, very few of the Sophists are identified as being sons of illustrious men. Indeed, one of the most famous Sophists, Isocrates (mentioned in Plato's *Phaedrus*), we learn is the son of a flute maker! We should note, however, that there is scholarly disagreement on this, and Philostratus may not be the most reliable source for the lineage of his subjects. For example, with respect to Isocrates, it is possible that his father was not a flautist, but rather that Isocrates' family was enormously wealthy and owned a flute factory. This interpretation is favoured by those who surmise that Isocrates may have been a student of Socrates – as well as of the Sophist Gorgias – and thus only one degree separated from Plato himself.

Another well-known Sophist, Aeschines (also mentioned by Plato), is said to have been born in an 'obscure family', and thus worked for some time as an actor and a clerk!

With this in mind, let us assume that at least some of the prominent Sophists were not high born. They do not have land, either agricultural or commercial, to live off of. Unlike the aristocracy, then, Sophists of common birth would need to earn their livelihood through their profession. What choice would they have other than to charge fees for their teaching? While the aristocrats look upon those who must

earn their living with great disdain, it should be clear to us today that charging fees for teaching is not a crime.

But again, we should note with caution that Philostratus often neglects to mention the patronymic even of known aristocrats, such as Critias (one of the thirty tyrants, who opposed democracy) and Antiphon (one of the 400 oligarchs, who opposed democracy). So we are not attempting to portray every Sophist, or even most of them, as a group who needed to earn in order to survive. However, it seems clear from the evidence that some of them did, and this clearly aroused the contempt of those such as Plato who were noble born.

What we can conclude from the literature on this is that some of the Sophists were from rather undistinguished backgrounds, while some were from noble families. Let us move on, then, to the ideas that many of them put forward, and the fact that they would share these ideas and their techniques with anyone who could afford to learn them, irrespective of their birth. But remember, context is everything. To see how and why, we are first going to go through the way that the Sophists' teachings are very traditionally presented; that is, how we have come to understand them on account of Plato's conspiracy against the Sophists. Afterwards, we shall go back and look closer at some of their ideas, and reread them in the light of some of the contextualization that we have already laid out above, and also adding further background that allows us, perhaps, to exculpate the Sophists somewhat.

### Teachings of the Sophists: a Platonic account

The famous and highly respected Sophist Protagoras (born early in the fifth century BCE) authored a book titled *On Truth*, of which the well-known first line has survived: 'Of all things, the measure is man: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not'. Interpretation of the passage varies, but most scholars attribute a deep moral relativism to Protagoras' teaching. Man is the measure of what is right or wrong, good or bad. No behaviour is necessarily right or wrong in itself, but rather whatever a man, or a society of men, takes to be right or wrong is right or wrong for him or his society. Protagoras' apparently radical relativism was modified and built upon by later Sophists and philosophers, such as Antiphon.

Antiphon argued that, irrespective of what moralists or lawmakers command, there are laws which nature herself imposes. The law of self-preservation is one such. It commands us to live by what is



advantageous to us, and the implication is that we should follow this command irrespective of what conventional morality or man-made law requires. Thus, Antiphon's teaching is summarized in a fragment of his that survives: a man will conduct himself 'in a way most advantageous to himself if, in the presence of witnesses, he holds the laws of the city in high esteem, and in the absence of witnesses, when he is alone, those of nature'.<sup>4</sup>

Another paid, traveling wise man of Greece was Callicles. In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* (which is the name of another Sophist), we learn about Callicles' critique of conventional morality. Callicles states,

I believe that the people who institute our laws are the weak and the many. So they institute laws and assign praise and blame with themselves and their own advantage in mind. As a way of frightening the more powerful among men, the ones who are capable of having a greater share, out of getting a greater share than they, they say that getting more than one's share is 'shameful' and 'unjust', and that doing what's unjust is nothing but trying to get more than one's share. I think they like getting an equal share, since they are inferior. This, then, is why it is said to be unjust and shameful to seek to get the upper hand of the many, and why men call it 'wrong'. But in my opinion, nature herself makes it plain that it is right.

(*Gorgias* 483c–483d)

In Callicles' view, conventional morality is a ploy, a trick used by the many weak against the strong few. The real principle of morality is the law of nature, which means self-preservation. In this respect, for Callicles as for Antiphon, nature and convention are deeply at odds.

### The Sophists and Plato's *Republic*

Another series of strong critiques of conventional morality appears in Plato's dialogue *Republic*. There, the Sophist Thrasymachus ridicules Socrates' attempts to establish justice and puts forward his own radical critique: 'I posit that the just is no other than the advantage of the stronger'. Thrasymachus asserts that injustice, when consummate, is prudent and good, and that the unjust man gains power over all. But as we have seen, Socrates trips him up, and attempts to reestablish the primacy of our reflective ideas about virtue. Overreaching, Socrates

established, is unnatural. Excellence is found in moderation and harmony rather than in overreaching. The just man, who does not overreach, uses good judgement, is prudent and good, and not the unjust man, who is overreaching.

Another interlocutor in Plato's dialogue, Glaucon, then raises a new challenge against Socrates, that the multitude see justice rather as an evil, but one which is necessary for the rewards it brings. Thrasymachus had himself suggested this, and presumably this was one of the standard Sophist critiques of morality. Glaucon begins claiming that the nature of justice is merely a convention, a means by which the many weak can prevent suffering injustice at the hands of real men, while all agree that it is good to commit injustice but bad to suffer it. The fable of the magic ring of Gyges is proffered to prove Glaucon's point.

As we have all been taught, it turns out to be part of the overall enterprise of Plato's *Republic* to refute these challenges to morality and thus to reestablish that it is better and more choiceworthy to be just and moral than to be unjust and merely seek advantage over others. Whether Plato succeeds in this enterprise has been the subject of much debate. For our purposes, it suffices to say that deep and radical challenges to morality have been part and parcel of moral philosophy ever since its inception. Given what we have already learned from Plato's *Republic*, it would seem as although the critique of morality goes back to the very origins of philosophizing about morality. Nearly all of Plato's works take up questions about virtue and vice, right and wrong, justice and injustice, seeking always to defend the virtuous, the right and the just against the unconscionable attacks of the immoral Sophists. But is this really the whole picture?

### Sophists as social reformers

In recent decades, the grip of Plato's conspiracy against the Sophists has begun to loosen, slightly. This is in large part due to feminism. For example, Susan Jarratt published a book titled *Rereading the Sophists*<sup>5</sup> wherein she analogized the marginalization of Sophists by mainstream, conservative philosophy with the marginalization of women by mainstream, patriarchal philosophy. Jarratt suggested that the signifier 'Sophist' and the signifier 'woman' shared much the same fate in philosophical discourse – they were disruptive, anti-logical, relativist and so forth. She also highlights the manner by which the teachings offered

by the Sophists – specifically, training in rhetoric and the art of persuasion – were of value to the success of democracy, always under siege by oligarchic and tyrannical forces. More striking, Jarratt posits that we might see the Sophist Gorgias as a proto-feminist.

Gorgias, one of the most celebrated Sophists, had a demonstrative piece of his skill in rhetoric titled *Encomium of Helen*. This was a striking work of powerful oratory, and it is important to note that it went quite against the grain of social norms, specifically, of the widely acceptable misogyny built into collective consciousness on account of the Trojan war. The Helen whom Gorgias praises is the infamous Helen of Troy, whose mythic beauty was the cause of the heinous war between the Greeks and the Trojans, which spilt the blood of countless Greeks, and ended with the total annihilation of the people of Troy. Helen was universally blamed for the carnage. In a culture of patriarchy and a social environment of misogyny, Gorgias exculpates Helen of any blame and, on the contrary, moves from defending her to praising her.

But if such a small gesture as praising a woman who is socially vilified can be regarded as proto-feminist, then surely the same status should be given to Plato himself, who put women – at least those within the guardian class – on an equal footing in relation to men in the ideal city created in the *Republic*, at least in respect of their education. Of course, as Susan Okin has incisively argued, Plato's estimation of women continues to be anchored in an assumption that they are a kind of property, whether that property is private (in the traditional conservative Athenian view) or public (in the revisionist account of the *Republic*).<sup>6</sup> Just the same, there is no historical evidence that the Sophists ever attempted to educate or train women, and thus even the expression proto-feminist bestows far more credit than merited.

On the other hand, even the merely symbolic turn ever-so-slightly away from Athenian misogyny initiated by some Sophists and Socrates in Plato's *Republic* (and *Symposium*) elicited strong reaction from the city's gentry and elite. These Sophistic-Socratic gestures were viciously attacked by the conservative comic playwright Aristophanes, who composed a play on the topic, called *Ecclesiazusae* (the *Assemblywomen*). In the play, the women of Athens become disgusted with the everyday politics under the control of men, and they take over the Assembly. Once in control of the Assembly, the women take control of the city completely and restructure it in a manner identical to passages in Plato. That is, they institute the community of women, children and property.

Obviously, the most truly devastating attack against Socratic philosophizing is not found in Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*, but in his comic masterpiece *Clouds*. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes attacks Sophistic education, and he uses Socrates as his paradigmatic example of a Sophist. In the play, a father seeks to have his good-for-nothing son reformed, as all he does is acquire debts from gambling. The father goes to see Socrates to see if he will take his son as a student and teach him the classical Sophistical art of making the weaker argument stronger. With this skill, his son should be in a position to outwit his creditors, to whom he owes large sums of money. The problem is that once the son begins to study under Socrates, he learns not only how to outwit his creditors, but also how to outwit his father. Now not only stronger than his father, but also smarter, he takes the inevitable next step in Sophistic training and learns how to beat his own father.

Now, there are several comments to make about Aristophanes' reactionary account of Sophistic social impact. On the one hand, there is the way in which for a classical, reactionary conservative, there is scarcely any difference between a Socrates and a Sophist, a Plato and a Gorgias. And on the other hand, we see how the slightest disruption of classic patriarchal and, classist and casteist values gets hugely attacked, exaggerated and vilified. Let us first take up some points related to the latter. Then we will close with some observations on the former.

We have already remarked on the manner by which Sophists laid the foundation for social change and possibly also social reform. One of the major interventions of nearly all of the Sophists was to critique customary norms, and to contrast and belittle human, social laws, which introduced arbitrary social distinctions (e.g. aristocracy, nobility) when nature herself made none. Among these were the institutions of slavery, against which, incidentally, the first known outspoken ancient Greek abolitionist was a Sophist, who argued – against Aristotle's claims – that slavery was merely a social phenomenon and that nature knew no slaves. Another social phenomenon that kept people chained were the guilds and castes, that sons should carry out the work of their fathers. Social reform against guilds and castes, whose foundations were shaken by the activities and teachings of many Sophists, was obviously a kind of license for sons to disrespect – that is, disobey – their fathers. This may have been where the exaggeration arose that Sophists teach sons to beat their fathers; for, that would be exactly the kind of uncharitable, reactionary propaganda we might expect to hear from forces opposed to innovation and social reform.

We might also consider in this light the frequently cited expression, there in Aristophanes, that the Sophists seek to make the weaker argument stronger. The implication being that the weaker argument is the false argument, and thus the Sophists specialize in the art of deception. But there is also a social rendition of this phrase. That is, the Sophists make the arguments of the weak stronger; Sophists make stronger the arguments of the weaker. It would not surprise me, given the swift and overwhelming negative reaction that social reform tends to evoke in conservative, casteist, patriarchal societies, if what some Sophists originally aimed to do was to train the weaker sections of Athenian society into the art of rhetoric and persuasion, so that they might stand up for themselves in courts, assemblies or other social, legal or political forums.

### *Nomos versus phusis versus kosmos*

Recall that it was mentioned that Plato's own ideas were subjected to critique from reactionary forces, and it is well known that Socrates was put to death under the charge of, among other things, corrupting the youth. This opens up another way of understanding Plato's contempt for the Sophists – with Socrates being so easily confused with Sophists, Plato sought to do everything he could to keep the strongest possible distinctions between Socrates, on the one hand, and the Sophists, on the other. This was a tall order given Socrates' attraction to Sophists, and his penchant for finding them out and debating with them at every available opportunity.

Further, in the tension above-described between *nomos* (convention, social norms) and *phusis* (nature, natural right), if these were the only two options, Plato would certainly himself side with the Sophists, that *nomos* is the realm of *doxa* or opinion, whereas nature is higher up toward the truth of things (or lower down, which is a more apt image for the Sophists' conception). But there is a third choice that was not considered seriously by the Sophists, that of *kosmos*. As we have seen through the Platonic roadmap for 'how to train your demon' (Chapter 4), *kosmos* is the harmonious ordering of things. It is more of a Pythagorean conception, and it seems to represent this essential Pythagorean component of Socratic thought. Within the *Republic*, it is the harmony of the *kosmos* that seems to define what justice really is, over and against either mere *nomos* or *phusis*.

If there is any hint of truth to this formulation that Socrates was more in tune with *kosmos*, Sophists with *phusis*, and conservative Athenian aristocrats with *nomos*,<sup>7</sup> it could help to explain a great deal about both the grouping together of Socrates with the Sophists from the point of view of the conservatives, at the same time as the Platonic contempt for the Sophists. Indeed, the Sophistic derision of Socrates' naivety – for example, as we find in Thrasymachus – may also be explained by this, since the Sophists might find belief in a higher cosmic order a sort of blind faith beyond credulity. I know that I myself certainly do.

Recall, in this light, Thrasymachus' animated reply to Socrates on whether politicians chose to rule voluntarily: 'By God no [I do not just think it], I very well know [they want to rule]' (345e, *ma Di ouk, ephe, all' eu oida*). As we discussed in Chapter 3, Thrasymachus is thinking something like, *Why on earth can Socrates not grasp this plain fact?* Thrasymachus, as all Sophists probably did, and all of us do too, himself sees clearly how rulers desire to rule, how they desperately seek power and influence. But it is not earth, it appears, that draws the full attention of Socrates; it is the cosmic orb, the Sun. And indeed, Aristophanes' *Clouds* opens exactly with this scene, of Socrates aloft in a balloon-basket high up in the air attempting to be nearer to the Sun.

However this be about the parallax view that conservative aristocrats had with respect to Socrates and the Sophists, as well as Socrates', Plato's and the Sophists' perceptions of one another, one thing should at least by now have become clear. That is, it should at least be apparent that there is a good deal more complexity to the lives and teachings of the Sophists than we have been led to believe in the orthodox presentations, the propaganda. It is not that they were all teachers of evil, as Plato would have us believe. Rather, many of them were arguably just trying to open their students' eyes to the harsh realities and injustices of the social and political world, rather than pointing them toward some mesmerizing utopia, or opting to have their vision cauterized by the light of the dazzling sun.

Were some Sophists avaricious? Possibly. Did they teach morality contrary to custom? Certainly. Did they openly defend weak arguments and 'sophistically' make them appear superior to the better arguments? Perhaps they did, or perhaps many of them were more purposely engaged with making unheard voices heard, making the arguments of the weaker stronger. And just so, maybe it is true that they created upheaval within the patriarchal home. But I am skeptical

that in opposing the caste-like guild systems, their aim was to have sons publicly humiliate their fathers. Such a representation is patently a conspiracy to defame them.

The social changes that the Sophists encouraged went hand-in-hand with the political changes that Periclean Athens witnessed. Sophists had an important role to play within the emerging democratic power structure, and their critical voice – while a threat to established aristocratic and traditional structures – may seem sinister in the upheaval it brings, but what is democracy without dissent, and where is the value in liberating only a single caste or class within the political regime? While the teaching of the Sophists may have served to undermine social institutions, the Sophists were not fully opposed to institutions as such; indeed, their teachings, on the contrary, served to strengthen democratic institutions in the process of deconstructing inegalitarian social ones.

Obviously, the earth would be a far superior planet to inhabit if all of us on it were each like Socrates, rather than like Thrasymachus or Callicles. But until the possibility for such an achievement opens up, and that means the establishment of an ethical, social, material and political base that supports it, we certainly need Sophists to help us to think through all of our most pressing social and political and the ethical questions, as uncomfortable as such enquiry may prove to be.

Indeed, we need them just as much as Plato himself did in order to produce his magnificent philosophical dialogues. For there is no way that Plato could have crafted his dramatic labyrinth without the challenging, charismatic presence of the Sophists.

## Notes

- 1 Plutarch's, *Life of Alexander* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), p. xiv.
- 2 For example, it is well known that Euthydemus differed with Protagoras on the 'man-measure' doctrine.
- 3 Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* (London: Putnam & Sons, 1922), p. 2.
- 4 John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (1968), p. 250.
- 5 Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1998).
- 6 Susin Okin, 'Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (Summer, 1977), pp. 345–369. It is also worth mentioning that Okin's article contains a brief but significant critique of Leo Strauss' reading of Plato's *Republic*.

- 7 Kanchana Mahadevan has critically commented on this hypothesis I present here, noting that living in accordance with *phusis* has different meanings in the post-Aristotelian context, which reconciled *nomos* with *phusis* in myriad ways. She points out that for the Epicureans, living in accordance with *phusis* (here meant to include the cosmic order) is the basis of rules. But, unlike salient Sophists, for the Epicureans these rules were interpreted via the *telos*, the aim or end, of pleasure. Mahadevan continues, that the Stoics also took *nomos* as primary in order to advocate living in accordance with *phusis*. The Stoics were influenced by Diogenes of Sinope (known as the 'mad Socrates'), who advocated living in accordance with *phusis* and without institutions. With these further distinctions in mind, Mahadevan poses the challenge of whether the Sophists also advocated a balance with *nomos* but with a stress on *phusis*. After all, as she points out, but my narrative neglects to fully account for, the Sophists taught rhetoric precisely to gain entry to (conventional) institutions. I am indebted to Kanchana Mahadevan for her critical remarks, which I cite at length to indicate alternative directions of research.



# THE MORALITY OF THE MASTER

## On Plato's *Meno*

Εχεις μοι επειν, ω Σωκρατες, αρα διδασκον η αρετη; η ου διδασκον  
αλλ' ασκητον; η ουτε ασκητον ουτε μαθητον, αλλα φυσει παραγιγνεται  
τοις ανθρωποις η αλλω τινι τροπω;

– *Meno*, opening line

After years of teaching courses in Ethics at various universities around the world, I have come to the regrettable conclusion that academic philosophy must be one of the greatest hindrances to the inculcation of virtue in young scholars. There are several reasons for making this possibly shocking claim, but here I will concentrate primarily only on one: the problem(s) of the abstraction of studying ethics, and especially meta-ethics, in the classroom. My argument here is similar to the one that has concluded in the first chapter of this book. That is, following what Plato seems to indicate in the *Parmenides* and in the dialogue *Euthydemus*, the method represented by the Eleatics alienates potential students instead of enticing them in. I will present my (conspiratorial) interpretation of Plato's dialogue *Meno* to drive this point home and will also make a slight detour to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to lead you in this examination of the problem(s) of teaching ethics, as it is presently taught in the mainstream.

One must first realize, now in the context of the *Meno*, that virtue has precious little to do with the ivory tower. The manner by which 'Ethics' as a course is taught in universities is clearly counter-productive to the inculcation of virtue at least insofar as the discussions there tend to centre on rival theories of moral philosophy and the seeming inability of the wisest people in history to come to any consensus at all on why any vicious act is in fact vicious.

Students, before studying ethics, generally know what is right and wrong, although there may be certain doubts, hazy points, confusions. In the main, though, the distinction between what is a good thing to do and what is a bad thing to do is present in the student prior to studying ethics. The principle effect of a university Ethics course is, thus, to eradicate the students' confidence in what they think is right or wrong, to undermine all of their justifications for a good or virtuous action, and generally to promote sophistry (in its mainstream definition) and moral relativism. This is a destructive sophistry, rather than the constructive one that we watched unfold in the second intermission.

In this respect, it is interesting to recall the following remarks from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*:

Most people, instead of doing virtuous acts, instead just discuss virtue, and they think therefore that they are good people. This is like a sick person thinking he can get better just by listening to a physician's advice rather than by following his prescriptions. The body of the sick person will not improve this way, and the soul of the philosopher does not improve by merely discussing virtue.<sup>1</sup>

According to Aristotle, virtue or human excellence is a fixed disposition in the soul.<sup>2</sup> The entire purpose of discussing virtue is not just to understand it, but to thereby engender virtuous acts. Do academicians keep this in mind when teaching 'Ethics' in the classroom?

Of course, one might object that there are intellectual as well as moral virtues, and that the quest to fathom various moral theories, deontological, utilitarian and so on, is virtuous (intellectually) irrespective of whether the theorizer practices the moral virtues or not. Philosophers refer to this as the problem of the unity of the intellectual and moral virtues.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, what is at play here is an ethical theory, or the interpretation of a moral philosophy, being carted out as the evidence of a fundamental problem in the nature of morality. At this moment, I would like to proffer that a lacuna in an ethical *theory* is in no way a sufficient justification to posit that humanity inherently suffers from an ineluctable moral defect. An analogy might help to clarify my meaning.

### Ethics and the platypus

In zoology, animals are classified into several categories, such as mammalian or reptilian. Mammals give birth to live offspring and nurse

their offspring. Reptiles, and birds, and fish, and so on, do not. These other classifications of animals are, similarly, based on distinct attributes of all the creatures subsumed under that classification. However, we know of an animal which does not give live birth, but lays eggs instead, and nevertheless nurses: the platypus. Now, the initial reaction of people educated in zoology to the aforementioned characteristics of the platypus is to regard them as freaks of nature. Of course, the platypus is not a freak of nature (nature herself knows no such classification); rather, our categories are simply shown to be artificial, in need of further sophistication, and not in adequate or comprehensive conformity to the nature of things.<sup>4</sup>

### Virtue as bellicosity

But does humanity suffer from some kind of fundamental moral defect? There is of course the doctrine of original sin. But let me approach this here philologically, rather than either philosophically (i.e. lack of unity of intellectual and moral virtues) or theologically (i.e. the doctrine of original sin).

Ethicists have always had trouble with translating the ancient Greek term *eudaimonia* used frequently by Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. Although *happiness* is most often used, everyone recognizes that this word is far from sufficient to capture the nuances and innuendo inherent to *eudaimonia*. At the heart of *eu-daimon-ia* is of course the *daimon*, the demon (as we discussed in Chapter 4). But that hardly helps us with finding a suitable translation.

Similarly, the Greek term *aretê* presents problems for us when we try to find an English equivalent. The recent trend is to use the compound term *human excellence*, but the classic and most frequent translation has always been *virtue*.

The English word *virtue* derives from Latin *virtus*, which literally means *manly*, or powerful. The root *vir-*, indicating *man*, has the function of denoting *man* or *manliness* or *manlike* in a handful of English words, such as *virile*, *werewolf* (i.e. man-wolf) or *virgin* (man-like woman). But why should the Romans have chosen to translate *aretê* in such a way as to emphasize power or manliness?

The reason lies partly in the fact that the word *aretê* itself derives out of the root *ar-*, indicating bellicosity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the English word *war* comes directly from this root. The name for the Greek god of war, *Ares*, is also built on the *ar-* root. So, we can see, then, that the terms

*war*, *man* (that is, *virtuer*) and *virtue* are somehow fundamentally related (as are *aretê* and *Ares*) in the so-called Western tradition.

Now, the curious thing is that this linkage of virtue, war and man is not limited to the translation/transmission of *virtue* from the Greeks to us in English by way of the Romans. The root *ar-* is recognized as proto-Indo-European (PIE), and thus we also find that there is a relation between the Sanskrit term *ārya* and Greek term *aretê*.<sup>6</sup>

The Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakośa* dating back to 450 AD defines an *ārya* as ‘one who hails from a noble family, of gentle behavior and demeanor, good-natured and of righteous conduct’ (*mahākula kulinārya sabhya sajjana sadhavaḥ*).<sup>7</sup> This definition is quite similar to descriptions of the *aristoi* in ancient Greek writings. The greek term *aristos*, the best, is also derived on the root *ar-*.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the Vedic term *rta* (commonly understood as the order of things, or ultimately, *morality*), which laid the foundations for the Hindu notion of *dharma*, is also derived from the PIE *ar-* root. *Dharma*, of course, is also often translated as *virtue*, albeit insufficiently.

Thus, we find also in the Indian tradition a linkage of ‘righteous conduct’; (*ārya*), morality (*rta*) and – at least tenuously – *dharma* to some fundamental idea of bellicosity by means of the derivation out of the PIE root *ar-*. To my knowledge this issue has never been explicitly investigated in Indian moral philosophy, but the very plain fact that the meaning and message of *dharma* is most exhaustively articulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a battlefield epic poem, should be enough to illustrate that the normative elements of *dharma* may be tacitly haunted by various aspects of the exigencies of war.

### The critique of morality

That to which we turn a blind eye was, on the contrary, profoundly studied by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In books such as *On the Genealogy of Morals*<sup>9</sup> and *Beyond Good and Evil*,<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche tied together the notion of a bellicose, ‘master morality’, with the idea of nobility and aristocracy, and he attributed Thrasymachean virtues to those who strove to transcend the slave morality, or the morality of the masses.

Indeed, because the PIE *ar-* runs through not only the ancient Greek and Sanskrit languages, but also Avestan, throughout the Zoroastrian texts, Nietzsche – a brilliant philologist – chose to envelope his consummate teaching that virtue, when properly conceived, was actually

power, mastery, bellicosity, into a volume which he titled *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche saw the link between the bellicose Greek ‘master morality’ (*aretê aristou*), or the terms *aretê*, *Ares* and *ariston*, the Sanskrit *ārya* and *rta*, and the Avestan *airya* (noble, Iranian) – all formed on the PIE *ar-*, whence, again, derives the English word *war*.

### Power/knowledge

This etymology of *virtue* as power leads to a genealogy of *aretê* as bellicosity that may itself lend to a hauntology of human morality – ethical life shall be forever subject to a basic instinct of self-sovereignty that entails mastery over others. This can explain Nietzsche’s ideal of human perfection: a ‘Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ’. But, we must stop and question, is the Nietzschean response to the philological nexus between human excellence and will to power the only adequate treatment of the problem of a hauntology of virtue?

In Plato, who himself may have been haunted by the *aretê/ares* relation, we find a treatment of virtue that attempts to overcome the problematic of virtue as power, replacing it by an entirely novel aretology focusing on virtue as knowledge.

Before directly addressing the Platonic approach, and floating free in the lofty heights of textual scholarship, it is important for us to momentarily veer back around, to securely ground ourselves in the concrete realities of the present. We seek to uncover the past, whether philologically or purely philosophically, primarily in order to better grapple with the peculiar problems posed by the present. Thus, it is useful to recall the words of Leo Strauss that we had quoted in the Parodos:

[O]nly we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the principles as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these principles to our tasks.<sup>12</sup>

Such is the requirement, at least, of an authentically committed scholar and pedagogue. Of course, we all know that the latter are rather hard to come by.

### Nietzsche's critique of morality: destructive aspects

Nietzsche was not only a prolific writer, but also an extremely stylized one (variously employing techniques such as aphoristic writing, metaphor, parable and so on). Therefore, to claim to be able to decisively sketch his philosophy, or even certain fundamental aspects of it, would be dubious to say the least. Nevertheless, we can do our best to attempt to understand his salient teachings on moral philosophy. Some points of his thought are easier summarized than others. For example, his dismissal of both Kantian deontological moral thought as well as of utilitarianism or consequentialism are fairly straight-forward.

With respect to deontology, Nietzsche sweeps aside all of its basic presuppositions, like rational self-awareness. For Nietzsche, 'consciousness is a surface', and plays less of a role in our actions than the primitive instincts or than the unconscious in the psychological sense. Any imperative to 'act only as if . . .' is doomed considering that we do not really know why we act, and furthermore spend a great deal of time deceiving ourselves about our actions, 'the most common lie is the lie one tells to oneself; lying to others is relatively the exception'. Our own motives are as inaccessible to us as are the motives of others. Any moral philosophy conditional upon self-aware action or upon intention is hardly more than a fiction.

Consequentialism fares no better under Nietzsche's searing estimation, since it presupposes some sort of adequate knowledge of the future. In fact, we can never really know the full consequences of any act. We may believe we know certain immediate consequences, but since the chain of causality never ends, that which may appear to us as a bad consequence, and thereby worthy of blame, may ultimately produce wonderful and happy broader results, thereby far worthier of praise. As Nietzsche says, 'any action at all is and remains impenetrable; our opinions about "good" and "noble" and "great" can never be proved true by our actions because every action is unknowable'.<sup>13</sup>

But specific, targeted critiques of specific moral philosophies are nothing new, and writings from advocates of deontological morality are full of criticisms of utilitarianism, and vice versa. Thus, in any academic moral philosophy course, a battery of criticism against each individually identified moral position would be encountered by the student. Much more profound are Nietzsche's wholesale attacks upon morality as we know it. Chief among these are denial of the substantive

opposition of good and evil, upon which so much of our conception of morality rests: 'Between good and evil actions there is no difference in kind, but at the most one of degree. Good actions are sublimated evil ones; evil actions are coarsened, brutalized good ones'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, evil, far from being something that morality should eschew, is in fact a necessity, ineliminable,

there is a personal necessity for misfortune; that terror, want, impoverishment, midnight watches, adventures, hazards and mistakes are as necessary to me and to you as their opposites . . . for happiness and misfortune are brother and sister, and twins, who grow tall together, or, as with you, remain small together!<sup>15</sup>

Another wholesale attack on the idea of morality itself is present in Nietzsche's apparent denial of free will. Obviously, if moral agents are not acting freely, they cannot be held morally culpable for their actions. Although there is a great deal of debate whether Nietzsche is truly committed to determinism, nevertheless it is fairly clear that he regards man as essentially primitive and animalistic, of a piece with the natural world where conventional morality plays no role. This position is referred to as 'naturalism'. Nietzsche appeared to hold to naturalism both methodologically, meaning that the methods of philosophy should be no different from the methods of the empirical sciences, as well as substantively. In terms of the latter, no non-natural cause may ever be appealed to in explanation of natural, including human, phenomena. Thus, our beliefs, our moral values, as well as our moral actions must be explained in relation to causal determinants in our nature.

### Nietzsche's critique of morality: creative aspects

Nietzsche's multi-pronged critique of morality is not merely nihilistic and destructive. In fact, it is ultimately creative. The primary point of Nietzsche's undermining of morality is in order to clear away the old and useless brush in the effort to offer fresh ground for a new ethical flourishing. A great deal of this orientation comes out in the Preface to Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Nietzsche suggests that from time immemorial we have been fooled. We have been fooled by a long line of moral philosophers, fooled

by Plato, fooled by Kant with his ridiculous Categorical Imperative which everybody knows is a joke. Nietzsche is calling out for those very few who can take the stand, who can turn back to the history of philosophy and see that it is folly, that it has gotten us nowhere, and who will sacrifice their present for the philosophy of the future. And this is where everything begins.

The destruction of the ideals of the past and a re-orientation for a new philosophy of the future, requiring a new type of person, is what Nietzsche seeks. Nietzsche believes that there is a kind of clarity that is coming. He thinks that people like him are writing, speaking out, that a new vista has opened up. Some decades before, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel thought that he was at the end of history; Nietzsche, however, thinks he himself is at the beginning, a new beginning. Nietzsche's philosophy is not about sitting in the library and reading and wondering, What did Plato teach? And, What did Kant teach? Rather, his is a 'philosophy of the future'. He warns us that his teaching about morality is dangerous; it is full of danger because life is full of danger. And as much as we like to repress the danger in life and try to maintain order (that is, adhere to conventional morality), in doing so, we also perhaps repress the possibilities of the future. Nietzsche's critique of morality, therefore, seeks to rip open the present. To rip it wide open and thereby let the man of the future leap out, the man whom he calls the 'Overman' (in some translations the term 'Superman' is used).

In treating of the critique of morality, it goes beyond the scope of this chapter to cover Nietzsche's positive amoral, ethical position. However, we need to take note of the fact that the Nietzschean critique served a purpose, just as we have seen in the second intermission that the Sophists' critique served a vital purpose. Nietzsche criticized all values in order to 'trans-valuate' them; that is, to overcome and surpass them with the new, coming values expressed by and for the Overman, the man who thinks beyond good and evil, the man not bound to the history and limitations of all previous morality. But even in this attempt to positively contribute to some truer form of human excellence, we find perhaps the most devastating critique of morality that Nietzsche made – for, if our perspective is to be oriented toward the future, then indeed it would seem a cowardly complacency, a sacrifice of the great promise of the future for the sake of a staid and comfortable past, for us to adhere to the



moralties we have inherited. In view of the need to experiment, to free ourselves for innovation, to slough off dogma and seek new truths, it would almost seem to be wrong to try to be moral in the mainstream way!

### On the hypocrisy of morality

Are teachers of virtue, practitioners of virtue? The preconditions for teaching ethics in the university include documented intellectual virtues (the gauge for which is generally a doctoral degree and publications) as well as absence of culpable transgressions – virtues of character are irrelevant. When it comes to lecturing to scholars and academics in a national seminar, even the criterion of absence of culpable transgressions is waived, and the sole criterion becomes the exhibition of certain intellectual virtues. The upshot of this is that the audience listening to an encomium on the ideal of human perfection by a scholar such as myself has no idea as to whether I myself even exhibit any of the moral virtues on which I pontificate at length. It is taken as institutionally irrelevant.

This circumstance is peculiar to so-called experts in moral philosophy or ethics. An audience at a seminar on a topic in medicine would not heed the words of a physician discussing health if she had never practiced or managed to heal anyone. If there were a seminar on infrastructural development, to take another example, and I had built a bridge that collapsed or had never built a bridge at all, no one in the audience would heed my hollow words on the construction of bridges even for twenty-five seconds, not to mention the twenty-five minutes the seminar speakers are routinely granted.

Am I a man of virtue, who writes and lectures on ethics in the classroom? Since the modern university system is not designed to cope with such a question, it necessarily requires neutralization of the question – thus, there is no scope for even imagining that a course on ethics has anything to do with the teaching of virtue. Thus, again, the condition of being virtuous is suspended, being replaced by the condition of having published articles or books on ethical topics in the abstract. But if teachers of ethics are not virtuous, then scholarship runs the large risk of leading to hypocrisy – it is thus an act of vice (the opposite of virtue), that I should be speaking to students on the nature of virtue. Even further, if I am not a man of virtue, then it would also be an act of hypocrisy that you students or readers should pretend to be

learning about virtue, where non-practitioners of virtue theorize vacuously on virtue.

### The abiding relevance of the *Meno*

Let us lay bare the implication of the last few thoughts – unless we are being made better and more virtuous by the lectures or writings on ethics, we would appear to be engaging in institutional hypocrisy.

But is it even possible to be made more virtuous by speeches? Do I have the ability to teach virtue? Are you readers or students in the classrooms constitutionally capable of learning virtue? Can virtue even be taught? Is virtue a teachable thing, and therefore a kind of knowledge? This string of questions follows naturally from my previous remarks regarding teaching ethics within the university system, as well as the possible threat of inherent institutional hypocrisy. And yet, this question string originates in a text of some 2,000 years ago. It is, more or less, the first sentence of Plato's dialogue *Meno*. The *Meno* is one of the world's first sustained philosophical treatments of the problematics of perfection, or the conditions for the possibility of teaching or learning virtue.

The opening sentence of the *Meno* (which in Greek text serves as the headnote to this chapter) runs thus:

Do you have it in you to tell me, Socrates, if virtue is a teachable thing? Or if it is not teachable, then does it come by training? Or if it is not coming by training and is not learnable, does it come to be in men by nature or by some other manner?<sup>16</sup>

The word *echeis* with which the dialogue opens recalls the *hexis* from Aristotle's definition of *aretê* (virtue, human excellence) given in his *Ethics*, 'Virtue is a settled disposition' (*Estin ara he arete hexis*).<sup>17</sup> The question, then, as Meno asks it of Socrates, is not merely whether virtue is a teachable thing, but expressly whether Socrates himself has all the right stuff required to tell Meno whether it is. Is Socrates virtuous enough to teach Meno about what virtue is?

Now it may become clear, in case I have aroused tempers by accusing all of us scholars and students of engaging in institutional hypocrisy, that I have actually been interpreting and teaching the heart of Plato's *Meno* all along. This is what the dialogue *Meno* is all about. Plato is showing us, in a profound and vibrant manner, that virtue is

a contentious issue. He shows us moreover that, at bottom, virtue or human excellence is a quintessentially political issue.

There is an important point to be emphasized about Plato's presentation of virtue as fundamentally political. The point is that the unique brilliance of Greek ethical philosophy lies in the fact of its origination in connection with political philosophy. As Aristotle mentioned, his book of political philosophy, the *Politics*, was essentially a continuation of his book on moral philosophy, the *Ethics*.<sup>18</sup> For Aristotle, it is natural (rational) that people should organize themselves into the *polis* (city, or state), and the *polis* is there to assist people to achieve the good life – that is, a life lived in accordance with virtue, leading to the highest possibilities of demonic flourishing (*eudaimonia*, human happiness and flourishing).

Plato, too, shows the inherent relation of virtue and politics in a very subtle, dramatic way – there are dozens of Platonic dialogues, but the character Anytus appears in only two of them: one is the dialogue that we have been discussing (the *Meno*), and the other is the *Apology of Socrates*, that is, the trial of Socrates where, because Socrates has corrupted the youth of the *polis*, Anytus prosecutes him, and the *polis* sentences him to death. In short, then, for Plato, virtue and politics are vitally linked – ostensible teachers of virtue may receive capital punishment if their teachings are not in line with the reigning morality of the *polis*.

### Far from perfect(ion)

Ask anyone familiar with Plato what the ultimate conclusion of the *Meno* is, and they will tell you that Plato or Socrates teaches that 'virtue is knowledge'. More accurate would be to say that 'virtue is a kind of knowledge', although exactly what kind of knowledge remains open to dispute, as Plato refuses to spell out the matter in the end. The text's teaching is ambiguous and it is very hard to know. At any rate, it is pretty clear from the dialogue that to say categorically that 'virtue is knowledge' is highly problematic.

Much of the central argument of the dialogue concerns examining the premise that if virtue is knowledge, then virtue is a teachable thing. The antecedent has a sub-argument: (a) virtue is essentially beneficial (*ophelimos*); (b) neither goods of the body nor goods of the soul are beneficial unless guided by knowledge of what is good or bad; (c) thus, virtue is knowledge of what is good or bad. In this examination,

the consequent is denied: (a) if virtue is teachable, then there must be teachers and learners of virtue; (b) neither Athenian aristocrats, nor the Sophists, nor the poets are teachers of virtue; (c) thus, virtue is not teachable (*Meno*, 88c6–d1). With the consequent denied, the antecedent must be rejected. The conclusion, therefore, is that virtue is ‘not’ knowledge.

Socrates showed that the aristocracy were incapable of teaching virtue; the priests and poets were incapable of teaching virtue; the sophists (in the mainstream sense, not in the sense of our conspiratorial rereading in the second intermission) were incapable of teaching virtue, and we might add in an update in the current context, all the academic philosophy teachers who surround us are incapable of teaching virtue. Virtue, then, is not knowledge, but a ‘kind’ of knowledge (*episteme tis*).

What kind of knowledge exactly? A kind of knowledge that, if it can be taught, nevertheless is totally lacking in teachers, and seemingly hopelessly so.

## Notes

- 1 *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1105b10–18.
- 2 *Nic. Ethics*, 1107a1.
- 3 We will take up this problem in a totally new, indeed conspiratorial, manner in Chapter 6.
- 4 For an extended discussion of the philosophical significance of the platypus, see Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York: Random House, 1999).
- 5 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1883).
- 6 Edwin Bryant and Edwin Francis Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: the Indo-Aryan Migration Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 7 [www.worldwizzy.com/library/Arya](http://www.worldwizzy.com/library/Arya).
- 8 Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945).
- 9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967).
- 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).
- 11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1954).
- 12 Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), p. 11.

- 13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (Vintage, 2010), Aphorism 335.
- 14 Friedrich Nietzsche and Reginald John Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 58.
- 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Aphorism 338.
- 16 Plato, *MENON*, all translations from the Greek text are my own.
- 17 *Nic. Ethics*, 1107a1.
- 18 *Nic. Ethics*, 1094b1–10.

# READING PLATO THROUGH HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*

## A conspiracy theory

Then the guardian women must strip for physical training, since they'll wear virtue or excellence instead of clothes. . . . And the man who laughs at naked women doing physical training for the sake of what is best is 'plucking the unripe fruit' of laughter and doesn't know, it seems, what he is laughing at or what he's doing, for it is and always will be the finest saying that the beneficial is what is beautiful, while the harmful is ugly.

– *Republic*, 457 a-b

This chapter is probably going to strike you as particularly strange. It directly advances a conspiracy theory that each of the previous chapters in this book has been hinting at sideways, obliquely, and laying some foundations for, in some way or other. But the chapters in this book can be read independently of one another. They do not rely upon one another inherently; indeed, in a few respects they might even seem to run counter to each other, presenting different kinds of readings or reaching conclusions that are in tension with each other. In this chapter, we gather up together some of their principle discoveries in order to build momentum toward one, comprehensive claim. And here is that claim in its naked form: very few people, if anyone at all, wants you educated, in the fullest Socratic sense of the word (as in, thinking of the analogies and imagery in the *Republic*, led out from the cave and basking in the generative physical and noetic warmth of the sun).

Let me rephrase it in the proper form of a conspiracy theory: the state (or, big brother, if you will) does not want you to display the most flourishing kinds of daimonic human excellence, that is, to have

a brilliant and shimmering unity of the intellectual and physical virtues, because then not only would you know that you are being bamboozled, that you are being bound and chained when you should be flourishing and free, but you would also enjoy the requisite strength and power and courage and stamina, and indeed feel it as your duty to yourself and others, to take real material recourse, to fully initiate your dynamic agency and do something concrete about it.

Now that I have said it so plainly, it is required by the rules of academia and scholarly research and publishing, to pull back away from it a bit, to not be so blatant. Remember, the aristocratic ancients thought that the people beyond the close inner circle should not be exposed to certain truths, and so philosophers should only write such dangerous truths as these esoterically, and leave the blatant and exoteric teachings for the masses as harmless and superficial, never striking at the deep core of things. So let me explain here the obfuscatory manner by which the stark and naked assertion above will be mediated and re-presented. First, you need to understand that virtue, or individual human excellence, is not the same as morality, or what it is we are socially expected to do in every given situation. In Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, he makes clear that it is possible to be a good man and a bad citizen, or a good citizen and a bad man (depending upon the excellence of the regime). Just so, philosophers from the Sophists to Nietzsche to Marx have long been attempting to point out that it is also possible to be a virtuous but an immoral person, or a moral but a non-virtuous person.

Next, understand that dynamic virtuosity is dangerous, and for every terrific example of its achievement, there are hundreds of terrible examples of its monstrosity. The erotic impulses that fuel virtuosity are next to impossible for an individual to control, and tyrannical expressions are inevitable when there is no morality (i.e. socially supported and controlled expectations of behaviour) that can house and ground and adequately regulate individual virtuosity. Ideologies, cosmologies of the nature of human hierarchies and so on, are thus imposed instead of authentic democratization and egalitarianism; patriarchy is imposed, precisely to carefully regulate the erotic.

In place of an ethics (now, understand ethics as the mediation between individual dynamic virtue and expected social morality) that cultivates full demonic human capacity – since we are colonized by the capitalist elite who own the state, who own the law, who own the politicians, who own the police, who are patriarchal, inequalitarian,

anti-democratic, who want you controlled, passive, ignorant, sexually repressed consumers – you are educated into social and political systems where the most you can be expected to do is to vote, or – if you need to do more – then to start a non-governmental organization to alleviate some of the visibly corrosive externalizations thrown out by the system imposed upon you (poverty, ill health, environmental degradation, illiteracy and so on). You cannot be allowed to fully cultivate and advocate your overflowing human capacity for flourishing. Thus, you are awash in social and political ideologies of limitation, control, impossibility, geared toward educating you into a mind-numbing or money-grabbing career, instead of a mind-expanding vocation, and thus told – contrary to everything that the aristocratic Greeks believed, but preciously guarded only and exclusively for themselves – that you can either be an intellectual, or be a physical person, either be a female or a male, develop either your mind or your muscle, but not, never, both at once.

Let us see now how all of these shocking assertions, which have perhaps long been taught esoterically but rarely made exoteric and public, come together through further reflections on the Greek texts.

### **The critique of morality**

In the history of philosophy, the critique of morality has been present ever since the dawn of the advocacy of it. As we saw with the Sophists (recall the second intermission) and in the Platonic dialogues, there are numerous vexing challenges to the basic question, ‘Why should I be moral?’ While philosophers from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill and so many others believed that they had offered compelling answers, Friedrich Nietzsche appeared on the scene to destroy them all (see Chapter 5). His aim behind this destruction was intended to be positive. But given the admiration for Nietzsche by the likes of Hitler and other heinous men, one may wonder if the positive ethics Nietzsche advocated was in fact more harmful than the destruction he had undertaken to prepare for it. The critique of morality is dangerous.

It also remains an open question, I believe, whether academic philosophy serves any positive goal by dragging students through all the arguments for and against every sort of moral position (see Chapter 5). Although the aim of higher education may not be conceived of in our anti-paternalist times as the inculcation of virtue and human excellence,



surely it should not abide the systematic practice of pulling the rug out from under it. Virtue ethics is not just another moral theory. It is fundamentally in tension with morality. Thus, again, it is inherently dangerous.

### The tyranny of erotic virtuosity

In Plato's *Republic* (see Chapter 3) we learn that the tyrant is *eros* incarnate – his soul is driven by indwelling tyrant Eros (*eros turannos*). But in his *Symposium* (see Chapter 4), we learn that the philosopher – or at least Socrates – is *eros* incarnate.<sup>1</sup> And if this is not puzzling enough, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, we learn that with respect to its pre-carnate interaction with the forms, the soul of the philosopher is the highest type, and the soul of the tyrant is the lowest type – that is, they have as little as is humanly possible to do with one another.<sup>2</sup> This complicated complex could be illustrated by reference to specific characters in the Platonic dialogues. For example, in the *Gorgias*, the Sophist and proto-tyrant Callicles is regarded by Socrates as someone with whom Socrates can share an understanding, as both of them are lovers and enjoy a common feeling.

If we consider these several statements and illustrations synthetically (recall our orientation toward a synthetic and dramatic reading rather than an Anglo-American analytic one), we come up with a pretty typical Socratic position running something like this: both the philosopher and the tyrant share in being erotic. *Eros* includes but is also inherently much deeper and wider than sexual satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> Diotima refers to *eros* as longing for union with the *kalon*, the fine, noble, beautiful. But this longing is not unequivocal. Diotima also says that we want the good to be our own forever – clearly an impossibility for mortal man. There is, thus, the tincture of selfish satisfaction in erotic striving, the seed for the possible flowering of injustice in the deep quest for fulfillment. *Eros* can drive one to the greatest heights just as well as to the greatest depths. Fully unleashed in the wayward or misguided soul, *eros* may eat into the soul, becoming the soul's tyrant, creating the tyrant's soul – that is, immoderate, overreaching and unjust. Stamping out a man's nobler aspirations and seeping him into base aims, power for its own sake, licentiousness, avarice, and perhaps even madness, tyrant *eros* (*Republic*) drives a man down as forcefully as winged *eros* (*Phaedrus*) raises him up.

And as the *Republic* presents it in a political context, when the tyrannic soul rules a polity by decree – that is, a polity not stabilized by the rule of law – then political tyranny is at hand. This is the account of *eros* gone mad, in the soul and in the city, in the *Republic*. Diotima's depiction of *eros* in the *Symposium*, then, gives the complementary side, or *eros* at work not in the misguided soul, but guiding the soul upward toward the good and toward the beautiful. The philosopher is also *eros* incarnate, but another avatar of *eros* altogether. The philosopher's soul – moderate, harmonious, just – lifts itself out from the mire of greed and power quest, rising to the world of forms and taking delight in the good. To be sure, the philosopher need not eschew the so-called lower pleasures. These may be delighted in, as Socrates hints at in his statement that he loves Alcibiades and philosophy, explaining to Callicles – who loves Demos and the *demos* – that he is not, however, at his lovely youth's beck and call. No, he is erotic, but he has trained his demon into self-sovereignty.

As the *Phaedrus* illustrates, the chariot may fly high or it may fly low – but all the while it is the black horse (*eros*) which charges forward. This forward thrust is in itself good and need not be thwarted. We are all erotic creatures, all hopeful and longing. Aristophanes' speech on *eros* in the *Symposium* makes the point that that is how we must be. *Eros* is therefore not something that either ought to be or even can be stamped out. Rather, it must be directed:

It is a controlled erotic life that hopes to attain what love unconsciously seeks: eternal truth, justice, beauty, wisdom. Few are capable of such a life, and most of those who aren't will gratify their yearnings in predictable ways and lead middling lives. Others, though, become utter slaves to their drives and nothing will control them. These people Plato calls tyrants.<sup>4</sup>

In short, then, for Plato, the tyrant is a sort of negative reflection of the philosopher, who, rather than channeling his desires to accord with noble aspirations, is a man of frenzied soul possessed by *eros*, slave to baser desires and their aims.<sup>5</sup> But in this way we see reconciled the puzzling expressions and images of the *Republic*, particularly its eighth Book, the Socrates-Diotima episode of the *Symposium*, the long-speech or palinode of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, the Callicles encounter of the *Gorgias* and so on: *eros* is the middle term binding together the philosopher and the tyrant, the highest and lowest expressions of

man's possibility. And, carrying it further, as the polis is the soul in large letters, tyranny is the regime of *eros* unleashed most unjustly, while the philosopher's absolute rule would be most just – of course, the latter is for various reasons impossible (i.e. it is nothing more than a 'city in speech', possible only in speech). So the next best approach would be a rule-of-law polis wherein the effect of the man of tyrannical soul coming to power would be dampened by his inability to rule by decree.

It has been frequently suggested that the description of the degeneration of regimes from *Republic* Book Eight (that is, where Socrates explains the decline of democracy and its transformation to tyranny) is based on Plato's observations from his first visit to Sicily around 388–387, by which time the tyrant Dionysius I had seized power and steadily stripped Syracuse of its democratic institutions and culture. It is, thus, not in spite of Plato's disgust with the situation in Syracuse, but because of that disgust that Plato was willing to return there during the tyranny of Dionysius II, in an effort at bottom to educate the latter into virtue. The tyrant undoubtedly did have *eros*, and Plato's avowed mission was redirecting that *eros*, and not opportunistically reaping its base boons.

So, let's sum up this section. Plato considered tyranny to be serious and deep confusion about the nature of human longing and how this longing should be satisfied. The longing, the *eros*, must be redirected, the baser passions must not be stamped out but trained and sublimated in accord with the natural cosmic order<sup>6</sup> if a just regime is to be humanly possible. Plato sought to educate Dionysius II into virtue and philosophy – as Socrates had sought (and also failed) with Alcibiades – because he saw tyranny as a longing for erotic satisfaction, parallel to philosophy but erroneously and dangerously vectored.

Plato's letters describing his voyages to Sicily are consistent with this presentation. And looked at from the other perspective, this account provides a basis for better understanding Plato's Seventh and Eighth Letters, where Plato attempts to justify his refusal to return to Sicily after Dionysius II was already dead, to help avenge the death of his friend Dion. Further interference into the politics of Syracuse would have been inconsistent with Plato's understanding of *eros* and its potencies. Plato, we might say, would have run the risk of succumbing to latent passion for power himself, could have run the risk of permitting winged *eros*' monstrous metamorphosis into the taloned hawk of *eros turannos*. Who knows, it could happen to anyone.

### The unity of the virtues

Now for something completely different. Let us return to the disparate sets of virtues or human excellences, the physical and the intellectual, that so troubled us in Chapter 5. *Eros* is the impulse, the excellences are the expressions. But since *eros* cannot be adequately controlled, another strategy has been operative throughout much of human history in order to keep it contained. It is manifest within an ideological package (a package wherein its sits comfortably placed alongside patriarchy) that blinds and binds us all. We are its puppets. It even tells us when to laugh (as illustrated in the Headnote starting this chapter). I will here broach the issue by means of the phenomenology of perception.

I am sure you would immediately recognize Rodin's *The Thinker*. We have all assumed that pose ourselves. I spent half of my life in it. Hunched over, chin resting on the hand, drifted away deep into thought. (See Figure 6.1.)

*The Thinker* is an iconic sculpture for those who live the life of the mind. Indeed, it serves as a ubiquitous representation not just of the pensive philosopher, but as a symbol of philosophy itself. For someone like you, who can make it all the way to the end of an esoteric and

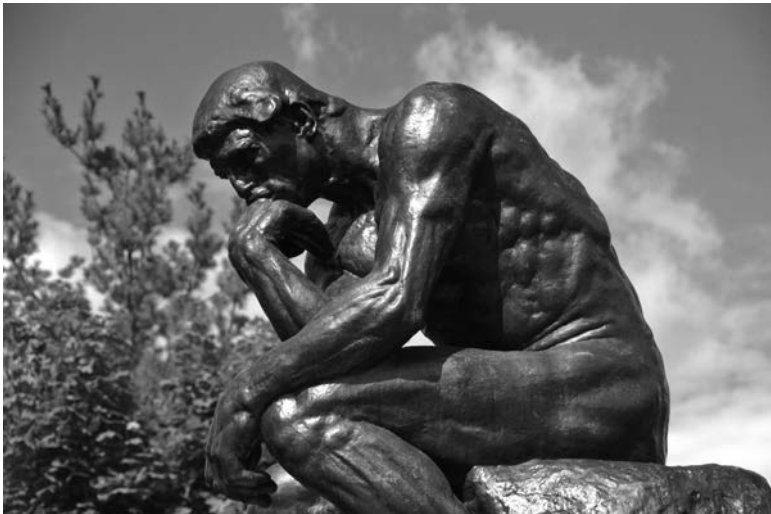


Figure 6.1 Rodin's *The Thinker*

highly intellectually demanding book like this one on Plato, certainly you can self-identify with the thinker and his pose.

This sculpture is one of the very few symbols that vulgar popular culture and the elitist philosophical academy agree upon completely: *The Thinker*, all equally assert, depicts the life of the mind; he is the philosopher par excellence; high-brow philosophy is profoundly represented by the deeply wrinkled brow of Rodin's extraordinary bronze. Countless book covers, numerous university squares, libraries, offices and studies are adorned with this image of cogitation, learning, wisdom, thought. Everyone everywhere equates *The Thinker* with the life of the mind.

But everyone is wrong.

We are not mistaken because Rodin's sculpture was meant to represent the poet Dante rather than a philosopher. No, the life of the mind is equally well depicted by Dante or Descartes.

We are mistaken, rather, because there is an anomaly – an anomaly of epic proportions – between what we actually see and what we think we see. We are blind to what we actually see, and see instead what we are told to see, because of ideology and social control.

Let's break through. We use simple, naive phenomenological seeing.

Look at the physical body of Rodin's *The Thinker* and describe what you actually see. If you are honest and straight-forward, you will use terms to capture a quintessentially muscular physique. That pensive philosopher-poet's broad shoulders are rounded, he is taut and fit, high on the lean muscular mass that comes only from athletics and low on the body fat indicative of a sedentary thinker's life.

Frankly, you don't get biceps like that from rhyming couplets.

That may be the 'position' of the thinker, but it is not his 'body'. It is the body of a physical, active person. How could that be Dante, how a philosopher?

Let me illustrate the mismatch that I am trying to bring to your attention by way of an episode that really happened during Rodin's own lifetime. You will have heard of George Bernard Shaw, certainly one of my own literary heroes, the Nobel Prize winner<sup>7</sup> and author of the well-known masterpiece *Pygmalion*. Apart from being a genius dramatist and a nut-job when it comes to global politics,<sup>8</sup> Shaw also possessed a narcissistic streak, manifest in his desire to be photographed nude in the pose of *The Thinker*. Erotic self-expression.

Rodin received the nude photograph from Shaw in 1906, which is now also on display at the Rodin Museum in Paris. (See Figure 6.2.)



Figure 6.2 George Bernard Shaw as *The Thinker*

Source: George Bernard Shaw in the Pose of *The Thinker* (1906) by Alvin Langdon Coburn, Carbon print on platinotype, H. 29.2 cm; W. 23 cm, Ph.1214. Courtesy of Musée Rodin, Paris, France.

Compare Rodin's sculpture to a bona fide flesh-and-blood thinker, to the great Bernard Shaw. Juxtapose the two, and on the one side you have brawn in bronze; on the other side, flab on film.

Present in Shaw's image, profundity, pensive depth, and even though Shaw lived for another half-century, somehow the portrait also reeks of mortality (to make an obscure allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*).

Mortality may be one of the themes upon which Rodin's thinker dwells, but it is vitality, it is pulsing with the blood that feeds those massive quads and lats, that is most visually forward. From a certain angle, a mental not visual angle, it is the sculpture – not the photographic portrait of a living man – that seems to devour more from the luscious fruit of erotic life.

But once again, let me state simply what we have before us. The real-life thinker, Shaw, is wan, flabby, with undefined musculature.<sup>9</sup> Rodin's *The Thinker*, which is universally taken as an ideal depiction of the life of the mind (that Shaw concretely represented), is muscularly well-defined, seething with testosterone and, as contemporary bodybuilders say, cut and pumped.

Paris, we have a problem. It is a problem for us. But it is not a problem for Plato.

### Mind versus muscle

Rodin's *The Thinker* visually contradicts all of our actual experience. We all know that great scholars and intellectuals tend to be effeminate and weak. Geeks and nerds are misshapen.

We all know that massively muscular people are mentally feeble. Bodybuilders are morons. There may be some exceptions. But Rodin's masterpiece is not meant to portray the exception; it is, remember, taken as representing the archetype – not just the philosopher, but philosophy as such. That makes no sense.

Was it not rather the great Danish existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who much more aptly captured the mind and body of the philosopher, portraying the archetype, when he remarked that the job of the philosopher was to ask questions, and the shape of the philosopher's body was well suited to the task, itself taking on the form of a question mark, spine perpetually curved and misshapen from hunching over a writing table and books? It certainly jibes better with our everyday experience.

Kierkegaard's life overlapped with Rodin's in the long nineteenth century, although he was a couple of generations older. Another great philosopher whose life overlapped with theirs was the German renegade Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche wrote at length about the physical weakness of philosophers (and indeed their intellectual weaknesses as well). He fantasized about an ideal type of man, an Overman, who synthesized and united all of the excellences of the

scholar–philosopher–philologist's mind with the athlete–gladiator–bodybuilder's physique. Nietzsche's conception of the Overman influenced Bernard Shaw, as apparent from Shaw's play *Man and Superman*,<sup>10</sup> as well as from Shaw's misplaced admiration of the likes of early twentieth-century pseudo-overmen tyrants like Stalin. As always, *eros* bubbles over.

But the fantasy of housing a profoundly philosophical mind in a perfectly chiseled body was not only a nineteenth-century dream or a twentieth-century nightmare. It is, in fact, a notion that dawned with the very birth of Greek philosophy itself.

We have already encountered several references throughout this book to Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* – two inestimably influential works which, according to Aristotle, constitute an organic pair. There is a question that Aristotle sought to answer in his *Ethics*. That is, Can the man of excellence unify the intellectual and the physical virtues?

Or, to put it back into terms familiar from Bernard Shaw's narcissistic romp in Paris: Is it even possible to be a real-life version of Rodin's sculpture?

But forget Rodin, there are other iconic sculptures for us to look at from Athens at the time of Plato's *Republic*. Another archetype altogether. In this case, it is the archetype not of the thinker, but of the athlete.

### Myron, not moron

Myron's *Discus Thrower* is a study on the perfection of the athlete's aesthetic form. (See Figure 6.3.)

The discus thrower's physique captures and seduces the onlooker into delighting in the human body in audacious flawlessness. No, flawlessness is not right because it is a negation – such a physique as that of the discus thrower does not just happen by luck, it is the result of countless hours, days, months, years of training, voluntary toiling away, sweating, aching, panting and bleeding. The lean, muscular form of the athlete angles like the tense archer's bow. It is the farthest cry from the philosopher's repulsively curved spine.

And there is no misprision here. With Rodin's *The Thinker*, we are forced – seeped in ideology so we cannot see – to ignore the way that the bodily representation contradicts our everyday experience of the physical manifestation of the life of the mind. With Myron's *Discus Thrower*, it is precisely the manifestation, culmination and





*Figure 6.3 Myron's Discus Thrower*

embodiment of physical culture that we are invited to admire. But wait, what about this athlete's mind? Do you think this hunk of man meat might himself have been a philosopher? Did he spend the same number of hours, days, months and years studying and contemplating ontology or epistemology as he did hurling heavy round things?

We are thus led right back to the same question, then: Is it even possible to be a real-life version of Rodin's sculpture; or, as reversed by a glance at Myron's work, Could the athlete's physical perfection belong to someone profoundly dedicated to the life of the mind?

Or, again, thinking along the lines of Aristotle's *Ethics*, Is it really possible to unify the physical and intellectual virtues or excellences?

### Enter Homer

Let me present you with a vivid scene from the eighth book of Homer's *Odyssey*:

Noble and long-suffering Odysseus . . . addressed the Phaeacians: ' . . . if any of you young men have the courage and spirit, then come prove yourself. I will box, wrestle, run, anything. Any of you Phaeacians come try. I excel at every athletic sport there is. As an archer, I handle the bow with skill. I am always the first to bring a man down from the enemy ranks, no matter how many others stand with me to shoot. Only Philoctetes surpassed me when we Greeks fought at Troy. But I far excel all other mortal men who still eat bread upon the face of the earth. And I hurl the spear farther than others can shoot an arrow. Only in running I am afraid that one of you Phaeacians might beat me, for I have long been tossed about by the waves at sea, and my legs are still weak from it.' They all stood silent at his words.<sup>11</sup>

Odysseus is a paradigmatic hero with overweening pride, so do not begrudge his lack of modesty. He tends to do everything in extremes; indeed, right around the passage cited above, Homer describes noble Odysseus as 'weeping like a woman who was just widowed'. This extreme Greek hero possesses excellences in abundance. He is strong, courageous, confident and demonstrates every physical virtue. But what is interesting is that his most distinguishing trait is his sharp intellect, his cunning and wisdom. It is packed into the very name by which Homer refers to him, *metis Odysseus*, the Greek word *metis* meaning cunning intelligence. Homer supplements this epithet of *metis* with another term signifying Odysseus' versatility and guile – *polytropos*. Many turns.

It is because the cunning Odysseus of many turns is not just brave and warlike, not just an athlete of exceptional prowess, but also

brilliant, clever and wise,<sup>12</sup> that the Goddess Athena adores and protects him.

Athena (called *Minerva* in Latin), the eponymous for the glorious city of Athens, was of course the Goddess of Wisdom. Philosophers have always evoked her name (*Cratylus*, 407b). Recall the famous passage from the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel about the philosophical achievements of nineteenth-century Germany, 'The Owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk'.

But in cultures such as ours that so rigidly separate the physical from the intellectual, it is easy to forget that Athena was not just the Goddess of Wisdom. She was also the Goddess of War (or, more precisely, of battle or war strategy). In fact, in the imagination of Greeks from Homer to Plato to Aristotle, Athena herself represents the unity of physical and intellectual perfection.

Myron's *Discus Thrower* recalled to mind the eighth book of the *Odyssey* because of a particular feat of Odysseus that he performs there, in the land of the Phaeacians:

Euryalus then mocked Odysseus: 'Stranger, you look like you are unused to manly sports. Rather, more like the captain of a merchant ship . . . seeking profit. The athlete you are not.' Fiercely, Odysseus of many turns replied: 'Stranger, you are quite mistaken. . . . I have endured much both on the field of battle and by the hostile sea. And yet, despite my suffering, I will compete. . . .' He hurried to his feet, still wrapped in his cloak, and seized a discus larger than the rest, thicker and heavier than those the Phaeacians normally compete with. Spinning around, he threw it from his brawny hand, and it hummed as it flew through the air. The Phaeacians cowered beneath the rushing stone that sped so gracefully from his hand. It flew beyond all the other marks, and goddess Athena, taking the form of a man, pegged the place where it fell. She said, 'Stranger, even a blind man groping with his hands could find your mark, it is so far ahead from the cluster. No Phaeacian could come near to it.'<sup>13</sup>

What makes Odysseus so wise and clever and the beloved of the goddess Athena? In both Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we are offered many examples of his wit and wisdom, beyond the mere designation of his epithet. Everyone has heard of the Trojan Horse. This was of course Odysseus' invention. That permitted the end of the war in decisive

victory for the Greeks. But before the Trojan war was even begun, Odysseus' cunning was seen in the way he found out where the great hero Achilles was hiding, and the way he tricked the unsurpassed archer Philoctetes into fighting on the side of the Greeks.

Throughout the war, too, and during his long and laborious voyage home from it, we are treated to numerous tales recounting how mighty Odysseus outwitted strongmen like Ajax, monsters like the Cyclops, seductresses and enchantresses like Circe, Calypso and the Sirens, and escaped both the Scylla and Charybdis. Odysseus literally went to Hell and back – he visited the underworld Hades and returned to tell of it. He achieved not once, but on several occasions what no other mortal man, howsoever wise, ever had been able to manage.

And although clever enough to delight Athena herself, Odysseus is not the discus thrower that we seek – when we are asking ourselves the question, Is it possible to be both Myron's sculpture and a philosopher in the Platonic-Aristotelian sense. Why not?

*Metis* Odysseus puts his intelligence to use for the sake of supplementing his physical virtues; he does not, he would not choose to lead the life of the mind over and against the life of action, the heroic life. Odysseus could not, would not have composed the *Odyssey*. He was no Homer, no Plato, no Dante, no Shakespeare, not even a Bernard Shaw.

## Platonic pedagogy 2.0

Plato's ideal citizens have the souls of athletes. In Plato's late dialogue the *Laws*, the Athenian says:

Let's see, now, once I've organised the state as a whole, what sort of citizen do I want to produce? Athletes are what I want – competitors against a million rivals in the most vital struggles of all.<sup>14</sup>

As we have already noted in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, Plato's ideal *Republic* is ruled by philosopher-kings. What we have thus far neglected to mention is that these philosophers are selected from amongst the guardians, both female and male, who have been thoroughly trained in athletics. Philosophers who can break through, who can undertake the dangerous and seemingly impossible task of rising up from out of the cave into the light of the sun, must necessarily be

trained in the physical virtues, so they can cultivate their courage and moderation, their grit, their determination and their stamina.

Heather Reid, in her thrilling and original work titled 'Plato's Gymnasium', captures these thoughts perfectly:

Plato set up his own school at a gymnasium called the Academy where promising youth had long since trained their bodies, formed lasting friendships and prepared themselves to become productive soldiers and citizens. Plato seems to have endorsed Athens's traditional educational goals, even the apparently body-based practices of nudity and pederasty. But he saw education ultimately as the cultivation of wisdom and harmony in the soul and therefore redirected educational conventions away from the body and other worldly objects such as wealth and political power, upward towards ideals such as truth and goodness; goals best achieved by athletic souls that love the right things. Despite his conservatism and persistent aristocratic tendencies, Plato's gymnasium, in the end, embraced the essence of the Hellenic democracy.<sup>15</sup>

This reinterpretation of the pedagogic teleology of Plato as supported by the *Republic* and the *Laws*, also has its resonances in the *Symposium*. While we should not take the character Pausanias as speaking fully for Plato, still this statement of his is extremely powerful and significant:

In . . . places where people live under the rule of the barbarians [pederasty] is considered base. This is shameful to the barbarians because of their tyrannical regimes, as are also philosophy and the passion for athletics (*philogymnasia*). For, it is not in the interests of the rulers that their subjects have high thoughts, nor strong bonds of friendship, which most especially *eros* above all these other practices are accustomed to create.

(*Symposium*, 182b–c)

The lethal combination of the unity of intellectual and physical virtues is made shameful in the ideology perpetuated by tyrannical governments. It is not in the interest of our rulers that we have high thoughts, paired with physical virtues like courage, and the willingness to die for our righteous convictions.

### The conspiracy against philosophy

It seems possible that the profoundly aristocratic conception of the philosopher-king, of the unity of intellectual and physical, of the master morality espousing self-mastery, self-overcoming and self-sovereignty, that which preconditions the mind and body for both the rigour of mental and physical training daily, might turn out – irony of all ironies – to be profoundly radical and revolutionary, rather than arch-conservative: Homer, Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche articulated a master morality that ironically unlocks the key for the most substantive democracy ever known – now think about *that* in the light of Marx's ideas of life in a communist political economy. There is abundant literature to establish that Marx learned a great deal from Aristotle. However, I think we can also thank Plato's *Republic* for some of Marx's greatest insights.

Plato did not teach morality, but virtue. Aristotle (in his *Ethics* and *Politics*) advanced upon some of these teachings, specifically in terms of a master morality of self-cultivation, for the good of the *polis*. It was the Sophists (some of them, that is), however, who undertook a proper destruction of morality in order to pave the path for the eradication of oppressive caste distinctions grounded in false cosmologies perpetuated by priests, to pave the way for egalitarianism instead of Aristocratic inequality, to provide vistas beyond misogyny and patriarchy, and to lay the groundwork for authentic democratization. Nietzsche took up the Sophists' critique of morality, but he re-aristocratized it. Marx, on the other hand, renewed the agenda of creating the ideal polis, and in doing so he re-democratized Aristotelian master morality, making the possibility of self-cultivation and flourishing universal, although conditional upon breaking over and out of the grip of capital.

Society wants you to believe that reading the philosophy of Plato is a useless luxury. Even those who should be teaching Plato to you teach it in a way that undermines its esoteric teaching, its true power. This is the real conspiracy. Philosophy was not conceived by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle or Nietzsche and Marx, notwithstanding their contextual differences, to liberate the philosopher's soul at the expense of the polis, or city or state; rather, philosophy aims to liberate the society and the state and along with it, the minds and souls of all citizens.

You are systematically misled to believe in the uselessness of philosophy because its true uses are dangerously radical and totally revolutionary.

## Notes

- 1 There is no direct statement as in the *Republic*, but it is strongly suggested several times through the content of speeches, as well as the fact that Alcibiades eulogizes Socrates himself rather than eros (*Republic* 212d–222e). The description of eros as *daimonic* recalls Socrates' *daimonion*, and many of the adjectives used to describe *eros* as the son of poverty and resource are also used to describe Socrates, in addition to its typically Socratic placement between wisdom and ignorance and so on (201e–204c).
- 2 *Phaedrus* 245b–257b; How much contact the disembodied souls of men had with the world of forms before they became incarnate determines what we become once living as men upon the earth: those who had the most experience with the forms become the highest type, philosophers; those who had little to no intercourse with the forms become the lowest type, the tyrant. Seven other middling types widen the gulf between these two very distinct and different souls. They would seem to have absolutely nothing in common (*Phaedrus* 245b–257b).
- 3 In Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, this point is made crystal clear through the fact that the halves long to be whole (i.e. they are erotic) before there is even any possibility for sexual union. Zeus later graciously shifts the genitals around to make sexual intercourse possible (189c–193d). This was discussed in Chapter 4.
- 4 Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p. 210.
- 5 Nor should we neglect to see the social function of patriarchy then, the totalitarian regulation of female sexuality, fitting perfectly well within this overall ideology of human oppression, containment of the demon.
- 6 An order to which, Plato seems to say, man has access prior to birth (*Phaedrus* myth) and a faded memory of in life (*Meno* recollection myth).
- 7 The Nobel Prize, incidentally, is yet another apparatus of social/ideological control, which is why the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre was extraordinarily virtuous to refuse to accept it, but that is all beyond what we can cover in a book on Plato.
- 8 Shaw admired various 'superman' tyrants such as Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini.
- 9 I would like to quote a commentator on this text, because she makes an important, critical point against my language: 'I am afraid that your readers may also see this as a harsh case of body shaming. This will take attention away from what you are trying to say'. I am divided about this concern, but have decided to take the risk.
- 10 Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (Brentano's, 1904).
- 11 Homer, *Odyssey*, 'Book VIII', pp. 199–225; translation is my own from the Homeric Greek text.

- 12 This is an allusion that I could not resist, to the chapter titles of Nietzsche's own autobiography, *Ecce Homo*.
- 13 Homer, *Odyssey*, 'Book VIII', pp. 158–198; Translation is my own from the Homeric Greek text.
- 14 Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Basic Books, 1980), p. 830a.
- 15 Heather L. Reid, 'Plato's Gymnasium', *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2010), pp. 170–182.



## EXODOS

Where do we go from here?

Statesmen and philosophers came to Alexander the Great to congratulate him, and Alexander expected that Diogenes would do likewise. But since that philosopher took not the slightest notice of him, Alexander went himself to see Diogenes, and he found him basking idle in the sun. Diogenes raised himself up a little when he saw so many people coming towards him, and fixed his eyes upon Alexander. The king greeted Diogenes and asked if there was anything that he might do for him. "Yes," said Diogenes, "stand a little out of my sun." The great Alexander was struck by this; he admired the haughtiness and grandeur of this philosopher who had nothing but scorn for him. While his followers laughed and mocked Diogenes for his eccentricity and folly, the king spoke above them: "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes."

– Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*

The *exodos*: At the end of a play, the chorus exits from the theatre, singing a processional song that offers the spectators some words of wisdom related to the dramatic action of the play and the fate of the protagonist. The drama, however, has by that time already been concluded. So, the *exodos* of the chorus offers a last little dance and ditty.

What a choice, to decide between living the life of an Alexander or a Diogenes! I have been studying the ancient Greek world for nearly thirty years. Despite all my other interests, hobbies, passions and distractions, nothing else on earth captivates me as much as the classical world, the questions it posed through its cast of inimitable characters. And yet, for some reason which I have failed for a decade to be

able to comprehend, I am more or less alone in this obsession within Indian academia. Other than the stray philosopher and perhaps some Christian priests in the south somewhere, I do not know of more than one or two scholars in India who pursue deep and sustained study of ancient Greek philosophy, literature and culture.

One of the reasons behind the lack of widespread interest in Greek thought within Indian academia lies in the fact that we have erroneously bought into the West's civilizational self-projection; that is, the absurd pretense to a cultural heritage of the earlier colonial English and now contemporary Trans-Atlantic world hearkening back to ancient Athens. This is a fiction, propagandist nation building (civilization building), not dissimilar from Virgil's *Aeniad*, commissioned to give the Romans an epic history equal in grandeur and pedigree to the Greeks whom they had physically and militarily overcome, but by whom in the very process they were spiritually overtaken. I have addressed this in an earlier book, *Indian Political Theory*, wherein I (of course rather polemically) explained that

this myth reconstructing a 'Western' tradition anchored in ancient Greek political and philosophical origins is farcical: the very appearance and etymology of the (most saliently Roman) concept of 'Eastern' was specifically created to contrast the oriental nature of Greece from the Occident, Rome. And indeed, within the scope of the actual foot traffic, and intellectual, cultural, and spiritual traffic of the ancient world, Athens and Delhi have a much deeper bond – again, with wildly random examples, you can think of the dress, the identity of the sari and the toga, not to mention the philosophy (Eleatic and its overlaps with Indic), and the children's tales (Aesop, *Panchatantra*) – than Athens and Amsterdam or Oslo or Helsinki.<sup>1</sup>

Greek philosophy is not 'Western' philosophy. It belongs to everyone, including us. It falls within our own heritage, not only in terms of territoriality, the concrete geography of the ancient world, but also in terms of its shape, or form (e.g. dialectics, as in the rich Buddhist philosophical practices), as well as in its content, or the quality of the ideas put forward. I wrote this book partly to make an intervention that might help readers to see this, to change their perception. And to excite some interest. Students of Plato and Greek thought, and especially their teachers, need to see the passion, frenzy, sophistication and

excitement of the ancient Greek world, and I want them to be infected by it.

And thus I do not intend to stop with the present little drama about Plato.

A sequel, a book on Plato's greatest student, Aristotle, is on its way, titled *Excellence for Everybody: A Marxist Rereading of Aristotle's Ethics*. As may be apparent, in the new book I shall try to push ahead with my suggestion sketched toward the end of this book that certain crucial elements of classical, conservative aristocratic teachings might actually prove to be radical and subversive in today's social and political environment. Both of these works unquestionably have a global relevance, but I do have a target Indian audience particularly in my sites.

Why? Because as far as I know, there has been only one major book about ancient Greek philosophy published in India by an Indian scholar.<sup>2</sup> That book being so different from my own, I want to pause for a fraction of a page to ponder on this difference.

Although the book in question is the product of a scholar of Greek philosophy, it is not meant primarily as a scholarly book; for, to use the author's own words, it 'is not addressed to scholars in the field, but to those about to make an entry into it' (viii). Reflecting on those remarks of that author, I have wondered how I situate the current book on Plato and the future coming one on Aristotle. Is it possible to have it both ways, both for the students and for their teachers, both amateurs and professionals?

Coeval with the question of whom a book was written for is that of why. But in posing that pair of questions here, we are far from the speculative orientation of a Leo Strauss. All that drama has come to a close with the crescendo, the climax, we have witnessed toward the end of Chapter 6. In this *exodos*, we are left merely to reflect on how we can move forward concretely, given what drama had already earlier unfolded. The author of *Ancient Greek Philosophy* is equally explicit here: his book was required, not because of a paucity of works on the subject, but for the near impossibility of acquiring them in India. Basic material conditions. The greater one's awareness of students' lack of access to books such as this, the greater the burden on the author to produce a book that will satisfy students' requirements not just partially but fully – otherwise the author's very motivation is held ransom to the chance availability of some supplement or other.

Thus, that text prefixed and appended so many student-friendly features: there is a map of the Hellas, an annotated chronology of the pivotal figures of that world, from Homer, through the poets, dramatists, historians and philosophers up to Aristotle, a detailed discussion of sources, both ancient and medieval, as well as a generous subject index to the book along with an index of cited passages and of ancient fragments. Such painstaking additions testify to the author's genuine commitment to his pedagogical task.

From the point of view of pedagogy, the above-mentioned traits are not merely desirable, but essential. The book is in this respect admirable, insofar as the author executed not merely what was necessary, but also what was beneficial. He has provided all the available fragments of the principal pre-Socratics, has himself interpreted and thereby guided the reader in how to interpret these texts, and he has placed these texts and their (ostensible) authors into both the narrow context that they were specifically tackling as well as the wider context into which history later situated them.

In the work before you, I have failed to provide any of these sorts of student-friendly apparatus, apart from a handful of sporadic footnotes. Perhaps, then, my books are inevitably directed more at the already learned than at young learners, those who already have access rather than those who aspire to gain it.

But something in me resists assenting to this. Something Socratic/erotic. Something that urges me to see pursuit at the realm of the symbolic as equally valuable in parallel with efforts to work with the given material conditions. And that hearkens back to the Dedication at the opening of this book.

Very recently, I was asked to write a brief article about my sometime teacher Umberto Eco. In the process of that request, I was asked what it was like to study under him. I replied: 'To be quite honest, neither I, nor anyone else I was studying with, really ever seemed to know what the hell he was talking about'. And indeed, even though the very title of this book was given to me by something Eco mumbled one afternoon, I do not actually even know what he meant. Even worse, I do not actually even know whether he was talking to me or to himself!

Nevertheless, the experience of being with him in Bologna, even for that short time, changed me completely – it is the source of so much inspiration for writing this book. For anyone who knows Eco's work, the influence of his novels like *The Name of the Rose* upon my

orientation toward ancient Greek and other classical intrigues, conspiracies and lies will be quite palpable.

So, from a different point of view, perhaps passion and exuberant dedication can serve as another useful and worthwhile modality of pedagogy? From my experience, this was true for Eco and for Derrida. And from what I have been frequently told by many, despite his flaws, this was true for Leo Strauss as well. I suppose, however, that this question is not for the scholars and for the teachers to ask and answer, but rather for the students.

Finally, I think what I have been trying to say all along is simply this: although the book was dedicated to and inspired by my teachers, its real reason for being is not genealogical, but teleological instead. Its end (*telos*) is to foster your beginning.

I hope you have enjoyed the show.

### Notes

- 1 Aakash Singh Rathore, *Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Svaraj* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 153, 155.
- 2 See Vijay Tankha's, *Ancient Greek Philosophy: Thales to Socrates* (New York: Pearson, 2014).

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