

Why the Philosopher Returns to the Cave

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Introduction

It is the most familiar of scenes: hitherto confined to a world of shadows that since childhood he has been taught constitutes the only reality, a prisoner is released from his bonds and compelled to make the ascent out of the cave and into the light of immutable truth. It is the seminal image of the journey of philosophical enlightenment in the Western tradition. Summarised thus, however, it tells only half of Socrates' story: having undertaken the journey out of the shadows, the newly educated philosopher is obliged to return to the cave and rule in accordance with the vision of truth that he has been afforded. Glaucon has his doubts, but they are assuaged. The philosopher, he concedes, must return; 'there is no one else' (521d).¹

The debate surrounding the philosopher's return to the cave is a constant of Plato scholarship. Why, having left the cave and witnessed the form of the good, does the philosopher forego his new found 'earthly paradise' (519c) and undertake the difficult task of ruling his former fellows? What is his motivation to return? The purpose of this essay is to examine Plato's answer to this question and its implications for the argument that is advanced in both the middle books of the *Republic* and, by extension, the dialogue as a whole. I shall argue that Plato provides a coherent account of the philosopher-ruler's motivation and that it is to be found in the political implications of his epistemological education in the theory of the forms. In conclusion, however, I shall suggest that there is a price to pay for the theoretical coherence of Plato's account in respect of the practical prospects for the philosopher-ruler's successful return.

I

Having completed his account of the philosopher's ascent, Plato considers what might be assumed to be a drawback in a potential ruler: a reluctance to govern. 'It won't be surprising,' Socrates suggests, 'if those who get so far are unwilling to involve themselves in human affairs, and if their minds long to remain in the realm above' (517c-d). Socrates would appear to have a point. He has already suggested that, if they returned to the cave, they would be blinded by the dark as once they were blinded by the light and make fools of themselves as a result (517a-d). Worse still, they would rightly return in fear of their lives: given the opportunity, Socrates reflects, the other inhabitants of the cave would be sure to kill them (516c- 517a).

Socrates cannot be accused of sugaring the pill. Yet far from viewing his reluctance as a problem, for Plato it is an indication of the philosopher's fitness to rule. Socrates maintains that 'the state whose prospective rulers come to their duties with the least enthusiasm is bound to have the best and most tranquil government, and the state whose rulers are eager to rule the worst' (520d). The argument is that only those rulers who have experienced a way of life preferable to political governance – namely, the life of philosophical contemplation – will be just rulers, for having experienced the philosophical life they will not seek self-satisfaction through the attainment of political power. In Socrates' words, they will not 'hope to snatch

compensation for their own inadequacy from a political career' (521a). Rulers eager to hold office inevitably compete for power, condemning the state to endless internecine strife. The just state requires rulers who hold themselves aloof from their task; who possess what, after Nietzsche, we might term the 'pathos of distance.'² In Nicholas White's summary, 'philosophising is essential to ruling because it is the activity that is preferable to ruling, and so the activity that the ruler must have available to him if he is to wish not to rule, where wishing not to rule is, paradoxically, what makes it possible for him to rule well.'³ In short, the just ruler is a reluctant one.

There are two points to make in respect of this argument. Firstly, whilst it may explain why the reluctant ruler is qualified to rule, it does not explain why he would necessarily feel obliged to do so. We shall return to this in due course. Secondly, Plato's insistence on the philosopher's reluctance raises a question mark against another aspect of his account. To consider this, however, it is necessary to examine the broader discussion that unfolds in the central books of the *Republic*.

II

Glaucon's agreement at 521d concludes a discussion that begins at 471c when Socrates is reminded that he has yet to explain how the ideal state might be realised. It will never see the light of day, he replies:

...till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands, while the many natures now content to follow either to the exclusion of the other are forcibly debarred from doing so. This is what I have hesitated to say so long, knowing what a paradox it would sound; for it is not so easy to see that there is no other road to real happiness, either for society or the individual. (473d-e)

Plato sets himself an immense task in this passage, not simply in view of the contempt in which the philosopher is commonly held – the topic on which Adeimantus will soon hold forth (cf. 487b-d) – but in view of the argument that is advanced in the dialogue as a whole regarding the nature of justice. Plato's ideal state is constructed on a definition of justice known variously as the Principle of Specialisation or the Natural Division of Labour. Each individual is to perform the single task for which by nature he is best suited: 'one man one job' (434c). Yet, in his insistence that the ideal state can only come about if rulers become philosophers and vice-versa, Plato would appear to predicate the realisation of the just state on the seeming *injustice* of a 'philosopherruler'; of one man with, in effect, two jobs (philosophising *and* ruling). Viewed in this light, the magnitude of Plato's task in the central books is clear. For the just state to possess a just philosopher-ruler, Plato has to show not simply that philosophy and ruling are mutually tolerant roles – that the philosopher should rule because he is best qualified to 'multitask' in this way – but that they constitute *one and the same role*. If this claim is not substantiated, then on Plato's own account of justice the realisation of the just state is significantly compromised.

In this connexion, the philosopher's reluctance to rule is of particular import. Plato argues that the philosopher's lack of enthusiasm for governance is supposed to

guarantee that, upon his return, the ideal state will not be riven by internal conflict. His experience of, and preference for, the life of philosophical contemplation will deter him from seeking self-satisfaction in the life of politics. Yet according to Plato's conception of justice, such 'multi-tasking' is 'the worst of evils,' and guaranteed to plunge the state into conflict and disharmony (434c). In short, it is a prescription for injustice. Far from fulfilling the task set out at 473d-e, Plato's insistence on the philosopher's reluctance suggests a calamitous irony: the philosopher is just – according to the 'one man one job' thesis – only if he refuses to rule and remains outside the cave. Does Plato's account of how the ideal state is realised founder on this irony? Does it betray Socrates' claim that, in expecting the philosopher to return to the cave, a just demand is made of just men?

III

It is in answer to these questions that we return to the matter of the philosopher's motivation. I suggested that the fact of the philosopher's suitability to rule is not in itself a reason why he need feel compelled to do so. Nor, incidentally, is Socrates' additional suggestion at 520b-c that the philosopher will feel obliged to repay the society that provided for his education; justice as the repayment of what one owes was dismissed at the beginning of Book I (cf. 331d). To discover the true source of the philosopher's motivation we need to consider the specific details of his education.

When Socrates says that, however reluctantly, the philosopher ruler will have to return to the cave, Glaucon raises his own cry of injustice. Picking up on the implication that the lives of philosophy and politics are distinct, he objects that 'we shall be compelling them to live a life poorer than they might live' (519d-e). Socrates replies:

The object of our legislation [...] is not the special welfare of any particular class in our society, but of the society as a whole; and it uses persuasion or compulsion to unite all citizens and make them share together the benefits which each individually can confer on the community; and its purpose in fostering this attitude is not to leave everyone to please himself, but to make each man a link in the unity of the whole. (519e-520a)

The recurrent suggestion that 'persuasion or compulsion' will be required to ensure that the philosopher fulfil his obligation is rather troubling. It is one thing to say that the philosopher will be reluctant to return but ultimately understand that it is his duty, quite another that force will be required. It is as though Plato does not fully appreciate the implications of his own account of the philosopher's education. On my argument, if, notwithstanding his reluctance, the philosopher requires 'persuasion or compulsion' to return, then he is not a philosopher; there is something fundamental he has failed to comprehend in the course of his education. To have properly understood the ascent out of the cave *is in itself* to have understood the duty to return and be motivated to obey it. Moreover, it is thus that the strict identity of the philosophical and the political demanded by the Principle of Specialisation is maintained.

What is it, then, that the true philosopher understands? It is agreed that the simile of the cave situates the ethical and epistemological concerns of the similes of the sun and of the divided line in a political context. Yet nothing specific is added in the detail of

the simile that points to its explicitly political implications. The reason for this, as the true philosopher understands, is that the duty and motivation to return is inscribed in the theory of the forms itself.

From the very beginning of Plato's account of the true philosopher at 474b, the latter is distinguished from the mere 'lovers of sights and sounds' (476b) by his ability to understand the relation between the 'one' and the 'many.'⁴ Each *eidos* or form, he says, is in itself 'single' or 'one', 'but they seem to be many because they appear everywhere in combination with actions and material bodies and with each other' (476a). However, the lover of sights and sounds does not understand this: 'Those who love looking and listening are delighted by beautiful sounds and colours and shapes [...] but their minds are incapable of seeing and delighting in the form of beauty itself' (476b). In short, they fail to understand the 'oneness' of the form in its 'many' sensible manifestations. The philosopher, on the other hand, 'believes in the form of beauty and can see both it and the particular things which share in it, and does not confuse particular things and that in which they share' (476d). He understands that two instances of beauty – to borrow Socrates' example – relate to each other not in terms of empirical resemblances between them, but in terms of their mutual participation in the form of beauty.

The process of understanding this relation is depicted in the philosopher's progress up the divided line and reiterated in a political context in the ascent out of the cave, culminating in the vision of the good in itself. The suggestion is that the relation between the form of the good and the other forms is analogous to the relation between the forms and their physical manifestations; the form of the good, as 'responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything' (517c), understood as the 'one' in which the 'many' forms participate or share.

It is often argued that the philosopher understands the imperative to return in relation to this vision of the good. As Julia Annas writes in her influential introduction to the *Republic*, the philosopher-rulers 'know what is just because they have the knowledge that is based on the form of the good. Their return is demanded by the justice that prescribes disinterestedly what is best for all.'⁵ On this reading, the philosopher's motivation is very abstract; he takes a wholly impersonal view of his interests and sets aside the life of contemplation because his judgements are made 'in the light of the impersonal good.'⁶ Yet for Annas such an account begs the question why the philosopher would wish to sacrifice himself in this manner ('why should *I* do what justice requires?').⁷ The argument that the philosopher-ruler would not perceive a conflict between justice and his own interest since he has been trained to understand himself as being 'merely' a part of the whole, is rejected on the grounds that it 'only raises the more urgently the question why in that case *I* should want to be a [philosopher-ruler].' 'Justice,' she says, alluding to the demand made of Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue (cf. 367d), 'was to have been shown to be in *my* interests. But now it requires that I abstract completely from my interests.'⁸

However, I would suggest that Annas's contention is predicated on what, from a Platonic point of view, is a false premise: that to understand oneself as part of a whole is thereby to be 'merely' a part, and that to 'cease to care about my own happiness in a specially intimate way' – i.e. as an atomistic individual – is to 'positively stop being human.'⁹ Whilst this may reflect Annas's conception of the human, it is not a

reflection of Plato's view. Regardless of the offence to our liberal-humanist sensibilities, it is essential to recognise this if we are to understand the philosopher-ruler's motivation. To this end, it is necessary to examine the philosopher's motivation not simply in relation to his crowning vision of the good, but his education in the forms as a whole. Recall Socrates' insistence that, in the just state, each man is a 'link in the unity of the whole.' It is a reminder that bears repetition, since in the light of the education in the forms it can be seen as the political counterpart of the epistemological relation between the one and the many.

By it, the philosopher understands his particularity – his belonging to the many – in relation to the one, to the community as a whole. Specifically, he understands his just participation in the whole as an obligation to rule. As in the epistemological relation between the particular and the form in which it participates, the philosopher understands that it is only in his proper participation in the whole that his own 'usefulness and value' (505a) is manifest. As a result, the philosopher-ruler does not consider his return to involve a personal loss or the means by which he surrenders his humanity and becomes 'merely' a part of the whole. Phrased otherwise, he does not equate acting in accordance with the good with acting impersonally. Rather – and most importantly – it is only in his return to the cave that he becomes properly human. This is not to suggest, however, that the philosopher's motivation is consequently selfish, where selfishness is understood as deficiency in one's consideration for others. He understands his good *as* the good of the whole.

Such an understanding accords with the account of justice in the state and the individual in Book IV. According to the Principle of Specialisation, every individual in the just state understands the role for which he is properly suited. The latter is determined by the predominance in the individual's soul of one of its three 'parts': the rational, the spirited, or the appetitive. The majority, those in whose souls the desiring part is dominant, enter the class of 'artisans and businessmen' (434b); those in whose souls the spirited part is dominant form the military class; and those few in whose souls the rational part is dominant will become the ruling class (the class later named philosopher-rulers). Strictly speaking, there are no just individuals; only the just state in which each individual component plays its proper role. Considered apart from the whole, each individual is, *qua* individual, 'unjust,' since as an individual he lacks the harmony that is only to be found in the just collective. No one is self-sufficient (cf. 396b). Whilst it is indeed Plato's view that the best soul is one in which the rational part of the soul predominates (441c-442d), that 'supremacy' is only meaningful in so far as the soul understands its proper relation to the whole. There is nothing 'impersonal' about this understanding; on Plato's terms it is the apogee of self-knowledge. It is what the philosopher-ruler understands, and it is the source of his motivation.

Thus, Glaucon's claim that an injustice is done to the philosopher in depriving him of the life of philosophical contemplation is a misnomer, and suggests that Glaucon has missed the point. What would be unjust is the disjunction between the philosophical and the political that his objection presupposes. However, as the Principle of Specialisation requires and as the education in the forms establishes, philosophising and ruling are one and the same task. Consequently, if, in insisting upon the

philosopher's reluctance, Plato maintains that the life of philosophy is separate from the life of politics, then we have to conclude that in this instance he creates an unnecessary tension in his own account. He underestimates the extent to which the preceding account provides an explanation of the philosopher's motivation to return, and why the call to do so is indeed a just demand made of just men.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the essay I proposed that, if Plato cannot provide an adequate account of why the philosopher-ruler returns to the cave that accords with his earlier definition of justice, then the theoretical coherence of the argument advanced in the middle books of the *Republic* is undermined. I argued that such an account is to be found in the detail of the philosopher's education. However, there is, I suggest, a practical price to pay for this theoretical coherence that in its turn compromises Plato's vision. It follows from the account of the philosopher-ruler that everything he needs in order to rule is contained in his education in the forms. It is thus that 'political power and philosophy come into the same hands,' and thus that the philosopher-ruler is motivated to return; yet it also the reason that we fear for the philosopher-ruler's chances of practical success. Why?

My concern centres on how the philosopher-ruler overcomes the hostility of his former fellows and establishes his authority. In Book IV we are told that in the ideal state governors and governed 'will agree about who ought to rule' (431e). But when in Book V attention turns to the practical matter of realising the ideal state there is a question mark over how this agreement is reached. The issue is highlighted in the simile of the ship (cf. 488a-489c). Ostensibly, the purpose of the simile is to account for why the philosopher is an outcast in contemporary society. The politicians of the day are compared to the crew who, though none of them understands the art of navigation, quarrel over who ought to command the ship. The philosopher is compared to the true navigator who has studied 'the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars,' and so on, but whom the crew regard as 'a word-spinner and a stargazer, of no use to them at all' (489a). On this scenario, we wonder what would happen if the true navigator resolved to assert his claim to the captaincy. On the face of it, there is little reason to suppose he would be successful. How is he to convince the crew that he is their rightful ruler? What means does he have at his disposal? The problem is that the navigator turns to the task unequipped with the rhetorical skills of persuasion or any other trick of the political trade that would appear essential if he is to obtain a hearing. It is difficult to conceive that he will not require such additional skills: the crew do not even believe that the art of navigation exists (cf. 488e). It seems that the best the navigator can hope for is to be ignored; should he persist, he will more than likely be thrown overboard.

Plato subsequently disputes this conclusion, though the basis on which he wishes to do so is unclear.¹⁰ At one point Socrates says that the populace will have to be 'compelled' to listen to the philosopher-ruler (499b). A little further on the suggestion is that the dominion of the philosopher-ruler will be recognised 'if instead of bullying [the masses] you are gentle with them, and try to remove their prejudice against learning and show them what you mean by philosophers' (499e- 500a). The latter would seem to be the only alternative available to the navigator, but again we wonder how he is supposed to go about the task.

As we have seen, there is a similar mix of optimism and pessimism in the simile of the cave. Socrates makes the point that upon his return the philosopher will ‘blunder and make a fool of himself’ (517d). But he adds that this stage is only temporary: in time the philosopher will re-acustom himself to the dark and ‘see a thousand times better’ than his former fellows (520e). Yet it is not the philosopher-ruler’s sight that is at issue; rather it is his ability to convince the prisoners of the clarity of his vision. Once again, it is difficult to deny that the more realistic possibility is the suggestion that ‘they would kill him if they could lay hands on him’ (517a). After all, he will challenge every conception the prisoners hold dear, and to have any chance of success it would appear imperative that he possesses the most sophisticated rhetorical and persuasive skills if he is to ‘turn’ them. Crucially, however, Plato’s account precludes the possibility of the philosopher-ruler being thus armed. The claim that the just state will only see the light of day when philosophers become rulers and rulers become philosophers, and ‘political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands’ (473d), demands the strict identification of the philosophical and the political: all the philosopher-ruler requires to rule must be contained in the education in the forms. For this education then to be appended by rhetorical skills that are inimical to it is to undermine this identification, and to render the saviour of the just state the epitome of injustice (philosopherruler *and* rhetorician). Consequently, the philosopher-ruler must return without such resources. Perhaps it is the recognition of this practical blind spot in his account that causes Plato to oscillate between optimism and pessimism when considering the prospects for the philosopher-ruler’s return. In the final analysis, it is difficult to sugar the pill. Little wonder if the philosopher appears reluctant.

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¹ Desmond Lee’s translation of the *Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) will be followed throughout, amended only when it is necessary to assist clarity of exposition.

² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §257.

³ Nicholas P. White, *A Companion to Plato’s Republic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 190.

⁴ Cf. John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 3rd ed. 1986), 382ff.

⁵ Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 266.

⁶ *Ibid.* 267.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* 268-69.

⁹ *Ibid.* 269.

¹⁰ Cf. White (*op. cit.*), 171-72.