



## Implementing the Ideal State

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# *Implementing the Ideal State*

GEORGE KLOSKO

WHAT I INTEND to demonstrate in this paper is that throughout his career, Plato was deeply concerned with a range of political problems for which he is commonly not given credit. Basically, I will argue that Plato was serious about implementing the ideal state sketched in the *Republic*, and that in his works we find a realistic assessment of the political obstacles that stood in the way of establishing it. However, not only is Plato frequently not cited for exploring these questions, but often, when his ideas along these lines are examined, they are discussed in a cursory, superficial fashion, while an increasing number of commentators has set about to dismiss them altogether. And so the task here is to show that in Plato's analysis of the question of implementing the ideal state can be found a political side to his political theory that is frequently overlooked, and what is more, that in his treatment of these questions Plato touches upon fundamental political truths, basic to any theory of radical reform.

## I

Plato's proposals concerning the implementation of the ideal state have been interpreted in a variety of ways through the years. To begin with, it seems that the traditional view, advanced in many familiar works on Plato's political theory and in many of the standard studies on other aspects of his thought as well, is that Plato is serious about implementing his ideal state, and though he does not

\* I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the anonymous referees of this journal for their helpful comments and suggestions.

have any great hopes that it will ever be realized, he does not think that it is absolutely impossible. This would seem to be the most obvious position on the question, since, as we shall see, this is basically what Plato says on the matter in the *Republic* itself, and the following scholars can be numbered among those holding this general view (which we can call the "traditional" view): Nettleship, Cornford, Barker, Sinclair and Raeder.<sup>1</sup> However, none of these authors goes into the matter in much detail or carries his analysis much beyond the specific claims advanced by Plato in his fullest discussion of this problem, in *Republic* V-VI (473-502). It seems to me that there is a context, a series of basic themes in Plato's political thought, in light of which this important section of the *Republic* must be interpreted. Because this context has been generally overlooked in traditional interpretations of this question, I find these accounts unsatisfactory. Moreover, it seems to me that the traditional view, as it has been traditionally expounded, is unable to offer an adequate response to scholars who contest this position, which, it seems, an increasing number has been doing. (For convenience, we can refer to their view as the "revisionist" view.) What I think can be shown is that if properly fleshed out and elaborated in light of the appropriate context in Plato's works, the traditional view is basically correct, and that modern "revisionist" interpretations of Plato's ideal state are based on various misconstruals of the *Republic*.

Those scholars I call "revisionists" believe that the *Republic* is not meant to contain practical political proposals, that Plato is not really serious about implementing the ideal state. They argue for this position on two basic grounds: (a) the ostensible structure of the argument in the *Republic*; and (b) the wild impracticality of many of Plato's proposals for his ideal state. These objections can be discussed in turn, though we shall see that the questions raised by (b)

<sup>1</sup> R. L. Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901), 211; F. M. Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), xv; Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (1937; rpt. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1957), 5; Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (London: Methuen & Co., 1918; rpt. 1947), 277-282; T. A. Sinclair, *A History of Greek Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1967), 157-9; Hans Raeder, *Platons Philosophische Entwicklung* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1905), 222. See also Werner Jaeger, (*Paideia*, 3 vols., trans. Gilbert Highet [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939-45], II, 278), who is more tentative than the authors listed. For an indication of how widespread this view seems to have been in 1957, see Raphael Demos, "Paradoxes in Plato's Doctrine of the Ideal State," *Classical Quarterly*, N.S. 7 (1957), 169.

are far more interesting than those centering on (a), and cut right to the heart of Plato's political theory.

To begin with (a), there can be no question but that the *Republic* is, at least ostensibly, a discussion of justice, and that this discussion informs the structure of the work. Glaucon and Adeimantus open Book II by demanding to be told the nature of justice and that it "pays", and it is in order to satisfy their demands that Socrates raises the question of the ideal state. Because justice in the city is easier to discern than justice in the soul, Socrates' strategy is to discuss the latter by means of the former (368c-369a). And so, because the *Republic* is an inquiry into the nature of justice, and it is ostensibly only to further this inquiry that the subject of the ideal state is raised, commentators have argued that Plato is not completely serious about the *Republic's* political proposals, that *the* theme of the *Republic* is justice, not political reform.<sup>2</sup> I believe that this argument is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. To begin with, it seems somewhat strained to argue that a given Platonic dialogue must have *one* theme, and so that because no other theme is *the* theme of the work, that these other themes are not to be taken completely seriously. Plato is notorious for not compartmentalizing the topics discussed in the different dialogues. To give the clearest example, the *Gorgias* is not about either rhetoric or the moral life, but about both.<sup>3</sup> And in the *Gorgias*, as so often in the dialogues, Plato's discussion of one of his themes works to broaden and deepen his treatment of the others. This kind of reciprocal enhancement is basic to Plato's technique.

There are other reasons why this revisionist argument is less than compelling. For even if the *Republic* is ostensibly an examination of the nature of justice and Plato's discussion of the ideal state is subordinated to this task, it is important to note that Plato finds it necessary to depart from this structure. The discussion of justice is carried on only in Books II-IV and VIII-IX, while Books V-VII are

<sup>2</sup> An extreme form of this position is presented by R. G. Hoerber, *The Theme of Plato's Republic* (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1944). See also W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962-78) IV, 470; I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962-63), I, 131; R. D. Levinson, *In Defense of Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 573-6; cf. Elizabeth Hansot, *Perfection and Progress: Two Modes of Utopian Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 13, 33-34.

<sup>3</sup> See E. R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 1-5.

formally an "interlude", a digression, prompted by the interruption of Polemarchos and Adeimantus and the three great "waves" of criticism they raise—including the one that is the "biggest and most difficult to deal with" (472a), the questions of whether it is possible for the city to exist and how it can be brought into existence (471c ff). It is to these questions that Plato ostensibly dedicates the remainder of Book V and all of Books VI and VII.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Plato finds it necessary to devote a substantial portion of the *Republic* to the question of implementation should go a long way towards countering arguments to the effect that political questions are discussed in the *Republic* only in order to advance the *real* argument of the work, which centers around justice—and any other variants of the argument that justice, not political reform, is *the* theme of the work. And as Demos notes, Plato's description of the ideal state is far too detailed and far too specific to be justified solely on the basis of what is needed for the argument that justice pays.<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that Barker is correct, that it is impossible to read the *Republic*—and others of Plato's works as well—"without believing that political reform was the pre-occupation of Plato's mind."<sup>6</sup> And I think it is clear that no argument resting primarily on the literary structure of the *Republic* is able to dispel this impression.

The other major argument against Plato's political seriousness in the *Republic* is that concerning the impracticality—many would say, impossibility—of various aspects of the political program advocated there. For instance, Guthrie questions the practicability of a political arrangement in which businessmen are barred from all political activity.<sup>7</sup> A more significant example, noted by a number of scholars, is Plato's proposal for bringing the ideal state into existence by rustivating everyone in the city over the age of ten, and then bringing up the next generation properly (*Rep* 541a). Crombie and Levinson adduce this proposal as evidence that, politically speaking, Plato could not be serious.<sup>8</sup>

An extreme form of the argument that the ideal state is impossible is advanced by Strauss and, following him, Bloom, and I believe that a suitable counter to their attack would also suffice to answer

<sup>4</sup> 471c-502c directly; 502c-541b indirectly.

<sup>5</sup> Demos, "Paradoxes," 169.

<sup>6</sup> Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, 277-78.

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie, *History*, IV, 469.

<sup>8</sup> Crombie, *Examination*, I, 131; Levinson, *Defense*, 348; see also Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 409.

other critics holding related (if less exaggerated) views as well. The arguments of Strauss and Bloom have become the focus of a good deal of attention and controversy in recent years, but for obvious reasons of space, I must confine discussion here to their central contentions.<sup>9</sup> Put very simply, Strauss and Bloom believe that the *Republic* is not intended by Plato to contain the blueprint for a realistically-conceived ideal state, but is, rather, a kind of satirical work that is ingeniously constructed to reveal the *impossibility* of the ideal state, in order to explore the limits of the politically possible. Their major support for this position consists of a battery of interpretations of specific details of the *Republic*, which, taken together, lead to the conclusion that the ideal state is obviously impossible—and therefore could not be intended to be taken seriously.<sup>10</sup>

Their case seems to me to be rather weak. Strauss and Bloom argue that the ideal state is impossible in two senses: (i) it contains features that are absurd and obviously could not work, even if the city were somehow brought into existence; (ii) the city could not possibly be brought into existence. Their evidence for (i) centers around the state's more peculiar institutional features, especially the community of the family discussed in Book V, which they read as some sort of burlesque of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, which discusses similar proposals.<sup>11</sup> But the point which Strauss and Bloom tend to overlook is Plato's tremendous faith in the plasticity of human nature and, consequently, in the power of education. Thus

<sup>9</sup> Some of their other arguments are discussed by Dale Hall, "The *Republic* and the 'Limits of Politics'," *Political Theory*, 5 (1977); there is a reply by Bloom in the same issue. One topic that is especially germane to the question of the validity of their arguments concerns their rather unusual method of interpretation; see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 50-62 and *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952); cf. Bloom, *Republic*, Preface. I believe that a fair assessment of Strauss' shortcomings as a commentator is given by Terence Irwin, in his review of *Xenophon's Socrates*, *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974). A bibliography of Strauss' work in Classical political theory and its many critics is found in *Polis*, 3 (1979-80), 28-34.

<sup>10</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 124-7, 138; Bloom, *Republic*, 407-12, esp. 409-10. A similar view is held by John H. Randall, *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 162-70.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, *Republic*, 380-88; Strauss, *City and Man*, 61, 116-18; Hall, "The *Republic* and the 'Limits of Politics'," 295-8; Bloom, "Reply to Hall," 323-9; cf. James Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), I, 345-55.

institutions and practices that might appear to be unnatural under present conditions would undoubtedly appear more reasonable if man's passions and desires were ordered differently. A related, though perhaps more interesting, line of attack is their contention that the city is absurd because it would make all its inhabitants, especially the philosophers, unhappy; that the just city is predicated upon an injustice to the philosophers.<sup>12</sup> But here, too, there is a reply. Even if the philosopher's happiness is to some extent sacrificed by his being forced to desert philosophy in order to rule, the obvious response is the one given by Plato (*Rep* 420b-421c), that the ideal state is designed not to make any one class happy, but for the good of all. In Plato's ideal city, as in all political arrangements, each individual is impelled to make certain sacrifices for the good of the whole. In Book I of the *Republic*, moreover, the reader is told an additional reason why the philosopher must make this sacrifice. For if he refuses to rule, he is subjected to a penalty of the severest kind, being governed by other men, who are less suited to rule and will not rule justly (347cd). Finally, one wonders how unwillingly the philosopher returns to the cave, in light of Plato's firm belief that an essential concomitant of knowing the good and the nature of true virtue is the desire to inculcate this virtue in others.<sup>13</sup> In these points, as it seems to me generally to be the case, Strauss and Bloom are guilty of focusing on isolated details of Plato's discussion and abstracting them from their overall context, at the expense of Plato's true meaning. And I believe that the other features they highlight as evidence of Plato's lack of political seriousness could be explained as well.

Turning to Strauss and Bloom's contention that the ideal state is not possible in sense (ii), that it can never be brought into existence, this raises the main focus of discussion throughout the remainder of this paper. It will be seen, I believe, that here, too, their position is not the most reasonable one, that, in fact, the ideal state *is* possible, though hardly likely to be realized. The attempt will be made to demonstrate that the *Republic* is not as utopian as Strauss and the other revisionists would allow — that, in fact, if properly developed, the traditional interpretation of Plato's political proposals is basically correct. From the outset, I must make it clear that I will not at-

<sup>12</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, 124; Bloom, *Republic*, 407-10.

<sup>13</sup> See *Symp* 212a2-5; Demos, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*?" *Philosophical Review*, 73 (1964); Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 169, 239-43.

tempt to show that the ideal state is a practical possibility—or that Plato ever thought it was. However, there is a wide range of possibilities between a completely visionary utopian dream on the one hand, and a completely practical proposal on the other. And I will attempt to situate Plato's *Republic* on this continuum with a certain degree of precision.

## II

In assessing the political theory of the *Republic*, I think it is well to begin with a basic distinction between the aspects of Plato's theory *he* would have considered utopian and those *we*—coming from our different historical perspective—would believe to be so. For it is hardly proper to argue that Plato is not serious about the political proposals put forth in the *Republic*, because he bases them on assumptions that *we* (but not he) would consider to be completely utopian. The main reason for bringing up this distinction is the fact that Plato bases much of the political theory of the *Republic* upon premises that we would tend to dismiss as impossible out of hand.

It is hardly open to question that, today, few would accept the entire range of Plato's philosophical premises, and since the days of Aristotle, much here has proved to be fruitful ground upon which to criticize his political theory. It is clear that Plato rests much of the political theory of the *Republic* upon the existence of full fledged philosophic rulers, and to the extent that critics of Plato focus on the feasibility of this kind of individual—and on the existence of the absolute truths that the philosophers incorporate into themselves—they are on fairly safe ground. But it seems clear that Plato took these basic premises of the ideal state very seriously. There can be no doubt as to the seriousness of his belief in a knowable, absolute moral truth, which, undoubtedly, must be taken to be one of the fundamentals of his teaching—especially in the middle dialogues.<sup>14</sup> As for the philosopher-king, the facts of Plato's life clearly bear out his faith here. We read in the *Seventh Epistle* about how, out of disillusionment with Athenian politics, Plato came to place his hope in the appearance of the philosopher-king, probably some thirteen years before the *Republic* was

<sup>14</sup> As Cornford says, the "twin pillars" of Platonic philosophy are the existence of the Forms and the immortality of the soul (*Republic*, xxvii; *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* [1934; rpt. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1957], 2).



written.<sup>15</sup> And so for many years Plato nursed and developed the idea that was to become the cornerstone of his masterwork, while there is strong evidence that, in the years following the completion of the *Republic*, the fact that Plato came to question the possibility of the philosopher-king led him to modify his political theory in fundamental respects.<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines, there can be little reason to doubt Plato's great faith in the malleability of man. Even if this belief is unfounded or untrue, it is central to the political theory of the *Republic*, and, as we have noted in criticizing Strauss and Bloom, it affords the explanation for many of the apparently peculiar institutions found in the ideal state. Thus, though we may believe Plato's psychological premises to be impossibly unrealistic, it seems that Plato himself did not, and for this reason they cannot be used as evidence that he was not serious about wishing to implement the ideal state. The same is true of the other points we have noted.

In order to assess properly the utopian character of the ideal state, we will examine Plato's proposals concerning its implementation in detail. For, obviously, if Plato believed it could be brought into existence, he did not consider it to be a completely visionary utopian dream. However, our task here is not nearly so simple, because Plato was far from confident that the ideal state could be implemented. But too much should not be made of this. One can distinguish various senses in which a theory can be utopian. What I will attempt to demonstrate is that Plato's ideal state is not utopian in two respects: (a) Plato is interested in realizing it; and (b) he has contemplated the political obstacles that stand in its way. This is not to say that the ideal state is not utopian in another sense, (c) that it will almost certainly never be realized. But though Plato's state will almost certainly not be realized, the matter cannot be allowed to rest here. For what interests us are the *reasons* Plato believes it cannot be brought into existence, and as we shall see, these are the same political impediments that confront any theory of radical reform. In brief, I will attempt to demonstrate that, in regard to Plato's ideal state, (a) and (b) are true. I am, of course, willing to

<sup>15</sup> According to the *Seventh Epistle* (326b), Plato had arrived at this view by the time he went to Sicily for the first time, in the year 387. The *Republic* should be dated around the year 374, which is Guthrie's estimate (*History*, IV, 437).

<sup>16</sup> See esp. *Laws* 874d-875d, 713c-714a; *Statesman* 268d-275c; and see below, n. 29. Plato's loss of faith in the possibility of the philosopher-king seems to be closely bound up with the general pessimism concerning human nature that pervades the *Laws* and the move to the "second best" state (see 739a-e, esp. 739d6).

concede that the state is utopian in sense (c), but demonstrating the truth of (a) and (b) is a significant accomplishment, for to achieve this is to reconfirm the traditional view against its revisionist attackers.

### III

An important point, and one not often realized, is that the political position of the *Republic* represents the rejection of a far more utopian position, that of Socrates—that of the historical Socrates, which is the position espoused in Plato's early dialogues.<sup>17</sup> The political position of Socrates centers around the peculiar elenctic mission to which he devoted the final decades of his life. For that mission—Plato's fullest account of which is presented in the *Apology* and in the pursuit of which he depicts Socrates in a number of dialogues—was a political undertaking of the highest order, an attempt to reform the lives of his fellow citizens—and of his city as a whole. However, Socrates' mission was "political" in a somewhat peculiar sense, in that it represented an attempt to reform the individuals of his society *without recourse to political means*, through the technique of logical persuasion, logical argumentation alone. In the *Apology*, Socrates describes his mission as follows:

... I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls . . . (30ab).  
 . . . and I go about arousing and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long (30e-31a).

Socrates directs his message at each of the Athenians in turn. He is indiscriminate, addressing all individuals who cross his path, taking each aside "individually like a father or an elder brother" (*Ap* 31b), urging each to care for virtue. As Cornford notes, this mission must be understood as nothing less than an attempt to reform his *city* indirectly, by reforming the individuals who composed it.<sup>18</sup> In the

<sup>17</sup> Throughout this paper, I distinguish between Socrates and Plato. Though I cannot discuss the Socratic problem here, I must mention that—along with the dominant trend in current Plato-scholarship—I assume that at least one important purpose of the early dialogues is the representation of the historical Socrates, as Plato perceived him—and that this historical aspect of the dialogues is largely abandoned with the middle works. The Socratic problem is discussed at length in Guthrie, *History*, Vol. III.

<sup>18</sup> Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 59-60.

pursuit of this mission, Socrates spent some thirty years of his life.<sup>19</sup>

The political character of Socrates' mission should not be overlooked simply because Socrates rejects traditional political means. Both in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*, he dissociates himself from the Athenian political process, arguing that it is hopelessly corrupt and that an honest man pursuing justice "within the system" would be committing suicide.<sup>20</sup> Thus it might seem puzzling to say that Socrates' life was a life of never-ending political activity, but this is precisely the claim he makes in the *Gorgias*:

I think I am one of the few, not to say the only one, in Athens, who attempts the true art of statesmanship, and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state; hence, as the speeches that I make from time to time are not aimed at gratification, but at what is best instead of what is most pleasant . . . (521d).

The apparent conflict here is not irreconcilable. One must only bear in mind that Socrates pursued a political end, the reform of his fellow citizens, without recourse to political means. He lived and died in the conviction that logical arguments alone were enough to sway people to the pursuit of virtue.

It is clear that at the time he wrote the *Republic*, Plato regarded the Socratic position as completely unworkable. Just as the introduction of the tripartite soul in *Republic IV* must be read as the decisive rejection of the fundamental principles of Socratic psychology,<sup>21</sup> Plato's new implementation theory, centering around the philosopher-king, must be seen as the rejection of Socratic political tactics. This is seen especially clearly in *Republic VI*, in Plato's discussion of the possibility of implementing the just state, in his analysis of the parable of the ship of state. In particular, in explaining one main moral of the parable, the fact that those individuals with philosophic natures generally end up completely corrupted in existing society, Plato presents a strong argument as to why the Socratic theory of implementation could not possibly succeed.

<sup>19</sup> John Burnet, "The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 7 (1915-6), 238-40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ap* 31c-32e; *Grg* 512d-519d, 521b-522a, 471e-472b.

<sup>21</sup> As espoused most fully in *Prt* 351b-360e; this is analyzed at length in my article, "On the Analysis of *Protagoras* 351b-360e," *Phoenix* 34 (1980). The argument that the *Republic* represents the repudiation of this position is made by Max Pohlenz, *Aus Platos Werdezeit* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1913), 156-7; James Walsh, *Aristotle's Conception of Moral Weakness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), Chapters I, II; and many others.

Plato's discussion here is based on one of his fundamental principles, the importance of the role played by the environment in the development of every living thing, plant or animal. Plato is convinced that, in order for a given being to grow up correctly, it must receive proper nurture, and the greater the potential good in a given nature, the worse it will turn out if it does not receive this, if it is corrupted by its environment. It is in keeping with this principle that *Socrates*<sup>22</sup> argues that, because the potential philosopher has a superior natural disposition and because society is almost always corrupt and virtually always corrupts him, he generally ends up prodigiously bad (491a-92b). According to *Socrates*, the force that is most instrumental in ruining the potential philosopher is public opinion, the all-pervasive spirit of the state. As he sees things, the entire Demos is a huge Sophist, teaching a pale shadow of true virtue. Through the power of public approval and disapproval it is able to mold the potential philosopher in its own image (492a-d). And in order to educate even a single individual against the tide of the many, a private teacher must compete with the resources of the state, but the outcome is preordained: "There is not, has never been, and will never be produced a character different (from the many) in respect of virtue by having been educated on principles opposed to theirs" (492e; mod.). "Our young man will then follow the same pursuits as the crowd, and be the same kind of man? — Quite inevitably, *Socrates*" (492cd). Only divine intervention can save even a single soul.

It is clear, then, that Plato believes a mission such as *Socrates'* to be foredoomed to failure. The upshot of his discussion (esp. 492a-494a) is that the irresistible force of the mob molds everything in its own image. And not only is the potential philosopher not exempt from such treatment, but he is singled out for special attention; fawners, flatterers, and hangers-on, perceiving his great potential and wishing to cash in on it themselves, inevitably corrupt him. Such a man is not easily saved. If someone came to the would-be philosopher and told him the truth about the wretchedness of his condition and how he could acquire true virtue, there is no chance that he would listen (494d). Even if he could be influenced initially, "because of his noble nature and its kinship with reasonable

<sup>22</sup> Throughout the remainder of this paper, I use the convention, *Socrates*, to refer to the Platonic *Socrates* (of the middle and late dialogues), when he is placed in explicit opposition to the *Socrates* of the early dialogues (and/or the historical *Socrates*).

discourse," that would not be the end of the matter. Those people wishing to make use of him, infuriated at the thought of losing him, would do anything, say anything, to make sure the persuader would not succeed. They would go so far as to bring the persuader to court to prevent him from winning the youth over (494de). And for all readers of the *Republic*, the fate of the historical Socrates is there to remind them how vulnerable the philosophic reformer is.

Despite all of the impediments, a few true philosophers do manage to survive in society unscathed. Some are held back from politics by illness, or banishment, or the kind of direct divine intervention represented by Socrates' *daimonion* (496a-c). Such men as these are indeed useless to the state, as the true philosopher neither engages in traditional politics—nor undertakes the private politics of a Socratic mission. Taking stock of his situation, the true philosopher "keeps quiet and minds his own business": "Like a man who takes refuge under a small wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, and seeing other men filled with lawlessness, the philosopher is satisfied if he can somehow live his present life free from injustice and impious deeds, and depart from it with a beautiful hope, blameless and content" (496de).

Thus, Plato realizes that the philosopher is powerless to persuade the corrupted individuals of a corrupt society to care for virtue. Not even the potential philosopher, who is naturally responsive to the pull of reason, can be won over. Because a society's souls reflect the city that has shaped them, the people of a corrupt city suffer from disorders that cannot be remedied by reason alone. Indeed, in keeping with his belief that people's moral make-up is decisively influenced in their early years,<sup>23</sup> Plato argues that people raised in a corrupt society are impervious to all reform. Accordingly, he moves away from a theory of moral *reform* to a theory as to how moral individuals can be *formed*. Upholding a position reminiscent of Moses in the Old Testament, Plato argues that the old generation must be sent away, while the moral reformer begins anew with the children. For only they have the potential to be raised to some semblance of the moral life.

In moving away from the Socratic position, Plato moves to the fundamental political teaching of the *Republic*. And here we find a powerful position, demonstrating an awareness of the important political impediments to moral reform. Not only are Plato's

<sup>23</sup> See *Rep* 377ab, 401d-402a, 424e-425a, etc.; cf. *Laws* 789a-792e.

arguments immeasurably superior to the naive optimism of Socrates, but in many ways they anticipate the teachings of the great political theorists in the tradition of radical reform.<sup>24</sup>

According to Plato's new position, the philosopher must reform his state as a whole. He cannot rest content with the attempt to reform isolated individuals, which, as we have seen, he takes to be a fruitless endeavor. In light of his strong emphasis on the effects of the social environment on the souls of the inhabitants of a city, Plato insists that the would-be moral reformer must have complete control over his entire society. As Plato sees it, souls are the products of an all-embracing social spirit, and it is this spirit that must be reformed. In the *Republic* Plato advocates radical reform—and is, perhaps, its most uncompromising advocate in the annals of political theory.

Plato argues most fully for the necessity of radical reform in an important passage in Book IV (423c-427a). According to the argument here, it is only through a thoroughly radical reform and the inauguration of a proper system of education that a social spirit could be created that would cause the state to function effectively. If, on the other hand, suitable education was not established, the situation would be virtually hopeless. The old corrupt social spirit would predominate and render any piecemeal attempt to improve things futile. Legislation could not hope to cure the ills that beset society, for the corrupt state would undertake an endless process of making laws and amending them, without being able to touch the fundamental ills that eat at the heart of society. Only if the state was reformed root and branch and reconstructed from the bottom up would there be hope.<sup>25</sup> Just as the corrupt state of Book VI inevitably twists the souls of its members, so the ideal state sketched in the *Republic* will make them good—as long as the all-important

<sup>24</sup> I must make it clear that I am not suggesting that Plato's arguments are in any way objectively "correct", that, in fact, in order to reform a corrupt state, one must do what Plato says. However, and this is the crucial point, Plato does advance serious arguments, which are worthy of more consideration than they generally receive from political theorists. I believe that Plato's works can be read with profit in the context of the great political theorists of radical reform, e.g., Machiavelli, Rousseau, Marx, Lenin, etc.

<sup>25</sup> This argument is the counter Plato would give to the famous argument of Karl Popper that opposes radical reform in favor of "piecemeal engineering;" see *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), Vol. I, Ch. 9: "Utopianism."

system of education is preserved and maintained. For Plato, the moral character of a society is a product of society as a whole. As he says in Book IV: "The final outcome is one complete and vigorous product, of good or the reverse" (425c; Shorey, tr.).

In order to create a society that is moral, the philosophers must initiate a thoroughly radical reform. They "would take the city and men's characters as a drafting board, and first of all they would clean it (*καθαρὸν ποιήσεσθαι*) which is not at all easy" (501a). "[T]hey would refuse to touch a city or an individual or to write laws, unless they either take over a clean surface to work on or clean it themselves" (501a; mod.). At the end of Book VII, Plato specifies the means they must pursue; the older generation, irredeemably corrupt, must be sent away:

All in the city . . . over ten years of age they will send into the country. Then they will take the children in hand, away from their parents' way of life, and bring them up in their own ways and by their own laws which will be such as we have described. This is the quickest and the easiest way to establish the city and constitution we have discussed, for it to be happy and to confer the greatest benefits upon the people among whom it may be established (541a).

The philosopher-king is likened by Plato to an artist; his role is to be a "craftsman (*δημιουργὸν*) of moderation and of popular virtue generally" (500d). Like the *demiourgos* in the creation myth of the *Timaeus* (28a ff.), he orders the undifferentiated material of this world—in his case human material, the souls of his subjects—after the pattern of the Forms. In the *Gorgias*, the proper rulers are compared to painters, builders, shipwrights, and other *demiourgoi*. Since the virtue of the soul, like that of anything else, "is a matter of regular and orderly arrangement" (506e), it is the job of a true ruler to impose this order upon the souls entrusted to him. In the *Republic*, the philosopher-kings are described along similar lines. They are "painters who use the divine model" in their sketching (500e):

. . . as they work, they would keep looking back and forth to Justice, Beauty, Moderation, and all such things as by nature exist, and they would compose human life with reference to these, mixing and mingling the human likenesses from various pursuits, basing their judgment on what Homer too called the divine and godlike existing in man.

Rightly.

They would erase one thing and draw in another, I think, until they had made human characters as dear to the gods as possible (501b).

These analogies are important for the light they cast upon the

relationship between the ruler of the ideal state and his subjects. The subjects are the *subject matter* upon which their ruler-craftsman works.<sup>26</sup> The familiar Platonic doctor-patient analogy is similarly revealing in regard to the essentially passive nature of the patient.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that once the ideal state is underway, the philosopher-kings find themselves in an exalted position. The state as a whole is structured so as to afford the easiest possible rule of their divine wisdom. Virtually all possible causes of difficulty are eliminated in the initial purge.<sup>28</sup> Having a clean slate to work with, the philosophers are able to bring up a new generation, instilling in them as much of true virtue as is humanly possible. And throughout the life of the state, the philosophers reign with total power. They are free of any institutional checks. Through control of education—and a program of rigid censorship—they are able to indoctrinate their fellow citizens and, if necessary, to deceive them as well. The class of Auxiliaries, clearly the most powerful group in the state in terms of brute force, is totally under their control and totally loyal. In all these ways, then, the ideal state is so designed as to put the philosophers in complete charge of things—to place them in that relationship of total control that an artist bears to his material. This is the basic framework around which the political theory of the *Republic* is structured.<sup>29</sup>

The problem with all this, however, is that the philosopher must somehow succeed in elevating himself to this position. He must attain absolute power in his state, if he is to duplicate the relationship that the artist bears to his material. And so Plato recognizes that the radical reformer requires political power. *He also recognizes that the philosopher is almost inevitably destined to fail as a reformer because there is no way he can attain this power.* The point I wish to stress is that Plato's political theory is virtually unworkable in the real world, not because it is an unworkable

<sup>26</sup> As Paul Shorey notes, in the *Republic* Plato applies the language of the theory of Forms to the "social tissue" "exactly as he applies it to the making of a tool in the *Cratylus* 339c" (*Republic*, 2 vols., Loeb edition [London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1930-35], II, 70 n.c.).

<sup>27</sup> For this analogy in Plato's later works, see *Statesman* 296a-297b; cf. 276de (note the important contradiction; cf. below 383-384). Cf. *Laws* 720b-d; cf. 874e-875d.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Laws* 736c-737b, 684de; cf. 744a-c.

<sup>29</sup> An additional indication of the centrality of the role of the philosopher-king in the *Republic* is the direct connection found in the *Laws* between the impossibility of finding a true philosopher and the need to abandon the ideal state in favor of the permanent institutional structure of the "second best" state; see 874e-875d.



theory—aside from the specific aspects mentioned above (which Plato undoubtedly believed in at the time he wrote the *Republic*)—but because of the *political* problems the reformer must overcome in order to implement it.

#### IV

It is with trepidation that, in *Republic V*, Plato approaches the question of implementing the just state. He makes use of a different aspect of the analogy of the artist. A man is no less a painter, *Socrates* asserts, if, having painted the model of a beautiful man and rendered all the details correctly, he cannot prove that such a man can come into being (472d). The same principle applies to the city he has been describing. “Do you think our discussion less worthwhile if we cannot prove that it is possible to found a city as we described?” (472e). The question of realizability, as Plato actually formulates it, is to discover the “smallest change that would enable a city to reach our type of government” (473bc). But in the *Republic*, Plato is not interested in compromise, and, as we have seen, the state he has outlined in theory can come into existence only through a thoroughly radical reform. Plato is, however, willing to compromise in one respect. He realizes that the ideal state as described in theory can never exist precisely (πᾶντῶσιν) in practice. And so the reformer of an actual state must necessarily settle for some approximation of the ideal (473ab).

The problem, then, is to discover “how the administration of a city can come closest to our theories” (473a). This is answered by the paradox of the philosopher-king. There is one change, says *Socrates*, that is “certainly neither small nor easy, but it is possible” (473c):

Cities will have no respite from evil . . . nor will the human race, I think, unless philosophers rule as kings in the cities, or those whom we now call kings and rulers genuinely and adequately study philosophy, until, that is, political power and philosophy coalesce, and the various natures of those who now pursue the one to the exclusion of the other are forcibly debarred from doing so. Otherwise the city we have been describing will never grow into a possibility or see the light of day (473cd).

The paradox of the philosopher-king is, of course, familiar. It is restated a number of times in the central Books of the *Republic*, and found in the *Seventh Epistle* as well.<sup>30</sup> In it is contained Plato’s

<sup>30</sup> See *Rep* 499b, 499cd, 501e, 540d; *Ep* 7 326ab. Throughout the *Republic*, Plato is indifferent to whether there is one philosopher-king or many; see 445d, 540d, 587d; and see Adam, *Republic*, on 445d.

prescription for political action. The ideal city will be realized in practice whenever the Muse of Philosophy takes control of a city. For this to happen, philosophy and political power must coalesce (*συνέσει*). It is important to realize that this can happen *in either of two ways*: if kings become philosophers, or if philosophers become kings. Although once the ideal state has been established along the guidelines Plato sketches, it will not make a bit of difference in which of the two ways the state was founded, insofar as the actual realization of the state is concerned, it makes all the difference in the world. Two entirely different sets of political problems are involved. Transforming a king into a philosopher involves convincing one man, who is already in power, to follow the path of justice. Transforming a philosopher into a king, on the other hand, involves the political problems a specific individual or group of individuals must overcome in order to secure power. Although either way one turns the problems are virtually insoluble, Plato realizes that these are *political* problems. They are not to be overcome in the world of rarefied deductions, but in the world of facts. The philosopher must enter this world and emerge with power, and depending on which of the two possible ways he turns, the problems he faces are quite different.

In all probability, Plato arrived at the paradox of the philosopher-king as the result of a process of elimination. As we shall see from a brief look at his *Seventh Epistle*, he had nowhere else to turn, and it was only when other possibilities had vanished that he came to propound this paradox. The major trouble with the paradox is that it, too, is virtually impossible to achieve in the real world; and so, in the long run, the philosopher is left with nowhere at all to go. But this is not to say that Plato was not *interested* in establishing the ideal state. Rather, it is only to realize what Plato himself was to discover. Because of intractable political obstacles, if the moral reform outlined in the *Republic* is to be realized in the world of men, it must wait upon the agency of more than human forces.

As we have said, Plato is convinced that the philosopher cannot hope to reform society—indeed even to save isolated individuals—without recourse to political means. He sees no good coming from a Socratic-type mission of reform. Though Plato nowhere discusses the remaining alternatives in any systematic fashion, we are able to get a fairly good idea of his thoughts on the subject from *Republic* V and VI, in which implementation is discussed, and from some of his other works, especially the *Seventh*

*Epistle*. What we find is a far cry from optimism. As the philosopher is barred from a Socratic-type mission, other possible courses are also closed to him. First of all, as we have noted, he cannot hope to accomplish anything by working within the political system. In a democracy, especially a corrupt democracy, the successful politician must pander to the mob. Socrates realized this, and in the *Apology* he gives this as his reason for not pursuing a political career (*Ap* 31c-33b). In a corrupt city, the successful politician — a Pericles, a Themistocles, or some equivalent — can win the favor of the mob only by means of an exceptional talent to gratify its harmful desires.<sup>31</sup> If the philosopher is not willing to indulge in such pursuits, he cannot hope for political success, while to work to oppose such measures would mean certain death. Thus, Socrates was forced to steer a private course, and the ironic fact is that this could not possibly have worked any better.

Additional factors work against attempting reform through the political machinery of a society. As we have said, ordinary legislative measures cannot achieve anything of value in a corrupt society. Such a society is fundamentally defective, and it requires fundamental reform. The mob, however, considers as its "worst enemy" anyone who tries to convince it of this (*Rep* 426a). It would undoubtedly resist any political figure who attempted such measures, and so the philosopher in politics is no better off than the philosopher outside politics. In the *Seventh Epistle*, we see that Plato arrived at his paradox of the philosopher-king when he realized that ordinary political solutions could not possibly work.

In this *Epistle*, Plato explains how he came to be disillusioned with Athenian politics (324b-325c). He recounts how, as a member of a well-connected family, he had as a young man thought about entering public life. In the turbulent period at the end of the Peloponnesian Wars — when he was in his early twenties — Plato was given what seemed like a golden opportunity to do so. A small group of men, the Thirty, overthrew the democratic constitution that had been in force for most of the Fifth Century, seized absolute power, and invited him to join them. Plato stood back to see what would happen, and he watched with horror as the reign of justice he had hoped for and anticipated degenerated into a reign of terror, which made the preceding constitution look like a golden age.

When the Thirty was overthrown and the democracy restored,

<sup>31</sup> See *Grg* 515c-517c (esp. 517bc); cf. *Rep* 493a-d (and cf. note 20, above).

again Plato “felt the desire, though this time less strongly, to take part in public and political affairs” (325ab). Though this regime proved to be far superior to the one it replaced, “certain powerful persons” in the democracy engineered the prosecution, conviction, and death of Socrates, and Plato’s disillusionment with politics was complete:

The more I reflected upon what was happening, upon what kind of men were active in politics, and upon the state of our laws and customs, and the older I grew, the more I realized how difficult it is to manage a city’s affairs rightly. . . . At last I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune; . . . (325c-326a).

The miraculous remedy in which Plato came to lodge his hopes was the convergence of political power and philosophy, i.e., the philosopher-king (326ab). And in this passage, Plato so much as tells the reader that his reliance on the philosopher-king was forced upon him by the sorry state of ordinary political affairs. Because the usual remedies could not work, he was forced to rely on “some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune.”<sup>32</sup>

As we have said, the philosopher-king can be brought into existence in either of two ways: either philosophers can become kings, or kings can become philosophers. The problem of how a philosopher attains political power is one that Plato does not consider in the *Republic*. In light of the fact that he says nothing about the use of violent means to attain it—the means attempted by Syracuse by his friend and pupil, Dion<sup>33</sup>—it seems probable that he would not approve of their use. But it is not possible to state Plato’s position on this question with assurance.

There is good evidence that Socrates was opposed to the use of violence to accomplish reform—especially violence directed at one’s homeland. In a well-known passage in his “dialogue” with the “Laws of Athens” in the *Crito*, Socrates states the basic principles of the limits of civil disobedience, according to which he lived and died. The position taken here is that, should someone disagree with an ordinance of his city, he must either convince his city through persuasion that he is right, or, if he is not able to, he must submit to her will (51bc). This position on the question of violence is in keeping with Socrates’ attempt to reform his fellow citizens through the

<sup>32</sup> In this *Epistle*, Plato reaffirms in the strongest possible terms his belief that the philosopher cannot hope successfully to take part in politics; 330c-331d.

<sup>33</sup> See Plutarch’s life of Dion; for Plato’s reaction to Dion’s plan, see *Ep* 7 350b-e.

use of persuasive means alone.<sup>34</sup> But whether this was the attitude of Plato as well is far more difficult to determine.

From the evidence of the *Seventh Epistle*, it would seem that Plato remained faithful to the position of his teacher. In this *Epistle* he asserts that one should attempt to warn his city if he thinks it corrupt "and there is a prospect that his words will be listened to and not put him in danger of his life" (331cd). But if persuasion will not work: "let him not use violence upon his fatherland to bring about a change of constitution. If what he thinks is best can only be accomplished by the exile and slaughter of men, let him keep his peace and pray for the welfare of himself and his city" (331d). It is worth noting that the last lines of this quotation almost echo the prescription Plato offers the true philosopher in the *Republic* (above, 376). The problem, however, is that, in the *Statesman*, written some time during the period between the composition of the *Republic* and that of the *Seventh Epistle*,<sup>35</sup> Plato is less squeamish about philosophic violence. The basic argument here is that in governing a state, the end justifies the means. Since the end of government, the betterment of the people, is the only factor to be considered, the question of how this end is to be accomplished is open, and among the means Plato countenances are putting citizens to death or banishing them (293de).<sup>36</sup> An indication that this was the attitude Plato held at the time he wrote the *Republic* is the fact that, in that work, he is willing to resort to drastic measures indeed against the population of the soon-to-be reformed state.

It seems to me that the decisive consideration in determining Plato's position on this question in the *Republic* is the fact that he does not say anything about the philosopher using force to seize power in the *Republic*. Here, I believe, is one case in which we must be guided by the argument from silence, but it is interesting that Plato seems to shy away from this alternative. For given the premises he has laid down, this would seem to be the obvious solution to his problem. If the philosopher requires political power,

<sup>34</sup> That this was the view of the historical Socrates is confirmed by the evidence of Xenophon (*Mem* 1.2.10-11).

<sup>35</sup> *Epistle Seven* was probably written in 354 or 353; see Glenn Morrow *Plato's Epistles* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962), 45. As noted above (note 15), the date of the *Republic* must be set some time around the year 374. The *Statesman* seems to fall some time during this twenty year period, most probably 366-62; see J. B. Skemp, *Plato's Statesman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 13-17.

<sup>36</sup> See 296a-297b, 292a-293e. Plato's attitude in the *Laws* seems to be that of *Ep* 7; see 719e ff. (also 874e-875d).

why does he not just take it? Had Plato followed up the implications of this line of argument, he would have found himself on territory close indeed to that of the more traditional political theorists of radical reform. But, for whatever reasons, Plato rejects this alternative. Perhaps he does so for moral reasons, disapproving (at the time he wrote the *Republic*) of “the exile and slaughter of men” on principle, or perhaps because in his youth he saw, in the Thirty, how political coups tend to end up – while the fate of Dion in Sicily would have more than confirmed his darkest fears. In any event, the fact that Plato deprives his philosopher of the resort to force places him in an impossible position. He cannot undertake a Socratic-type mission of reform, nor can he hope to wield influence within the political system. If he cannot attempt a seizure of power, the philosopher has nowhere left to turn. And so he must indeed “keep quiet and mind his own business;” all other options seem to be closed to him.

There is, however, one remaining possibility, and this takes us to the other main alternative. Even if the philosopher cannot hope to rise to power, he can hope to influence those who are in power – even granted the severe difficulties he would encounter of the kind sketched in *Republic VI*. It is apparently upon this alternative that Plato lodges his hope for the founding of the “second-best city” in the *Laws*, (709c-711c), while this probably lay behind his second trip to Sicily as well (see below, 387-388). In addition, there is good evidence that Plato founded the Academy as a training ground for future statesmen – for advisers of rulers.<sup>37</sup> But Plato does not pursue this line of approach in the *Republic* either, probably, it seems to me, because he does not see this as being able to yield anything resembling the program of radical reform he has in mind.

Plato lodges whatever hope he has in the possibility of a philosopher-king in the possibility of a king becoming a philosopher. Though the chances of this ever coming about are pitifully slim, it is not impossible, and it is the fact that it is not impossible that Plato

<sup>37</sup> See Guthrie, *History*, IV, 23-4; J. S. Morrison, “The Origin of Plato’s Philosopher-Statesman,” *Classical Quarterly*, N.S. 8 (1958). Aristotle is said to have argued with his pupil, Alexander, “that for kings to be philosophers was neither necessary nor even helpful: ‘what was really necessary was that they should be willing to hear and ready to accept the advice of genuine philosophers.’” (From Themistius, *Oratio* 8; quoted by Barker, *From Alexander to Constantine* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956] 205 n. 1; see Barker, 205-7).

chooses to emphasize. However, unlike the other alternative—the philosopher becoming king—hoping for a king to be born with a philosophic nature leaves the existing philosopher in the unhappy situation of waiting upon events beyond his control. Direct divine intervention is required—as is seen in language that Plato uses to describe this possibility.<sup>38</sup> But still, it is upon this hope that Plato bases his argument for the realizability of the just state.

Plato presents this argument in Book VI. He argues only for the possibility of a king becoming a philosopher. What is needed to achieve this is a series of lucky accidents, and no one can possibly prove that such a sequence of events is impossible.

First, no one would contend that there is no chance that the sons of kings and dynasts could be born with the philosophic nature (502a). Second, no one could possibly prove that, if so born, they must all be corrupted. *Socrates* knows that it would be difficult for a potential philosopher to escape corruption, but still: “could anyone maintain that, in the fullness of time, not one could ever be saved?” (502ab). If, in the fullness of time, one should be saved, the next step is not impossible either; “one such individual, if his city obeyed him, would be sufficient to bring about all the measures which now seem incredible[.]” (502ab). But would his city obey him? Again, this is not impossible: “If he was in power . . . and established those laws and institutions which we have described, it is not impossible that the citizens would be willing to act accordingly” (502b). That the entire citizen body over the age of ten would willingly go out into the fields never to return does strain one’s credulity; but perhaps it is not absolutely impossible.

At this point it is fairly clear that Plato is grasping at straws. Not only is he basing his case on one highly unlikely occurrence after another, but he is pyramiding them. Each improbable event is dependent on all the ones that precede it, and so the odds against Plato’s miracle increase not arithmetically but geometrically. But the series is complete. Is it possible that the citizenry would be willing to obey their philosophic ruler? It is not impossible. “Would it be astonishing and impossible,” *Socrates* asks, “that others should think as we do?” (502b). “I do not think so,” *Adeimantus* replies, and *Socrates* concludes: “our plan would be best if it could be realized and . . . this realization is difficult yet not impossible” (502c; Shorey tr.).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See *Rep* 499b; *Ep* 7 326b; also *Rep* 592a, 492e-493a, 492a.

<sup>39</sup> The revisionists, who dismiss the possibility of the state out of hand and go so far

It is clear that Plato has little hope for his ideal state. Instead of arguing that its realization is possible, he demonstrates only that is not impossible, and he must go to extreme lengths to prove even this. Presumably, the philosopher-ruler would have recourse to means—perhaps violent means—that the philosopher without power does not have.<sup>40</sup> All he would have to do is to purge his city of its corruption, to rusticate all citizens over the age of ten. And although it seems almost beyond comprehension that he would be able to accomplish this, Plato is probably right. It is not absolutely, 100 percent impossible.

This is the position that Plato takes throughout almost the whole of the *Republic*. “It is not impossible,” he writes in Book VI, “and our talk is not of impossible things. That it is difficult we ourselves agree” (499d). This is also asserted at the end of Book VII: “these things are difficult, but somehow possible. . .” (540d). Plato’s last word on the subject, found at the end of Book IX (592ab), is, however, more akin to despair. The tone in this well-known passage is different from that of defiant hope expressed through the rest of the *Republic*, and this seems to indicate that Plato had at least some trouble believing that the ideal state is not impossible after all.

As we have seen, the real hope that Plato maintains throughout most of the *Republic* is the conversion of a king into a philosopher. It was in keeping with this idea that he journeyed to Sicily for the second time, in the year 367, with the intention of winning over the young tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius II, to philosophy. The events that occurred are recounted in the *Seventh Epistle*.

At this point in his life Plato was about sixty years old and he seems to have lost faith in the possibility of a full-fledged philosopher-king.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it seems that his hope was more to be able to influence Dionysius, to have him *listen* to a philosopher, than actually to convert him into a philosopher-king. The evidence of the *Epistles*—the *Eighth* as well as the *Seventh*—makes it seem highly unlikely that Plato had any hope of implementing the ideal

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as to doubt that Plato is serious when he talks about implementation, seem to me simply to overlook this argument (for references, see above, notes 2, 7, 8, 10; further references are available in Guthrie, *History* IV, 483 n. 3). To cite the clearest example, Hansot seems to me to be seriously mistaken in her assertion that “the problem of how to bring about utopia is one that Socrates deliberately sets aside” (*Perfection and Progress*, 34). Cf. Bloom, *Republic*, 401.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Laws* 711b-d.

<sup>41</sup> See above, note 16.



state of the *Republic* as written. Far more modest goals were undoubtedly in his mind.<sup>42</sup> But, despite the clear injunction of *Republic* VI, Plato decided to seize this opportunity to bring about some accord between philosophy and politics.

A complete account of Plato's experience in Sicily is readily available in the *Seventh Epistle*, and it is not necessary to review it here.<sup>43</sup> Let it suffice to say that Plato had grave doubts about being able to accomplish even the limited goals he had in mind. He distrusted the characters of young men, "for their desires arise quickly and often change to their contraries" (328b). But he found sufficient reason to go, especially (and ironically, given what he says in *Republic* VI) the desire not to disgrace philosophy—lest he be branded "a pure theorist, unwilling to touch any practical task" (328c).

Though, in almost Socratic style, Plato attempted to win over Dionysius through the use of arguments, he did not attempt to use the Socratic elenchus. Instead, it seems, he devoted the better part of his efforts to establishing the *preconditions* for logical persuasion.<sup>44</sup> Needless to say, he was unsuccessful, and when he returned to Sicily a few years later, he had no better luck.

To conclude, we return to the paradox of the philosopher-king. As a program for political action, this provides two alternatives; philosophy and political power can be united in either of two ways. Either philosophers can become kings, or kings can become philosophers. We have said something about the possibility of philosophers becoming kings, and it is clear that Plato did not put much store in this prospect. This is unfortunate, because this alternative would give the philosopher some control over the fate of the ideal state. But the philosopher in contemporary society is a stranger in a strange land. He cannot take part in ordinary politics, and he is unwilling to attempt to seize control of the state by force. Though naturally a ruler of men, he is not invited to rule; and until he is asked, there is nothing he can do. "The natural thing is for a sick man, be he rich or poor, to knock at the physician's door, and for anyone who needs to be governed to knock at that of the man who can govern him. It is not for the ruler, if he is in truth any

<sup>42</sup> See Morrow, *Plato's Epistles*, 155-64; cf. J. Harward, *The Platonic Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 13-14.

<sup>43</sup> Also see Plutarch's amusing account of Plato's attempt to persuade the elder Dionysius that the tyrant is the least fortunate of men, on his first visit to Sicily. Predictably, the tyrant refused to hear him out (Plutarch, *Dion* 5).

<sup>44</sup> See 331d-333a, 340b-341a, 345ab.

good, to beg the others to accept his rule" (*Rep* 489bc). But reason and order do not reign in the world, and it is without hope that the philosopher waits to be asked.

So we are left to place all our hopes on an accident of birth, a king with a soul of gold. The bare possibility of the ideal state is based on the bare possibility of such a prodigy of nature. But, as Plato argues at length, the philosophic nature, if nurtured in a corrupt environment, would become supremely wretched. Hence we must pile hope upon hope and rely on a series of accidents, each more improbable than the one on which it depends. Though it might seem a poor reflection on Plato as a political theorist that it is upon such a peg that he is left to hang the realizability of his ideal state, this is the case. And, needless to say, it remains a *paradeigma*, founded only in heaven (*Rep* 592b).

On a larger scale, however, something more can be said on Plato's behalf. Plato understands full well the grim necessity that forces the philosopher to resort to political means. He sees the futility in trying to use persuasion as a means of reform. A society indelibly stamps the souls of its inhabitants, and Plato pursues this insight to its logical conclusion. To reform the corrupt inhabitants of a corrupt society, this process must be reversed; the indoctrinating mechanism of society must be used for virtue not for vice. And so not only does Plato have an interest in implementing his ideal state, but he perceives both the means necessary for the desired end and the obstacles that bar the way.

The solution to the problem is clear. In order for the ideal state to be made real, political power must find its way into philosophic hands. However, the problem does not have a *theoretical* solution, but only a *political* one. And where this power is to come from Plato cannot say. He rejects the possibility of the philosopher attempting to seize power, while all other alternatives leave the philosopher waiting on forces beyond his control. However, the fact that Plato's theory of radical reform is almost impossible to implement does not destroy its value. In rejecting the Socratic position and formulating the means through which a corrupt city must be reformed, Plato accomplishes a theoretical feat of inestimable value. In formulating his great principle that the moral reformer requires political power, Plato states a permanent political truth — for good or for ill.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> To quote Machiavelli: "Thus it comes about that all armed prophets have conquered and unarmed ones failed; . . ." *The Prince*, Ch. 6; trans. Max Lerner, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 22.