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## PLATO'S ETHICS AND POLITICS

### WHAT IS THE CALCULATING PART OF THE SOUL (REASON)?

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, whose psychological theory resembles the *Republic's*, Socrates depicts the soul as a charioteer steering two horses. One horse is gentle and heeds its driver; the other one, a crazed animal, tries to drag the entire team wherever it wants to go (246a–b, 253c–254e).

The image captures several features of psychological experience, but maybe most dramatically the sense people can have that reason by itself is powerless. Without the horses the charioteer would stand in a stalled chariot. Without some desires that begin outside the calculating part of the soul, reason might imagine what the person should do, but would not get beyond imagining. Reason can weigh one desire against the welfare of the whole soul; counsel against some irrational impulses; encourage those that conduce to the soul's overall health. But in itself it contains no source of movement.

On this view of the soul, reason is a second-order agency, only having something to do once the person experiences some other

motive. I crave a fistful of bacon but I tell myself I'm better off without it, or else I lay the strips of bacon in a pan to cook them: either way my reason reacts to my hunger.

In the Platonically just soul, as Book 4 describes it, the spirit and the desires accept reason as their overlord. When the calculating part of a just soul tries to curb the person's anger or to counter any other temptation, the person listens. But on what basis does reason decide what to say? Here the charioteer may be a misleading image, because charioteers do not steer for the good of their horses. The *Republic's* analogy between city and soul, while it still envisions reason in a second-order capacity, describes a more specific function for the tribunal of reason. The governing classes come into existence to serve the needs of the productive class, whether they work for this class in obvious ways – when the army protects the city – or in a way that only the rulers appreciate, as when they deprive all citizens of the delights of drama in order to keep the army both fierce enough to protect the city and gentle enough not to overrun it. It does not matter that the craftspeople never initiate public policy; not even that they may not grasp the reasons behind a policy. Their continued activity is the goal at which all policy aims.

To the extent that the good city reflects the good soul, its organization implies that within the soul, reason pursues the long-range satisfaction of the desires. The world is such that most desires have to go unsatisfied, and the ones that do get satisfied bring unwanted effects. The greatest satisfaction of the desires therefore demands that they be controlled. But desires express themselves unconditionally, lacking the ability to impose conditions on themselves. So reason acts on behalf of the whole person, but the person (we are told to this point) is moved by a cluster of appetitive desires; and it is these that reason serves.

We saw that when Socrates defined justice in Book 4 as a psychological state, he had to address the charge of irrelevance. For the *Republic's* argument to work against the challenge that Thrasymachus posed, the P-just person must be the one who acts O-justly. Though Plato's response to this challenge is oblique and incomplete, it stands a chance of working as long as reason is a second-order critic of other motivations and supplies no motive force of its own. For

then the essence of P-justice is thoughtful self-control. In that case it makes sense to see the P-just person as O-just, because self-controlled people can adapt to any rules; also to see the O-just person as P-just in turn, if that simply means that obedience to any sane moral system inculcates the restraint that lets reason's voice be heard. (Socrates seems to have this etiology of the ordinary virtues in mind when he says that they are 'produced by habits and exercises'; 518d–e.)

But the calculating agency does not remain at the level of practical wisdom. Socrates implies in Book 6, then asserts directly in Book 9, that the calculating part of the soul has its own desires, just as the appetitive and the spirited parts do, except that where they love gain and honor, respectively, it loves learning and philosophy (581a–c). The wisdom that resides in the calculating part of the soul (441e) now amounts to theoretical wisdom.

Why should Plato change his conception of reason halfway through the *Republic*? For one thing, the argument in Book 6 (485d) needs this premise for the purpose of demonstrating the philosopher's virtue. Being so passionate about wisdom, philosophers have less energy left for the attachments that lead other people into vice. But the possibility of rule by philosophers owes more to the expanded conception of reason than this argument alone would indicate. If reason had no desires of its own, the calculating faculty that directed traffic among the parts of the soul would possess only practical wisdom; it would be the rational agency of the sane person and the sound ruler, but the sound ruler would not have to be a philosopher too. Once reason has some purpose of its own to pursue – which turns out to be philosophy – then the same part of the well-integrated soul that manages its own efforts (and the city's, if it is the ruler's soul) will be the faculty that grasps abstract truths. The highest knowledge and the sanest personality go together. The philosopher rules.

The argument profits in a second way too. When reason can achieve its own satisfaction, it is easier to demonstrate the rewards of reasonableness. By Book 9, Socrates hardly distinguishes justice from philosophy. The comparisons between just and unjust lives (576b–587b) allegedly return to the challenge that Glaucon and Adeimantus had set Socrates in Book 2; yet the victorious (because

more pleasurable) life repeatedly turns out to belong to the philosopher in particular. (See 582e, which speaks of the 'lover of wisdom' or philosopher as the best judge of pleasures; at 583b that argument proclaims 'the just man' the winner, as if the two were the same.) If the harmonious or P-just soul is also the one that hungers after philosophy – call that the  $\Phi$ -just soul – then all the delights of intellectual activity automatically accrue to the P-just soul and help to show that justice is profitable.

Now Plato faces a fresh charge of irrelevance. In Book 4 he could be accused of changing the subject from O-justice to P-justice, demonstrating merely that a certain state of character is worth possessing, not that recognizably virtuous behavior is worth doing.  $\Phi$ -justice poses a similar problem, for the skeptic may wonder whether the philosopher's soul will be the same as the just person's soul. If it is, justice has been vindicated; if not, we possess only an advertisement for philosophy.

To overcome this new threat of irrelevance, Plato needs to show that

- (1) the  $\Phi$ -just soul = the soul of one who is more likely than anyone else to perform O-just deeds.

The *Republic* has overtly recognized and asserted one component of (1), namely the claim that

- (2)  $\Phi$ -justice in the soul brings about regular O-just actions.

Testimonies to the philosopher's virtue recur through the second half of the *Republic*, most obviously at 485a–487a. Philosophers are moderate (485e), brave (486b), and in every other respect (487a) the right sorts of people. But these claims only do half the work. For the pleasures of contemplation redound to the credit of all just people only if all just people have philosophical souls – only if, that is,

- (3) the regular practice of O-just actions implies a  $\Phi$ -just soul.

Because he needs (3), or something as close as possible to it, Plato makes a bold claim on behalf of ordinary morality:

[The] laws have made the distinction between noble and base things on such grounds as these: the noble things cause the bestial part of our nature to be subjected to the human part – or, perhaps, rather to the divine part – while the base things enslave the tame to the savage.

(589c–d)

The laws in question are not only such perfect laws as the good city's rulers will establish, but all those decent precepts that everyone knows, condemning lies and thievery and the offenses of every day. One who follows those laws comes to be ruled as the *Republic's* finest city is ruled: 'all the soul follows the philosophic' (586e).

The extravagance of the claim is hinted at in the words 'divine part' (already commented on at the end of [Chapter 8](#)). Reasonable governance might even foster what is godly in human beings, turning obedient citizens into new divinities.

Plato knows that his argument needs some version of (3) if Book 9's praise of philosophic pleasures is to promote the just life. So he makes the claim (589) and seems to think he can defend it. We would need to see the empirical support before believing him, but at least the *Republic* does not fall unwittingly into the fallacy of irrelevance.

It goes without saying that (3) is extremely hard even for Plato's sympathizers to accept. Does plodding adherence to law and custom really make a soul philosophical? Then it's surprising there are not more philosophers in the world, as even Plato grants that many people lead upright lives, however blindly they may do so. If (3) is true there is no virtue without philosophy.

Indeed, (3) claims more than Plato himself often says. It contradicts, to name only one example, a significant passage in the myth of Er. When one sorry soul inadvertently chooses the life of a tyrant, Socrates remarks that he had lived 'in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy' (619c–d). The warning to the complacent Cephalus in all of us is that only philosophical enlightenment can give virtue the foundation it needs. But if we need to heed that warning, we must be able to achieve virtue without philosophizing – which makes (3) false.

But again, if (3) is false then  $\Phi$ -justice is not O-justice, and then Book 9's advocacy of higher pleasures brings no comfort in

the face of the threat of immoralism. If (3) is false then Plato must give up on the greater hope of redefining justice as philosophy, and specifically give up this hope by denying reason its own desires. And then there can be no philosopher-rulers.

Premise (3)'s promise that all those who live lawfully become philosophical makes other problems as well. In Book 7 Socrates says that philosophers who come into existence in ordinary cities

grow up spontaneously against the will of the regime in each; and a nature that grows by itself and doesn't owe its rearing to anyone has justice on its side when it is not eager to pay off the price of rearing to anyone.

(520b)

This loophole seems concocted to excuse Socrates. Can it work? If any legal system can bring its citizens into a just psychological state in which their calculating agencies predominate, and therefore into a state of studying philosophy, then all philosophers owe their enlightenment to the regime they were born into. Philosophers like Socrates are as indebted to the states they grew up in as the ruling philosophers are to the *Republic's* philosophocracy.

Note the fatality of this last problem to the *Republic's* grandest proposal. To justify rule by philosophers, Plato expands his conception of reason. His expanded conception of reason makes justice in the soul something further removed from just behavior than it had been, and thereby commits him to the claim that the practice of ordinary justice makes one a philosopher. But then we lose the striking contrast between how philosophers come to be in the ideal city and how they have come to be in actual cities; and when that contrast is lost, so is the argument compelling the good city's philosophers to govern. The claim that comes in to show why philosophers *ought* to rule undermines the argument that should *persuade* them to.

## POSTSCRIPT ON TWO PHILOSOPHERS

The cheap and easy accusation says: Plato the philosopher over-values philosophers. All the trouble with the *Republic's* politics

begins with that massive collective self-regard that philosophers are prone to. Such accusations are unfair and personalize serious questions. But there is even more wrong with them than that. They accept 'the philosopher' as a unitary concept in Plato when in fact many of his works, including the *Republic*, are divided between two different ideas of what philosophizing is and what people philosophize.

Sometimes the philosopher's activity is the quintessential human activity. If other people do not think about virtue and the integrity of their words, they should. Or they think this way for a while, talking to Socrates, and forget to keep doing so after Socrates walks away. Such philosophizing amounts to moral integrity, and the philosopher resembles the sage, the good person, or the hero: a purified version of what everyone can be and a model for everyone to follow.

As the great human possibility, philosophy gains importance; but also loses the claim to expertise. Philosophical theorists or experts ought not to exist if philosophy comprises what everyone ought to know. But the *Republic* clearly envisions some knowledge as the object of specialized lifelong study. The experts who pursue that knowledge separate themselves from nonphilosophers (503b–d). Their inquiry is something distinct from the pursuit of justice, even from the study of justice (504b–505b). When the good city's philosophers die they receive memorials suitable to minor deities (540b–d) in recognition of their difference from the ordinary human standard.

Philosophy in the first sense, the essentially human capacity, employs the deliberative sort of reason as defined in Book 4. Philosophy as superhuman expertise employs reason in the contemplative sense. In part the *Republic's* two conceptions of reason run together because the figure who masters each one is such a compelling vision of the philosopher.

## **IS THE *REPUBLIC'S* POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY PATERNALISTIC?**

In legal theory, a law is said to have a paternalistic justification if the law exists for the good of the person whose behavior it regulates.

Motorcyclists have to wear helmets on the grounds that the benefits of helmets are too great to be canceled by the rider's desire (judged an unimportant desire) to ride a motorcycle without one.

The political structure spelled out in the *Republic* is unquestionably autocratic; but not every autocratic state is paternalistic. (See the next section on the tyrannical paternalism called totalitarian.) And Plato does acknowledge the importance of citizens' moral decision-making, when he insists on a state that governs without the threat of force (548b, 552e). The productive class should freely consent to being ruled by the guardians – the city's moderation requires their consent (432a) – so the city's goodness may be said to rest on an acquiescence in being governed. If the city's goodness requires such consent, its citizens must possess a substantive power of consenting.

But this rock-bottom act of consent, however significant it is, does not gainsay the paternalism that pervades the Platonic state. The city of the *Republic* goes beyond strict centralized governance into paternalism when it refuses to recognize citizens' capacity for moral authority over their own lives. And in fact it refuses to recognize that capacity at every turn.

It is for paternalistic reasons that Plato bans mimetic poetry, for example, and proposes arranged marriages among guardians. The latter is an especially paternalistic move, in that it gives one group authority not trusted to another. Sex is necessary as drama is not, so the rulers can cast comedy and tragedy out of the city altogether, forbidding it to themselves as well as to the other citizens. Artistic imitation is a pollution of the intellect to which the rulers consider themselves as susceptible as anyone else. It is not unduly paternalistic to deny everyone access to a toxin.

The breeding laws, on the other hand, divide the guardian population into those whose marriages are secretly arranged and those who do the arranging. What the former must never find out about their marriages the latter must always bear in mind: this absolute divide (a divide, remember, not between the city's guardians and those less-able craftspeople, but among the elite) assumes an absolute difference in moral reliability between those entrusted with the secret and the rest.

Plato does not include the city's huge productive class in the guardians' communism or breeding rituals. That class only feels

the effects of censorship accidentally, in the sense that poetry must be denied to the whole city in order that it not corrupt the guardians. Indeed, aside from general restrictions on how much money laborers and artisans may accumulate (421d–422a), or what they can do with their property (552a), they will live as people always have, owning goods and belonging to families. Many of them will appreciate having professionals in town to take over the tedium of governance and the perils of warfare – so cheaply too – while the productive class busies itself making private fortunes.

But while the superior life that the city makes possible will keep the productive class freely loyal, another kind of paternalism comes into play for them. Life in this class will never feel like autonomous life, for its members will not participate in the city's governance. The price they pay for privacy is a loss of autonomy.

## THE ROOTS OF PLATONIC PATERNALISM

Paternalism turns up frequently in the dialogues' political arguments. In the *Crito*, Socrates describes a hypothetical expert who would function in the moral domain as a doctor does with bodies – an expert who must be obeyed regardless of the nonexpert's opinion (48a). Socrates' claim that we should only listen to 'the one who knows' (47a–48b) means that individual moral deliberation is at best a necessary evil for circumstances in which we have not identified the expert.

As if talk of a moral expert did not announce Socrates' paternalism clearly enough, he closes the *Crito* with an analogy between the state and a parent. The laws of Athens provide for marriage, the nurturance of babies, and education; so the city performs the childbearing and child-rearing functions of the parent, which makes it a super-father (50d–51b). The *Crito's* argument for citizens' obligation to the state therefore begins with the assumption of a sharp divide between the citizens' moral authority and the state's.

The *Crito* is much shorter and simpler than the *Republic* and dated earlier; the *Statesman* is assigned to a later period. Socrates is not its main speaker, and the *Statesman* sets stricter limits on how much is possible in human politics. Still paternalism is at work.

Plato compares rulers to doctors again, now emphasizing that the right commands are good for people even imposed by force (293b). The dialogue's leader, the Eleatic Stranger, calls statesmanship an art of herd-tending (261d–e). He depicts rule by consent of the governed as a nightmare of incompetence (298a–300b). Above all, the ideal of rule by the perfectly knowledgeable statesman (see 293d–e, 301c–d) makes it clear that the Eleatic Stranger dreams of a city in which moral deliberation by the citizens has withered away.

There is a larger issue that is relevant here but with no space to do it justice: the state's moral education of its citizens. Plato's dialogues speak to this subject even in nonpolitical contexts. Athenian democracy as presented (for instance) in the Funeral Oration of Pericles saw its own virtues arising spontaneously; moral education implied the laborious training that Spartans subjected themselves to. The dialogues' numerous attacks on Pericles fault him for just this democratic reluctance to educate. For Plato education means moral education first and foremost, in which the teachers claim authority, evidently on the grounds of their superior virtue and their superior understanding of what virtue is.

Almost everyone agrees on the existence and value of moral education when the teachers are parents. Plato's vision of the state as the great educator, obvious in the *Republic* and *Laws* but present in many other dialogues too, turns that unobjectionable process into a strong and controversial kind of paternalism.

## RULE BY PHILOSOPHERS

Expertise always grounds Plato's paternalism. That expertise takes its most dramatic form in the *Republic*, whose philosopher-kings derive their legitimacy from having studied the Form of the Good. A full examination of paternalism in the *Republic* – to avoid loose generalizations about Plato's writings – would lead into how the theory of Forms proposes to make governance a mathematical science. But the guiding impulse behind rule by philosophers, behind Plato's call for not only justice in the good city but also the knowledge of justice, may be something simpler than the developed theory of Forms.

When Socrates has described the first city, in Book 2, that Glaucon will call a city of pigs, he asks Adeimantus where that city's justice and injustice would be. 'I can't think, Socrates,' Adeimantus answers, 'unless it's somewhere in some need these men have of one another' (372a). And although the more plausible reading of this answer is that the village only fails as a display case for justice – that it is perfectly good in itself as a human community, bad merely as a philosopher's illustration of justice – Plato might be suggesting that the first city contains neither justice nor injustice; that such a simplified society has no room for either one. In any case it is surely true that this first city cannot know that it is just even if it should happen to be. Only a philosopher can know whether or not a city is just, and what Socrates calls the true city will have no philosophers in it.

Why should it matter that the city know its own justice? Because merely habitual justice – justice without such knowledge – is the kind of virtue we see in Cephalus, and hear warnings about in the myth of Er (619c–d). For the city as for the individual human, politics means not only practicing justice but also understanding it, because without an understanding to moor that practice it will not last.

Socrates makes the point about cities early in his defense of rule by philosophers:

Those who look as if they're capable of guarding the laws and practices of cities should be established as guardians ... Does there seem to be any difference, then, between blind men and those men who are really deprived of the knowledge of what each thing is; those who have no clear pattern in the soul, and are hence unable ... to give laws about what is fine, just, and good, if any need to be given, and as guardians to preserve those that are already established?

(484b–d)

Because justice without understanding falls so far short, Socrates speaks of the irreplaceability of philosophical governance: 'There should be no other leaders of cities than these [philosophers]' (485a). But if that first city had leaders they would not be philosophers.

Here begins the road that ends in philosophy. The best city will have philosophers in it, because it is the philosopher's task to understand justice. But a just city with philosophers in it will be a city in which they rule – and we set foot on the slippery slope to paternalism.

## AUTONOMY

Suppose we grant Plato that moral expertise exists in the form he envisions and therefore that it is conceivable to have rulers whose decisions about our private lives would be superior to our own. We might still protest that the process of making and obeying our own principles is essential to the human moral function. Paternalism keeps us from being full human beings.

The *Republic* too considers the capacity for moral deliberation essential to humans. Reason governs in the just soul exactly because it is the person's deliberative faculty. But we acquire the power to reason by first obeying the commands of moral superiors; those who can't make themselves better should keep obeying (590d). This desirable condition of being able to think for oneself may be attained, might even be *best* attained, through paternalism.

Autonomy through deference sounds like a contradiction. Maybe it is. But realize that Plato would find the modern democratic position contradictory. If mature moral deliberation is so important, then why not subject citizens to the guidance that makes such deliberation possible? The antipaternalist has good answers available to Plato's challenge, but they are not trivially easy.

## IS PLATO A THEORIST OF TOTALITARIAN GOVERNMENT?

### EVIDENT AFFINITIES

Since the rise of modern totalitarianism, its enemies have pointed out its resemblance to the Platonic state. Their argument has only been made more persuasive by Nazi and Stalinist books that claim Plato for a predecessor. Between the big family of the city and the powers available to its rulers, we feel ourselves on creepily familiar ground.

The popular image of communism comes to mind when Socrates depicts the guardians' lives together, property-less in dormitories. Other specifics of the city will recall the fascist fetishism of unity. Under fascism, the state has an identity above and beyond the collection of individuals constituting it. In many instances the state gives itself over to military organization. When not at war or planning for war, the state expresses its militaristic nature in the rigid hierarchy of civil society.

Much of this sounds like the alleged good city in the *Republic*. Most worrisome is the *Republic's* organic conception of the state, the sense that for Plato the state counts as an individual. The very possibility of an analogy between person and city presupposes a reality to the city's existence that will not let it remain merely a set of human beings. Add Plato's dream of eradicating the family, so that the emotional attachments once pulling people toward private goals now conduce to social oneness, and every feature of the worship of the state is in place.

The Platonic state also reproduces totalitarian regimes in the control it imposes on its citizens. Typically the desire for complete control has meant that totalitarianism (1) restricts speech, (2) denies its citizens participation in government, (3) subjects the young to an indoctrinating education, (4) selects a self-perpetuating ruling class or cadre, and (5) enforces its rule by punishing any citizens' acts of disobedience or subversion.

Many of the same features appear in the *Republic's* city. The philosophers' knowledge of the Form of the Good licenses their complete domination over the other citizens' lives. Free constitutional debate makes no more sense to Plato than asking children to vote on the multiplication table. As every government does, the guardians will make laws about contracts, libel, and insult, will levy taxes and regulate trade (425c–d). But we also see them lying to the people about their births (414d–415a), and to the guardians about their breeding partners (460a); planning the reproduction of the guardians in accord with eugenic theories (459a–e); restricting the speech and poetry permitted in the city; indoctrinating young guardians. Of the five characteristics listed, these clearly account for (1)–(4).

An unsympathetic reader will immediately think of the possibilities for abuse and blunder, assuming rulers with either character

flaws or imperfect knowledge. Here lies the puzzle; for Plato acknowledges both the potential for character flaw in his rulers, and the imperfection of their knowledge about guardian-breeding. Socrates describes batteries of tests to separate the upright guardians from their unworthy siblings (413d–414a, 535a, 537a), institutes penalties for those who have not learned their moral lessons (468a–469b), and warns of the young candidates' corruption if they learn dialectic too early (537c–539d). As for error, the excellent city begins its decline because of these rulers' mistakes about breeding (546a–547a). To grant them the power they have on the grounds of either their goodness or their intelligence betrays a willingness on Plato's part to invest rulers with power even when they go wrong. This willingness appears to tend toward veneration of the state.

## DISSIMILARITIES

Not all apparent resemblances mean what they first seem to. Especially because some labels ('fascist,' 'communist') are heavily charged, a comparison between Plato's city and modern totalitarian states should look closely at the differences between them too. The organic unity of the state; the emphasis on citizens' loyalty; the completeness of state power: from a distance these features appear alike whether in ancient or modern manifestations. But from a distance a planet looks like a star.

And first there is a general accusation that needs to be gotten out of the way. Plato believed that moral propositions can be known as surely as mathematical ones; therefore he thinks like a totalitarian. But if this much can make Plato totalitarian, it also condemns most religious believers (and secular moral theories as well). Plato's confidence in moral truth might be false and might even be dangerous. To call it totalitarian is itself dangerous – disregarding important moral distinctions – and is false to all those who have believed in objective moral values without once falling into totalitarian practices.

### State unity

The *Republic* does portray its city as an extended family, but this is a commonplace in classical Greece, not some new fantasy of

Plato's making. Most Greek cities saw themselves as descended from a single lineage. Plato has accepted the platitudes of his own time, which feel more natural to a small city than they do in large modern countries.

Plato seems to have breathed in Athenian nationalistic prejudices too: belief in the superiority of Athenians over other Greeks and of Greeks collectively over the foreigners spoken of as 'barbarians.' Acquiescing in this prejudice is culpable in a way that wanting to picture your city as one large family is not, and the *Republic's* simplistic ethnic distinction in Book 5 (469b–471b) comes as a disappointment after its independent-mindedness on other topics. The *Menexenus* funeral speech elaborates on the Greek–barbarian difference, though Plato also deserves credit for dissolving that distinction in the *Statesman*.

### Loyalty to the state

The *Republic* insists that the city think as one, even inscribing this insistence in one of its two foundational principles for all human society (⑤). Is this the blind loyalty that fascist governments call for? Plato presents the singleness of mind as no more than a necessary condition for human society, but we have seen how far the argument develops unanimity beyond that first friendly cooperativeness.

Of course the citizens of democracies often call for unanimity too, especially during a crisis. Democratic agreement is free, not coerced – but then Plato takes pains to prevent the city's army from terrorizing its populace. This brings us to (5), that very important feature of totalitarian states. They use considerable force to maintain their rule. But Plato says that a good state bases its legitimacy on persuasion, not force (548b, 552e). Even the loyalty that the good city expects is not supposed to be blind loyalty. If the philosophers living under existing regimes do not owe their cities public service (520b), political obligation must be something earned by the city. Indeed Socrates says one owes loyalty only to the well-run city, or to the model of it in one's soul (591d–e). Sensible people won't pay attention to political affairs in cities as they are (592a–b). A theory that calls for civic

sentiment only in the best of all states is not a theory demanding irrational obedience.

Here it is important to remember that the Platonic city distinguishes itself from both Athens and Sparta. Both cities contained destabilizing tendencies toward civil unrest, and in Plato's time both had known violent civil war. Most of the *Republic's* readers today live in some version of an Athenian constitution, divided between democratic and oligarchic powers; so we notice how Plato seeks to transcend both sides of the political opposition in a new harmony to which 'politics as usual' becomes irrelevant. This principled distaste for political opposition does anticipate modern experiments – totalitarian experiments – for bringing politics to an end.

Sparta's civil wars, however, pitted a small class of warriors against the Helots, the Spartan slaves. Plato wants to avoid that internal violence too. The Helots spent their lives in productive farm labor or craftwork, lived in poverty, and hated their Spartan masters. The *Republic's* city will contain a large class that does the Helots' work, but they will consent to be governed by the city's guardians – perhaps because of the opportunities they will have for getting rich in this city.

As an anti-Athens the *Republic* does bring tyrannical modern regimes to mind. But as an alternative to Sparta, whose revolts Plato equally wanted to avoid, the new city repudiates precisely the rule by force those modern regimes are known and loathed for.

## State power

On the subject of the city's strong centralized authority, it should also be borne in mind that its extreme powers mostly affect only its ruling class. Every totalitarian state has a ruling elite, but none yet has imposed intrusive laws only on that elite, letting most people live as they used to. Not one has divorced economic power from political power.

One final difference might be what matters most in practice. Totalitarianism could only exist in the modern age, because only this age gave it the tools it needed. Telephones, television, and guns let a state spy on its subjects, bombard them with misinformation,

and kill large numbers of them at once when it has to. This is not to mention faster or fancier tools of the modern state. In the absence of such technology, even a centralized military state like Rome under Augustus tolerated a fair degree of free thinking, free communication, and free movement among its people.

If Plato had envisioned modern technologies he might have also envisioned them at work in his city. As it is, the absence of modern tools from his arsenal leads him to sketch a political entity that differs in kind, not merely in degree, from the worst modern states. In another world he may have proposed a more terrifying state apparatus. In the world he lived in he could no more describe a totalitarian state than he could write an English sonnet.

## A LINGERING WORRY ABOUT PLATONIC POLITICS

One last worry is worth raising about Plato's style of political thought. He belongs with political philosophers of the Enlightenment in believing that tradition does no useful work in thinking about politics.

When Socrates calls for everyone over ten to be expelled from a city, and philosophers to indoctrinate the remaining children (540e–541a), he removes all doubt as to the value of traditional culture in the Platonic state. (And we may assume that during this interim regime the rulers might need to use force to get all those adults out of the city.) Book 2's dismissal of poetry that contains false allegations about the gods has already made this attitude evident; or consider the language with which Socrates speaks of women guardians exercising, his unconcern that people will laugh (452a). The *Republic* retains a role for Delphi (427b–c, 461e, 540b), but otherwise it has no place for the traditions that Plato's contemporaries took pride in. Totalitarian government wants no brakes on its progress toward a new society. Tradition, whether for good effect or bad, has a retarding effect on social change. Plato ushered into political philosophy a disregard for the customary that it has never abandoned, and that shows itself today in those fruits of political philosophy we call totalitarian governments.