

Responses to Howland

1. The Seam of Theory and Practice

Near the apparent end of the outline of the best *polis*, it is the headstrong Glaucon who raises the question of whether such a community can actually come into being or not (471c). Socrates' "incredible" answer (*paradoxon*, 472a6) is precisely the "third wave" discussed by Prof. Howland—the notion that philosophy should rule. The meaning of this possibility is, however, gently qualified by Socrates in several places. He reiterates that the best city is only a "likeness" or a "pattern" (472c4, 472d9-10), that the speech about the city is like the speech of myths (501e4), and, in the end, that such a pattern perhaps resides only in heaven (592a-b). Socrates asks the most crucial question in this regard immediately before the explicit statement of the third wave: "So then is it possible for something to be done the way it's talked about? Or is it in the nature of things that doing is less in touch with the truth than speaking, even if it doesn't seem so to everyone?" (473a). Glaucon agrees, and the investigation proceeds under that governing premise.

What exactly the possibility of philosophic rule means cannot then, in the final analysis, be a matter of straightforwardly making sure that the right people end up in office—the point of Glaucon's agreement with Socrates is precisely that embodied deeds cannot *in principle* be identical to disembodied speech, that actuality bodies forth with concrete determinations of its own, and so, that at best we can attempt an approximation of theory and practice that acknowledges their heterogeneity. Granted, the discussion of the *Republic* almost always proceeds with this qualification in the background as it pushes the identity of theory and practice to the limit, but this should not obscure for us the principle of the ultimately dialectical relationship between the two. The demonstration of the superiority of justice to injustice, in fact, *depends* on this intrinsic distinction of insides and outsides.

Prof. Howland's otherwise thoughtful article seems a little too blithe to me on this count, in that he writes as if the relationship of speech to deeds were in fact totally seamless, or, what's more, as if deeds could be swallowed up entirely by the precision of speech with

no remainder whatsoever. This might be formulated in three (related) concerns.

(1) He claims that it is no “decisive” objection to philosophical rule that philosophy itself is not the art of piloting the ship of state “*as such*,” given that every ruler has a learning curve and philosophers are in a better position than most to negotiate it (“Plato’s *Republic* and the Politics of Convalescence,” 11). But governing is not a hobby, and in order to apply intelligence and principle to any present situation requires intimate familiarity with the minutest circumstances, idiosyncrasies, and competing considerations involved—a familiarity that can surely *only* come from wholehearted and full-time involvement with such duties. There are, of course, no *decisive* objections to philosophical rule in the sense that it somehow violates the law of non-contradiction; but are they not decisive in the different sense that practical considerations cannot simply implement theoretical ones without the latter in turn being thoroughly colored and modulated—not to say altogether absorbed—into the former? Philosophy cannot but become other than itself through rule: if the Platonic Ideas are more like questions than answers (ibid. 8), then the practice of politics is certainly more like giving answers than asking questions. Howland himself entertains a version of this objection later, when, after mentioning Heidegger’s *Rektorsrede*, he seems to agree with Socrates that philosophers are “never” in a position to emancipate themselves from “the political disease” (ibid. 16)—does this concession not totally upend Howland’s earlier confidence?

(2) The image of philosophy as medicine is troubling, especially in the way that it is developed in the conclusion of Howland’s essay. It suggests, for one, that philosophy is an instrumental inquiry, that it is for the sake of politics rather than on a par with it or—as the overall tenor of Howland’s essay would have it—superior to it. Just how far is this analogy intended? Is political convalescence the essential task of philosophy or an incidental effect of it? Neither alternative seems especially desirable to Howland’s argument. If it’s incidental, then philosophy’s ostensible role as the cure for the feverish city becomes unclear. If it’s essential, then Socrates’ position amounts to little more than edifying cheering from the sidelines, a therapeutic “acknowledging the full complexity of our disease” (“Politics of Convalescence,” 16) that, in committing us to open-ended treatment on Dr. Wittgenstein’s couch, retains a

very tenuous connection to political virtue. By the same token, how could philosophy ever be a regimen of “communal self-treatment” or lead to anything like “communal health” (ibid. 16, 17), when Howland signs off on Socrates’ suggestion that “most human beings...are by nature incapable of philosophy” (ibid. 12)?

(3) The image of philosophy as medicine ultimately stems, of course, from the notion that politics is *in itself* a sort of disease. But how, finally, does Howland mean this? The thought stems, as Howland notes, from Socrates’ description of Glaucon’s revolutionized City of Pigs (ibid. 1-2). It is also consistent with the notoriously severe treatment that *erôs* receives throughout the *Republic*. Still, before coming to a general conclusion about philosophy as a whole, does that view not demand refinement by looking at other constellations within the Platonic cosmos? Do we not find precisely the opposite assessment by looking to the demonic and exalted presentation of *erôs* in, say, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*? Within the *Republic* itself, there are unmistakable indications that *erôs* and *thumos* are fundamental conditions for the possibility of philosophy. The former, for instance, is casually said to be what political men must experience toward the true philosophy in order to become philosopher-kings (499c1). As for *thumos*, we not only have the patent fact that philosophers in the best city are only picked from the warrior caste, but the *Republic* is—contrary to the widespread view that philosophers are undisturbed by spiritedness (see “Politics of Convalescence,” 9)—the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates himself unmistakably admits to have been made angry (536c). Is it not the case, furthermore, that philosophy is *only* made possible in the deepest sense once the city becomes feverish—not only in the trivial sense that disease could be said to prompt the invention of medicine, but in the sense that philosophy is *itself* part of the syndrome? There is no indication that the citizens of Swineville have any care for philosophy whatsoever. And if philosophy and decadence are coeval symptoms of the same fever, shouldn’t we rather pray with our whole heart never to be cured of it rather than attempt anything like a systematic purge? It is only because we are erotic and political creatures that, as W.H. Auden put it, “our thoughts have bodies; the menacing shapes of our fever/ are precise and alive.”

~Antón Barba-Kay

2. Plato's Efforts at Political Recuperation in the *Republic*

If Plato presents a “politics of convalescence” in the way that Prof. Howland suggests, the following may help expand Howland's argument. In Book 6 of Plato's *Republic*, beginning with the ship analogy (488a-489a), Plato seems to contribute his own three-fold effort to help remedy the political disease afflicting Athens. While this attempt at political improvement serves the obvious function of explaining the poor reputation of philosophers (487d), in the following, I will attempt to explain these three successive stages and the way in which they are directed at Plato's readership. Simply put, Plato attempts to lead the reader away from political illness by means of three distinct shifts in perspective provoked by (1) the ship analogy, (2) the medical analogy (489b-c), and finally, (3) the discussion of particulars versus universals (493e-494a).

The first suggested perspective change, or reorientation, involves pointing out that the pilot in fact is the only one who truly knows how to steer the ship, while those on board think he is useless because of the way in which he differs from those who make it their occupation to vie for control (488a-489a). Plato here suggests to the reader that a reevaluation of one's political opinions is in order if one thinks that the many politically aggressive or powerful are good politicians, as opposed to those few who are knowledgeable in cultivating the common good. The imagery of the ship analogy pedagogically drives this suggested shift in perspective, since it is unavoidably clear to the reader that the ship will be utterly lost without the one the many call a “stargazer” (489a), and hence, that the city will remain just as lost if it continues to follow the path of the many, rather than a path guided by knowledge. The reader is thus brought to see the disease that is the ignorance of the many, in contrast to true knowledge, which is the remedy.

The second attempt at, or step toward, reorientation turns on the medical analogy, which actually begins with an explicit extension of the ship analogy. At 489b, after the main discussion of the pilot analogy is complete, Socrates points out the absurdity of a pilot begging to rule sailors, and links this to the equally absurd situation of a doctor pleading to care for the sick. Both point the reader toward a specific absurdity in the relationship between ruler and polis that is a consequence of the shift in perspective suggested by

the ship analogy. This will be explained in what follows. One function of the medical analogy is to make a second attempt at the alteration in perspective suggested by the ship analogy. In other words, the medical analogy also highlights the need for rulers who are knowledgeable in the art of ruling. Just as the sick need doctors, the citizenry needs rulers with the expertise proper to their craft. Another function of the medical analogy, and the focus of this paragraph, is the way that it helps add to the ship image by indicating the absurdity of the electoral process, and specifically by suggesting the way in which the ruled should come to power. In other words, if the first step (implied in the first discussion of the ship analogy) is satisfied and rulers are indeed to be those with expert knowledge about governing, then, according to the medical analogy, it is just as ridiculous for a doctor to go door-to-door seeking out patients as it is for rulers to petition the citizenry for votes. Both of these actions are silly for the same reason: the knowledgeable do not need the ignorant, and thus, have no need to request support from the many. However, the ignorant need the knowledgeable, and thus must seek out the help of the latter. By showing the reader a specific reversal that ought to take place in the ruler-to-ruled relationship, the medical analogy thus brings the reader further along politically than the main discussion of the ship image did. The reader is now twice encouraged to change their perspective about the place of knowledge in prevailing Athenian politics (steps 1 and 2), and is also privy to the kernel of truth about the need to reverse the electoral process (step 2). This specific need for reversal is an implication of the reorientation begun with the ship analogy, which is why Plato chose an analogy besides that of the ship. If he stopped after pointing to the absurdity of the process of the pilot begging sailors to rule them, he would have run the risk of the reader not realizing that specific implication of the ship analogy, and thus, only internalizing the first suggested shift in perspective. Plato seems to realize that at least some readers toward whom this recuperation effort is directed may only have the capacity to internalize one suggested shift in perspective per analogy. Thus, he adds the remark about the medical analogy, and carefully guides the reader along, even though the ship analogy was crafted well enough to suffice.

Finally, although the ship analogy implies that knowledge of ideas, or unified knowledge, is superior to opinions about

particulars, this distinction is made explicit in the third and final step for the express purpose of addressing the sharp divide between the many and the philosophers, and hence, the inevitably negative opinion that the many have of philosophers. Socrates explains that the many cannot believe that the noble or beautiful itself truly is, rather than the many fair particulars, just as they cannot believe anything on its own is, rather than the multitude of particular things (493e-494a). Thus, the many cannot share the philosophers' perspective of reality, and therefore, will have animosity towards philosophers, must remain inferior to philosophers, and are unqualified to rule when compared to philosophers. The reader is here encouraged to link this divide between the many and the philosophical to that of the sailors versus the pilot, or to any blind, opinion-oriented multitude as opposed to the one who truly knows. The reader is thus urged toward the furthest possible change in perspective, and hence, a cure: value knowledge of the ideas, and hence, the truth, rather than the chaotic, non-functioning opinions of the sophists and the many whom they influence. Once again, whereas Plato's ship image may have sufficed to drive this lesson home to the reader, Plato chose to add the aforementioned metaphysical remarks about the many and the philosophers. Perhaps this is another instance of Plato knowing the limitations of readers toward whom he directs the current political effort.

The first two analogies help Plato to advance the reader toward the third, more complex, reorientation. (It is possible to argue that all three prepare the reader for the "Divided Line" and the "Allegory of the Cave.") By teaching the value of true political knowledge in three progressive stages, Plato urges the reader to emerge as one less affected by the political disease afflicting Athens. To summarize, it is likely that each change in perspective described above would improve the reader, and possibly Athenian politics, by, respectively, (1) increasing the numbers of those who value knowledgeable politicians, rather than valuing the power-hungry, (2) cultivating a political process that involves selection rather than ruthless competition, and (3) fostering an appreciation of the ideas over particulars.

It is arguable, based on the wider dialogue and Howland's argument, that Plato's reorientation of values described above involves being less hostile toward philosophy in the public realm, but does not amount to advising for the full compatibility of

philosophy and politics, or the exclusive dominion of philosophy in the political realm. It may involve, rather, seeking out the guidance of philosophical knowledge and making necessary practical or humane compromises. Furthermore, these suggested changes in perspective may also simultaneously address the soul, as a parallel to the city, encouraging moral, epistemological, and metaphysical improvement by urging the individual to shun the corruption of particulars and embrace the universal.

~Joseph M. Forte