

Plato's *Republic* and the Politics of Convalescence

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In book 2 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates describes a city in which human beings live life "in peace, and with health" (372d).¹ But the simple life of this community strikes Glaucon as one that is fit only for pigs. And indeed, the city's inhabitants, like Rousseau's tranquil savages, seem to live wholly within themselves and so to lack the most characteristic human longings.² They have sexual appetites, but are otherwise neither erotic nor spirited. They do not produce poetry, seek wisdom, hunt, eat meat, fight, or compete for honor or excellence. Compared to men like Glaucon, they are literally anorexic or without desire. Yet this city seems to be the only healthy one, for Socrates associates the introduction of luxuries such as couches, courtesans, rhapsodes, teachers, and cooks—luxuries that are present in virtually all *actual* human communities—with a kind of political "inflammation" or "fever" (*phlegma*: 372e) that manifests itself immediately in wars of acquisition.

From this point on in the *Republic*, Socrates concentrates on applying political medicine to the feverish city. Most remarkable is the radical prescription he sets forth at the exact center of the dialogue: philosophers should be kings. In the absence of philosophical rule, Socrates explains, "there is no rest from ills for the cities ... nor I suppose for human kind.... [and] in no other city would there be private or public happiness" (473d-e). This, he

¹ All translations from the Greek are by Jacob Howland.

² See Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *The Basic Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 41, 81.

asserts, is the biggest of the three waves of paradox of book 5 (473c). What is the nature of these political ills, and of the disease that produces them? What does this disease have to do with the problem of human happiness? What is so paradoxical about philosophical rule? Why does Socrates wonder “how a city can take philosophy in hand without being destroyed” (497d)? And how can philosophy help to alleviate the political disease? These are the main questions I intend to explore in this article.

Symptoms

In book 6, Socrates introduces an image that illustrates the everyday business of politics in the cities of men. The essential elements of this image are a ship, a shipowner, and sailors. Ordinarily, a shipowner will enter into a partnership with sailors for the sake of transporting merchandise or people across a body of water. At the end of the voyage, the fruits of this partnership will be distributed; the sailors will be paid off and go their separate ways. But while the ship is underway, the good of any individual sailor is inseparable from the common good of getting the ship safely to its destination. The achievement of this common good presupposes a social order, inasmuch as it cannot be realized by any single individual, but only by all working together in such a way that each discharges his proper task under the command of a knowing pilot. In Socrates’ image, however, the social order that sustains the common good fails to emerge at all. The “noble shipowner” is bigger and stronger than all those on board, but he is hard of hearing, somewhat shortsighted, and largely ignorant of seamanship.³ The sailors, none of whom has

³ That Socrates is describing the *dēmos* or people who hold the keys to power in democratic Athens is later confirmed when he compares the many to a great beast, and insists that it is impossible for a multitude to be philosophical (493a-94a).

ever studied the art of piloting, nevertheless quarrel with one another about who should steer the ship; the word *kubernan*, “to pilot,” is the root of the English verb “to govern.” Like those who aspire to political office, these sailors evidently come together in competing associations or parties, crowding around the shipowner and “imploring him and doing everything so that he will turn the rudder over to them.” “Sometimes,” Socrates continues, “if they fail to persuade him and others succeed, they either kill the others or throw them out of the ship.” Finally, having enchained the shipowner with drugs or drink “or some other thing,” the sailors “rule the ship, using what is in it, and drinking and feasting they sail as it is likely that such men would” (488a-c).

In Socrates’ image, neither the shipowner nor the sailors seem even to recognize their common good, much less act with a view to it. The shipowner appears to be permanently distracted by the pleasures showered upon him by the sailors, while the latter, like competing bands of pirates commandeering a luxury liner, seek to dislodge one another from the helm merely so that so that they may have license to pilfer the ship’s hold and do whatever else they may wish. Such order as may emerge from these activities is by no means a consequence of the art of piloting, but reflects at best nothing more than a temporary configuration of private interests. Indeed, while the art of the sailors consists exclusively in “persuading or compelling the shipowner” to give them ruling offices, Socrates remarks that the true pilot—who pays attention “to year, seasons, heaven, stars, [and] winds,” all of which one needs to know in order to sail well—is called “a stargazer, a babbler, and useless to them by those who sail on ships run like this” (488d-e).

Socrates’ image of quarreling sailors vividly represents a city’s failure to order its citizens to the achievement of the common good. The feverish symptoms of this political sickness include the

subornation of juries, assemblies, and other sovereign institutions; the appropriation of public treasure for private use; the initiation of hostilities against other “ships” or cities for the sake of acquiring *their* treasure; the exile and ostracism of political opponents; and, especially, chronic political instability and strife that occasionally rises to the level of civil war. And it must be emphasized that these afflictions of the body politic would have been depressingly familiar to the *Republic*’s earliest readers—a fact of which we are reminded by the dialogue’s setting and list of characters. The *Republic* depicts a conversation that takes place at the home of Cephalus in the Piraeus sometime during the Peloponnesian War.⁴ In the aftermath of this war, the Athenians endured the brutal regime of the Thirty, a group of oligarchs backed by the victorious Spartans. During their eight-month rule in 404-403, the Thirty executed some fifteen hundred of their fellow citizens. They also robbed the family of Cephalus, and put to death several of the men present in the *Republic*, including Polemarchus, Niceratus, and possibly Cleitophon.⁵ One ancient historian has speculated that Glaucon was among those who died in the battle in the Piraeus in which the Thirty were ultimately defeated.⁶ Finally, Socrates was executed under the restored democracy—an action in large measure attributable to his association with men of tyrannical inclination

⁴ The issues are ably discussed in Nails, “The Dramatic Date of Plato’s *Republic*,” *The Classical Journal* Vol. 93, No. 4 (1998): 383-96.

⁵ On the numbers executed by the Thirty, see Peter Krentz, *The Thirty at Athens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 79; Barry S. Strauss, *Athens After the Peloponnesian War: Class, Faction and Policy 403-386 B.C.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 54-55; Mark Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 231. On the fate of Niceratus, see Krentz, 79-80 with Munn, 230-31 (see also 211). Paul A. Rahe, *Lysander and The Spartan Settlement, 407-403 B.C.*, PhD. Diss. Yale, 1977, notes that, while Cleitophon’s associates are either killed by the oligarchy or reemerge as democratic politicians, Cleitophon himself simply disappears from the historical narrative (198).

⁶ Munn, *The School of History*, 239 with 416 n. 36.

such as Alcibiades and Critias, the cousin of Plato's mother and leader of the Thirty.⁷

While the Athenians' self-inflicted wounds were unusually severe, no political community has ever been entirely free of the disease from which they suffered. Nor is Plato the first to inquire into the underlying causes of this disease. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides notably identifies the passionate longings that the Greeks associated with eros—the term for sexual desire that was extended to other, equally potent yearnings—as the source of the Athenians' self-destructive military enterprises. In his famous Funeral Oration, Pericles encourages his fellow citizens to “realize the power of Athens” and to become “lovers” (*erastai*) of the city (2.43.1); some years later, Diodotus, speaking against a proposal to execute all the adult males of a former ally, finds it necessary to remind the Assembly of the dangers inherent in what he calls “the lust for all” (*ho erōs epi panti*: 3.45.5). Arguing against the ultimately disastrous expedition to Sicily, Nicias presciently warns the Athenians against being “sick with desire [*duserōtas*] for things that lie far away” (6.13.1); nevertheless, Thucydides writes, “a passionate desire [*erōs*] for the enterprise fell upon everyone alike” (6.24.3). In this sentence Thucydides uses the verb *piptein*, “to fall in or on”; in Greek literature, this verb frequently signifies the attack of an enemy or of disease.⁸

Like Thucydides, Plato traces the fever of political bodies to erotic longing. But the speeches and deeds of Socrates in the

⁷ See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.12 with the sources cited at Munn, *The School of History*, 425 n. 33. Plato's maternal uncle Charmides, who also associated with Socrates, was one of the Ten who governed in the Piraeus under the Thirty (Krentz, *The Thirty at Athens*, 92). By 400/399, Socrates' name “had been invoked often enough in connection with the enemies of democracy to create an ill-defined yet pervasive aura of sinister power about the man” (Munn, *The School of History*, 289).

⁸ See also Thucydides' use of *enepipte* at 2.49.4.

Republic teach that the problem of eros lies not in its intensity, but its orientation: human desire is properly ordered not to the acquisition of ever-increasing quantities of power, glory, or wealth, but to the achievement of wisdom, conceived as the philosophical understanding of the nature and goodness of what is. And this rehabilitation of human desire in the aftermath of an exhausting and demoralizing pan-Hellenic war is arguably one of Plato's greatest accomplishments.

Diagnosis

When Socrates introduces the third wave of paradox in book 5, Glaucon tells him that he will be scorned unless he is able to defend his assertion that philosophers should rule. The reason for this scorn become clear later, when Adeimantus maintains—and Socrates surprisingly agrees—that most of those who spend much time in philosophy become “quite twisted, not to say completely vicious,” while the ones who seem “most decent” are nevertheless “useless to the cities” (487c-d). But before we can consider *this* problem, we need to determine who the philosopher is. This is the first question Socrates takes up after announcing the third wave.

Remarkably, Socrates begins not with the philosopher's intellect but with his desire: he is a lover of the whole of wisdom. In explaining this claim, Socrates gives three examples that help to clarify the distinctive nature of the philosopher's eros. A lover of boys loves “all boys in the bloom of youth”; a lover of wine loves “every kind of wine”; a lover of honor desires “honor as a whole” (474d-475a). These lovers not only love different *things*, but do so in different *ways*. One who loves all boys loves every individual boy, and so is—to say the least—not very choosy. Those who love every kind of wine are more discriminating; precisely because they take

pleasure in the special character of each *type* of wine, they do not enjoy individual bottles of inferior quality. Finally, one who loves the whole of honor loves honor as such, in the distinctive integrity of its being. Taken together, these examples represent an erotic progression from fragmentary and partial embodiments of a whole to the richness of the whole itself. As Socrates makes clear in the sequel, the lover who is capable of completing this progression moves from multiplicity to unity, from the intermediacy of generation and decay to the purity of being, or, in Platonic terms, from particular individuals to the Form or Idea that is imaged in them. Just so, the philosophers, who love all of wisdom, and who delight in “tast[ing] every kind of learning,” are simply the most dedicated and persistent lovers of wisdom—those few “lovers of the sight of the truth” who do not stop short of wisdom itself (475c, e).

It is crucial to see that, in Socrates' account, lovers of the whole of a thing are drawn toward the truest being of that which they love; their erotic progression toward the wholeness of being is thus the exact opposite of what is commonly understood as the process of intellectual abstraction. In mentally setting aside or “abstracting from” certain characteristics of some particular existing thing in order to focus on others, one arrives at a concept that necessarily lacks some of the concrete richness of that thing. But in explaining that being appears fragmented and dispersed among particular existing things, Socrates turns upside-down our ordinary or prephilosophical assumption that existing things are the most real and least abstract entities. Rather, they are very nearly the *most* abstract, because they are distorted images of an original that embody only part of, or only in a partial manner, the whole that gives them their distinctive character. Conversely, the philosopher's erotic and intellectual progression from (for example) many beautiful existing things to the different kinds of beauty, and finally

to the sight of the Beautiful itself, is a process of enrichment that reassembles or reintegrates the whole of Beauty from a multiplicity of fragmentary and deficient instantiations of it. What is more, Socrates' inquiry into the question "Who is the philosopher?" itself recapitulates the erotic progression of philosophy that he describes at the end of book 5. For in taking pains to distinguish the lover of the Beautiful itself from the lovers of sight and hearing who delight in beautiful things but "neither acknowledge Beauty itself, nor, if someone should lead [them] to the knowledge of it, [are] able to follow" (476c), Socrates attempts to grasp the erotic inadequacy of the many incomplete and defective likenesses of the philosopher so as to bring to light the distinctive erotic wholeness of the genuine article.

On Socrates' account, philosophers sense a reality within the things they love that awaits disclosure through inquiry. The Platonic Ideas are thus more like questions than answers. What is this alluring Beauty that we glimpse in all beautiful things? The mystery of this being calls out to the philosophers like an imminent revelation, and they answer this call. As Socrates says in book 6,

it is the nature of one who is really a lover of learning ... not [to] lose the keenness of his passionate love [*erōs*] or desist from it until he should touch the nature itself of each thing that is.... Having drawn near it and coupled with that which truly is, and having begotten intelligence and truth, he would know and live truly and would be nourished and thus cease from labor pains, but not before. (490a-b)

The desires of nonphilosophers, by comparison, are incapable of leading them to the innermost nature of the things they love. The nonphilosopher is like the eunuch in the riddle Socrates refers to at 479b-c: a man who was not a man who saw and did not see a bird that was not a bird—that is, a castrated male with bad eyesight who glimpsed a bat. This riddle is meant to express the partial and ambiguous character of all particular existing things, but its deeper

implication is that nonphilosophers are no more whole or complete than the many things with which their desires and limited intellectual vision stop short. What is more—and this is the really important point—nonphilosophers fail to achieve the deep and lasting fulfillment experienced by one who “know[s] and lives truly and thus cease[s] from labor pains.” For every soul, as Socrates states in book 6, pursues the good and does everything for its sake, but only the philosophical soul is capable of “get[ting] a sufficient grasp of just what it is”—of discerning within the many things that appear to be good the integrity and being of the Good itself. Souls that are unable to grasp the nature of the Good, Socrates adds, fail to derive any advantage from anything else (505d-e). And just as eunuchs can only imagine the pleasures from which they have been excluded by the mutilation of their nature, such souls must experience the impotence and fruitlessness of their most fundamental desires as a source of profound frustration.

In sum, Socrates presents philosophers as the only human beings who are not erotically defective and therefore erotically unsatisfied. In particular, philosophers remain undisturbed by the powerful agitations of soul—including the spirited emotions of anger and hatred—that characterize the frenzied competition of nonphilosophers for goods that inevitably fail to provide them with the happiness they seek. “For the one who has his intellect truly turned toward the things that are,” Socrates tells Adeimantus, “there isn’t any leisure to look down toward the affairs of human beings, or, in fighting with them, to be filled with envy and ill-will.” Rather, the philosopher is absorbed in the contemplation of beings “that neither do injustice, nor suffer injustice at the hands of one another, but remain all in an ordered whole [*kosmos*] according to reason” (500b-c). In a cosmos, as in a healthy city, the parts are ordered to the common good of the whole. And because we imitate that which

we admire, the philosopher's soul inevitably reflects the tranquility and integrity of the ensemble of beings rather than the restless disorder of human competition for "honors, praises ... and prizes" that Socrates describes in the Cave Image of book 6 (500b-c, 516c).

I have lingered on certain passages having to do with the distinctive nature of the philosopher because they help us to see the origins of the political sickness. According to Socrates, the feverishness of the cities is rooted in the erotic incapacity and misdirection not of the human soul as such, but of the nonphilosophical many. But in that case, the political sickness is both pandemic and seemingly ineradicable. For if Adeimantus is correct that a multitude cannot accept that there is, for example, a Beautiful itself beyond the many beautiful things, it follows necessarily, as Socrates says, that "it is impossible for a multitude to be philosophical" (494a). And in any regime, the character of the many inevitably leaves its impress on the community as a whole. It would therefore seem that the best we can hope for from any political medicine is not to cure our disease, but merely to alleviate its symptoms.

Paradoxical and Contraindicated Treatments

Socrates' prescription for the ills of the cities is that philosophers must rule. Expressed in the terms of his nautical image, philosophers should take control of the helm. One very strong argument for their doing so is that their studies, by attuning them to the kind of goodness that is characteristic of wholes as wholes—a goodness that inheres in the internal arrangement of their parts—have prepared them to understand the essential relationship between social order and the common good. Another is that, because their desire for wisdom is consistent with the common good,

they will not attempt to subvert public power or treasure for their own private ends. But it does not follow, as Socrates implies it does, that philosophers *as such* possess the true art of piloting the ship of state (cf. 489a)—as if the true art of piloting were contained within the study of philosophy. Even if we suppose that the well-ordered political community is an image of the cosmos of Ideas that the philosopher contemplates, the ship of state moves on an ever-changing sea of events, and philosophy as Socrates describes it includes no study of the dynamics of these perilous waters. The same point is reflected in Socrates' suggestion in the Cave Image that the philosopher who returns from the sunlit uplands of the Ideas and the Good must adjust to the darkness before he can apply what he has learned to the governance of a human community. Nor does philosophy involve learning how to persuade or compel others to hand over political power. Nevertheless, I do not see these as decisive objections to the claim that philosophers should rule. Every ruler, after all, has a learning curve, and if the curve is in some respects longer and steeper for philosophers than for others, they make up for this disadvantage by being able to negotiate it more quickly and completely than nonphilosophers.

Socrates makes a convincing case that, both in character and intellect, no one would be better suited to govern than those he calls "philosophers." But even if philosophers *should* rule, there is very little possibility that they will ever actually do so. In the first place, any philosopher who sought political supremacy would be strongly opposed by all other interested parties. Socrates' nautical image is the core of his response to Adeimantus's assertion that the most decent of those who pursue philosophy are useless to the cities. "It's not natural," Socrates proclaims, "for the pilot to beg the sailors to be ruled by him"; rather, "it's necessary for a man who is sick ... to go to the doors of the doctor, and for every man needing to be ruled to

go to the doors of the one who is able to rule” (489b-c). Yet precisely this unnatural situation obtains in the case of the genuine philosopher, who is useless only because he is not used. The shipowner, after all, is of such a sort as to allow himself to be enchained by the sailors, while the latter would naturally be hostile to any other would-be pilots—especially those few virtuous men with whom they could not hope to form an alliance.

What is more, philosophers would be unable to persuade any “shipowner” or sovereign to give them power without finding some way of overcoming the bad reputation of their way of life. In this context, Socrates is compelled to explain the difference between genuine philosophers and those who take up philosophy although they are unsuited by nature to do so. As we saw earlier, Adeimantus maintains that most of those who spend much time in philosophy are “very twisted, not to say completely vicious.” The word translated here as “twisted” is *allokotous*, which literally means “different in rancor or ill-will”; in other words, these men are primarily characterized not by philosophical eros, but by an atypical kind of small-minded spiritedness. In acknowledging the truth of this charge, Socrates first makes it clear that the genuine or “useless” philosophers are in fact the few among the few. Most human beings, as we have seen, are by nature incapable of philosophy; of the few that remain, the greatest part is unable to resist the relentless social pressure to conform to the ways and opinions of the non-philosophical many. For whatever private philosophical education a young man may have had, Socrates explains, is likely to be “carried away” by the resounding “flood” of praise and blame that rushes in from all sides when men “sit down in large numbers together in assemblies or courts or army camps or any other common meeting of the multitude,” so that, in the end, “he’ll assert that the same things are noble and shameful as these men do, practice what they

practice, and be such as they are” (492b-c). Furthermore, some few clever men among the many who are by nature incapable of philosophizing nevertheless presume to be able to do so. These are the majority of so-called “philosophers,” and these are the ones Adeimantus calls twisted and vicious. Like all who have no notion of a life that transcends the confines of the Cave, these sham-philosophers in fact pursue conventional “honors, praises ... and prizes” (516c), but they do so under the guise of the love of wisdom. It is sobering to think that, while such narrow and unerotic souls may not have had any place in Plato’s Academy, they must—if Socrates is right—constitute the majority of those in the various departments of the modern academy who profess to love wisdom.

Given the multitude of competitors for ruling office and the difficulty nonphilosophers experience in distinguishing philosophers from their vicious imitators, it would seem that philosophers could not deliberately take power by means of persuasion, but would have to resort to force. One might well doubt that a violent revolution, especially one that involves expelling everyone over the age of ten (as Socrates recommends at 540e-41a), would be consistent with the purpose of establishing a just regime. But quite apart from this paradox, the only “philosophers” that would naturally be attracted to political power would be the vicious ones. Genuine philosophers would rather spend their time seeking wisdom than ruling other human beings. Socrates makes this clear in book 7, when he says that the philosophers in the city in speech would have to be compelled to reenter the Cave (520a-c). I suspect that it is for both of these reasons—the injustice of implementing philosophical rule by force, and the philosophers’ unwillingness to rule—that Socrates indicates in book 6 that the ascent (or rather, descent) of philosophers to political power is ultimately dependent on chance. “Neither a city nor a regime nor similarly a man would ever become

perfect,” he explains at 499b, “before some necessity by chance compels those few philosophers who are not vicious—the ones now called useless—to take charge of a city, whether they want to or not, and compels the city to obey.” We may note in passing that the “necessity” that might compel a philosopher at least to attempt to rule could include the prospect that the ship is about to go down. But even if it is necessary that *something* be done to stop an impending catastrophe, Socrates makes it clear that it is only “by chance”—that is by an unpredictable and lucky coincidence—that a philosopher will be the one to do it.

If we cannot reasonably expect that philosophers will rule, might it be possible for them to treat our political ills in a less direct, yet still essentially political manner? In particular, might philosophers undertake to serve those who *do* rule in an advisory capacity? Socrates points toward the danger of this strategy when he wonders “in what manner a city, taking philosophy in hand, will not be destroyed” (497d). This is a strange question, for it implies that philosophy runs the risk, under certain circumstances, of destroying the very community it is trying to save. While Socrates does not explain what he means here, one problem seems to be how to avoid the situation in which ailing patients usurp the authority that properly belongs to their doctor. If a city were simply and directly to “manage” or “use” philosophy (these being the relevant senses of the Greek participle *metaxeiridzomenē*, literally “taking in hand”), philosophy would be compelled to conform to the political sickness that it is supposed to treat. It would thus sink to the level of ideology, which is nothing other than debased or decayed philosophy. As such, it could hope only to feed the fever that it seeks to starve.

A remarkable illustration of just this point is furnished by Martin Heidegger’s “Rectoral Address,” which he delivered after

Hitler came to power in 1933. In this speech, Heidegger used his authority as the most famous living German philosopher and as the Rector of the University of Freiburg to support the social and political program of the new regime. Having argued in favor of the reorganization of the German university under the Nazis, and insisted on the university's essential role in what he calls "the historical mission of the German people," Heidegger concluded his lecture with a warning about the critical condition of the West:

Do we, or do we not, will the essence of the German university?... But no one will even ask us whether we do or do not will, when the spiritual strength of the West fails and the joints of the world no longer hold, when this moribund semblance of a culture caves in and drags all that remains strong into confusion and lets it suffocate in madness....

But we do will that our people fulfill its historical mission....

[And] we fully understand the splendor and the greatness of this setting out only when we carry within ourselves that profound and far-reaching thoughtfulness that gave ancient Greek wisdom the word: "All that is great stands in the storm ..."⁹

Heidegger borrows his lecture's last words from Plato's *Republic*, 497d. A more precise translation of the whole sentence from which he draws the phrase "All that is great stands in the storm" would be: "For all that is great is prone to fall, and truly, as the proverb says, beautiful things are hard." But it is no small irony that Heidegger—who speaks so confidently of the spiritual sickness of Western culture, and who supposes that Germany under Hitler may hold the cure—overlooks the immediately preceding sentence, in which Socrates asks "in what manner a city, taking philosophy in hand, will not be destroyed." And indeed, Heidegger's speech must be read today precisely as a cautionary tale about the danger of allowing philosophy to render service to a diseased regime in the form of ideology.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," trans. Karsten Harries, *Review of Metaphysics* 38.3 (1985), 480-81.

The example of Heidegger is perhaps instructive in another respect as well. Just before the passage Heidegger quotes, Socrates makes it clear that even genuine philosophers are to some extent deformed by the sickness of the cities. Philosophical souls, Socrates observes, would “flourish more fully” in a community that is suited to them, but “not one of the cities today is in a condition worthy of the philosophical nature. And this is why it is twisted and changed, and just as a foreign seed planted in alien soil tends to be overwhelmed, and disappear into a native type, so too this kind fails to maintain its own power, but falls away into an alien disposition” (497a-b). One implication of this observation is that philosophers are *never* entitled to assume that they themselves are free of the political disease. I believe that Heidegger is a case in point. In any event, Socrates implicitly warns that philosophers should refrain from attempting to implement any radical political treatment of this disease. For when it comes to sicknesses of the soul, the physician who has not already healed himself is obliged to exercise caution and moderation in attempting to heal others.

The Politics of Convalescence

The foregoing reflections suggest that philosophers cannot feasibly treat our political ills through the direct or indirect exercise of political power, not least because they themselves may be far from fully healthy. At the same time, Socrates points toward the alternative that I am calling the politics of convalescence—a politics that, in acknowledging the full complexity of our disease, practices a course of communal self-treatment. This politics, with a small ‘p,’ proceeds not by way of rule but by way of dialogue. Its primary aim is to assist us in becoming conscious of the nature and extent of the illness from which we suffer, because this self-knowledge is the first

and greatest step on the road to recovery. Philosophers can promote such self-knowledge by providing in their own speeches and deeds an admittedly provisional and potentially correctible standard of personal virtue and political health, and by helping us to identify the symptoms, explore the causes, and think through the advantages and disadvantages of various possible treatments of our disease. This is more or less what a medical textbook does. But it is also, as I have argued, what Socrates does in Plato's *Republic*. A medical textbook is not a prescription, but a tool that serves the essentially social process of teaching and learning the art of medicine. Just so, the *Republic* does not prescribe a specific cure for our political sickness. Rather, it is a book for teaching and learning through dialogue—one that addresses the deepest problems of our common life precisely insofar as it helps us to think together about these problems. It is only through such ongoing teaching and learning, Socrates suggests, that we may hope to keep the political disease in remission. If this is correct, the kind of thinking the *Republic* enables is—and always will be—as indispensable to our individual and communal health as the study and practice of medicine itself.