

The Political Pessimism of Plato's *Republic*

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In Plato's *Republic* Socrates expresses a deep pessimism about the possibility of empirical cities, composed of flesh-and-blood citizens, ever becoming just.¹ His reasoning is psychological. Given what he thinks is the nature of the human *psyche* it is inevitable that cities will be badly governed. It thus follows that what Socrates describes as his "city in speech" (*polin . . . logôî*: 369a6), his long presentation of what may appear to be a set of practical proposals for the amelioration of political life, cannot be implemented. At best "the beautiful city" (*kallipolei*: 527c2), as he later calls it, is finally no more than "a dream" (*to enupnion*: 443b8).²

The Third Wave

In Book V, Socrates deploys a metaphor to explain the three conditions that must be met for the city in speech to come into being. He likens them to treacherous "waves" through which he and his fellow city-founders must swim. The first is that men and women must do all the same jobs, including governing (see 455d). The second is that men, women and children must live communally rather than in private families (see 457d). But the third is the most

¹ Translations of the *Republic* are my own. The Greek text used is the Oxford edition of S.R. Slings (Oxford: 2003). This essay can be read as either a response to or a complement of Jacob Howland's article, "Plato's *Republic* and the Politics of Convalescence" in *American Dialectic* I.1 (2010), 1-17.

² My view, which here can only be asserted, is that Plato is entirely cognizant that the beautiful city cannot be implemented. What value its dream-like status thus has is another question I cannot address in this short paper.

difficult of all and is the linchpin of the central books of the *Republic*.

Unless philosophers rule (*basileusôsin*) in cities or those now called rulers and masters philosophize in a legitimate and adequate manner—unless, in other words, political power and philosophy coincide—there will be no end of evils (*kakôn*) in cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I suspect for the human race. (473c11-d6; lines 473d3-5 have been omitted)

If philosophers do not rule, cities will be badly governed and human life will be plagued by “evils.” Unfortunately it turns out that philosophers cannot rule. The first indication that this is so comes in Glaucon’s reaction to the third wave.

What a speech and argument you have unleashed, Socrates! You must expect that having uttered it many men, and not worthless ones, will rip off their clothes and being naked will grab whatever weapon they happen to find, and thus armed they will attack you and do terrible (*thaumasia*) things!” (473e4-474a3)

In response to Glaucon’s extraordinary outburst, Socrates proposes a strategy to protect himself from the naked men attacking him.

If we are somehow to escape the men you’re describing we must, it seems to me, distinguish **for them** (*pros autous*) who (*tinas*) these philosophers are, the ones we dare to say must rule. (474b4-6)

The passage implies that, first, what Socrates will next say, and this may include the remainder of Book V and all of Books VI and VII—in other words, the central sections of the dialogue and those typically considered the most philosophically significant—is addressed to these naked men. Second, what they need to understand is “who” philosophers are. Note this one word carefully for it suggests that what Socrates says next will provide an account of the intellectual character or temperament of the philosopher. If this is the case, the central books of the *Republic*, whose salient feature might seem to be their metaphysical or epistemological

import, are better construed as a form of psychology, as a *logos* of the human *psyche*. Such, at least, is the thesis of this paper. While it is undeniable that Socrates' discussions of the "idea of the Good" and the "divided-line" are immensely suggestive about the nature of reality or being, they actually tell us more about "who" philosophers are. More generally, they help us understand the psychological forces at work in both philosophers and non-philosophers that render justice in flesh-and-blood cities an impossibility.

To clarify, consider how Socrates begins his defense against the attack of the naked men. He asks what it means "to love something" (*philein ti*: 474c9) and then goes on to suggest that as a "lover of wisdom" the philosopher is similar to an "erotic man" (*erôtikon*: 474d3), to "lovers of wine" (*philoinous*: 475a5) and to "lovers of honor" (*philotimous*: 475a9). Such people have strong "desires" (*epithumêtai*: 475b1) and strive hard to get what they want. What makes philosophers special, then, is not that they love but what it is they love. And this is "everything that can be learned" (475c6).

As he so often does in this dialogue, Glaucon challenges Socrates by saying that other sorts of people also seem to have a passionate desire to learn new things. Consider, he says, "lovers of sights" (*philotheamones*: 475d2). Similar to those we would today call "tourists," they enjoy visiting new places and learning about different things. So too "lovers of hearing" (*philêkooi*: 475d3), those who enjoy conversation and the theatre, are "similar to philosophers" (475e2). What, then, is distinctive about the lover of wisdom?

Socrates agrees that philosophers are themselves "lovers of sights" but in one way only. What they most desire is the sight or vision "of the truth" (475e4). Glaucon wonders what he means. Socrates explains that ordinary lovers of sights and hearing "delight

in (*aspazontai*) beautiful sounds and colors and shapes" (476b5). They enjoy navigating through the variegated world revealed to them by their senses. But their "thinking (*dianoia*) is incapable of either seeing or delighting in the beautiful itself" (*autou de tou kalou*: 476b6-7).

This last phrase and one very close to it—namely, "beauty itself" (*auto de kallos*: 476c1)—are, of course, critical to understanding Plato's conception of philosophy. To oversimplify, they refer to the universal beauty that all particular beautiful things—and note the plurals at 476b5—have in common. As Socrates somewhat mysteriously puts it here, these particulars gain their beauty by "participating" (*metechonta*: 476c8) in "beauty itself." He does not elaborate. We are reminded here of the question Socrates asked at the end of Book I: "what is the just?" (354b4). Only by answering such a question and thus understanding what "justice itself" really is will the philosopher gain genuine "knowledge" (*gnômên*: 476d4). By contrast, ordinary folk such as tourists and theatregoers have no interest in Socratic inquiry. They are content to enjoy the sights and sounds their senses afford them and have no desire to discover the universal that binds these particulars together. Indeed, they are incapable of "delighting in" (*aspasasthai*: 476b7) the beautiful itself. Note that Socrates does not accuse them of lacking cognitive ability. Instead, their deficiency is a matter of intellectual temperament. For whatever reason, and even if their intelligence quotient is high, they take no pleasure and thus have no interest in pursuing the "what is it?" question Socrates favors.³ They are not impelled to seek the universal that lies behind the many particulars. Instead, they revel in the particulars themselves.

³ A good example is the character of Theodorus who appears in the *Theaetetus*.

Questions abound. What exactly are these universals? What is the ontological status of beauty itself and how does it differ from that of the sensible particular? How do the many beautiful things we see with our eyes “participate” in beauty itself? And how does such participation confer beauty on, for example, a painting or a face? Answers to these metaphysical questions may seem forthcoming at the end of Book V. This, however, is not quite the case.

Socrates begins innocuously enough: if someone “knows something” (*gignôskei ti*: 476e9), he says, then he knows “something that is” (*on*: 477a1). For, he argues, it is impossible to know “what is not” (*mê on*: 477a1). After all, if something “is not” it cannot “be” an object of knowledge. Knowing and “being” thus go hand in glove. As Socrates puts it, if something is “completely knowable” (*pantelôs gnôston*) then it must “completely be” (*to men pantelôs on*: 477a3). He also says that “knowledge is directed upon what is” (*Epistêmê men ge pou epi tôi onti*: 478a7).

The connection between being and knowing dates back to Parmenides. His intuition, one that Plato (and later Aristotle) shared, was that knowing requires a stable, invariable object, an object that simply “is.” Unlike opinion or belief (or *doxa*, which Socrates will soon discuss), knowledge is never false. So, for example, you know that $2 + 2 = 4$. And the truth of this equation never changes. Even if some day you develop Alzheimer’s Disease and forget that $2 + 2 = 4$, the fact remains that it always “is.” The equation, then, expresses a permanent and unchanging truth whether you apprehend it or not. By contrast, if something is changing then it cannot be known. If the sum of $2 + 2$ were to change on a daily basis then you would never be able to know what it is.

This line of thought, which of course begs for elaboration, is especially pertinent for Socrates since, as indicated by his asking

what justice is at 354b5, he seems convinced that real knowledge requires definitions. A definition is a *logos* that provides an answer to a “what is X?” question. This question cannot be answered, as Socrates’ interlocutors regularly discover, by offering a list of particular instances of X. Instead, it requires an answer that would apply to and thereby unify all such particulars. Socrates wants to know the essence of justice or justice itself, which is the abiding source, the connective tissue, of all particular instances of justice. The particulars may all change but justice itself never does. It simply is.

To put this point into grammatical terms: verbs in English and Greek have a past, present and future tense. If something is changing, as all sensible particulars are, it partakes in all three. The beautiful painting which **is** now in the museum **was** painted in 1950. In 2050 it **will** be gone. By contrast, beauty itself always and simply is. Residing only in the present it partakes of neither past nor future. As such, it is entirely stable and therefore, Socrates seems to be arguing here, it and it alone can function as the object of real knowledge.

Plato deploys a variety of terms in order to make sense of all this. Above we saw *to on*, the neuter participle of the verb *eimi*, “to be,” accompanied by the definite article that transforms it into a substantive. In other instances, such as one that follows shortly below, he will use the articular infinitive, *to einai*. On other occasions—notably at 509a8—he uses *ousia*, which is derived from *ousa*, the feminine participle (singular, nominative) of *eimi*.⁴ Whatever term is used it is meant to signify changeless “being” as opposed to the continually changing particular items, like the beautiful painting in the museum. Such particulars “participate in

⁴ This word also means “substance” or “property” and Socrates may have been punning with it at 330d3.

both being and non-being” (478e1-2). They come into being, change and then perish. We encounter them through our senses. By contrast, “beauty itself” does not change. It simply is. As such, it can only be accessed through the intellect. To sum up, Socrates offers an analogy. As knowledge is to being, so “opinion” (*doxa*: 480a1) is to what is changing. Philosophers are those who seek knowledge of what-is. Most other people, by contrast, are lovers of sights and sounds; that is, they accept what their senses present to them as real. They end up as “lovers of opinion” (*phildoxous*: 480a6) rather than of wisdom.

Again, the issues broached here would typically be categorized as belonging to “Platonic metaphysics” or his “theory of Ideas.”⁵ But what is striking about this passage is how conceptually sparse Socrates’ treatment of them is. He simply does not supply the details needed to construct a robust metaphysical theory in which “participation” and entities like beauty itself are integral. Perhaps this is because his goal is not to do metaphysics. Recall that here he is addressing the naked men who attacked him when he proposed the third wave, and he is explaining to them “who” philosophers are. They are human beings who long for universality, presence and stability, who are troubled by the passage of time and so take greater delight in the prospect of changeless beauty than they do in particular and therefore imperfect instantiations of that beauty. What exactly beauty itself might be, or even whether it actually exists, is another question entirely. What is salient here is that philosophers are a psychological type. As Socrates later puts it,

Philosophical natures . . . always erotically pursue (*aei erôsin*) the study which clarifies for them that being (*ousias*) which always is (*aei ousês*) and which doesn’t wander on account of generation and decay. (485a10-b3)

⁵ Socrates mentions “the idea (*idean*) of beauty itself that always stays self-same” at 479a1-2.

Socrates is describing a specific inflection of human eros. Philosophers are people who “strive” (*hamillasthai*) for “what is” (*pros to on*: 490a6-7) and are “erotically driven by” (*tou erôtos*) the urge to grasp “the nature of each thing itself that is” (490b2-3). As such they are—indeed given the nature of the human *psyche* they necessarily are—extremely rare. Why this is so is progressively explained as *Republic* VI and VII unfold.

The Ship of State

Socrates next explains, albeit imagistically, why the philosopher whose psychological portrait he has just painted will never govern flesh-and-blood cities. He begins by asking Glaucon to bring to mind the following scenario. Imagine a ship whose “shipmaster” (488a8) is bigger and stronger than everyone else on board. Unfortunately he also has poor eyesight, is “rather deaf” (488b1) and doesn’t know much “about nautical matters” (488b2). With such an ineffectual and incompetent master the most ambitious of the sailors sense a power vacuum and an opening for themselves. They begin “fighting” (*stasiizontas*) with one another over the “piloting” (*kubernêseôs*: 488b3) of the ship.

Two notes: first, *ho kubernêtês*, “the pilot of a ship,” is the root of our word “governor.” Second, recall that in Book IV Socrates identified injustice as precisely what is taking place here: “conflict” or “in-fighting” (*stasin*: 444b1). Socrates’ ship, then, represents a typical (and therefore unjust) city whose leading citizens are fighting to gain power and become its ruler.

Each of the sailors thinks he should rule or “pilot” (488b4) the ship despite the fact that none of them “has ever learned the art” (*technên*) of piloting nor has had a proper “teacher” (488b5). In

fact, these sailors are so hostile to the very idea of piloting being “teachable” (488b6) that if someone were merely to suggest that it was they would “be ready to cut him to pieces” (488b7). The virulence of their reaction is comparable to that of the naked men who were outraged by Socrates’ third wave. For some reason, ordinary people become furious at the mere suggestion that someone knowledgeable should be in charge of their affairs.⁶

The sailors are willing to do anything to gain control of the ship. If they fail to “persuade” (488c3) they will not hesitate to resort to “killing” (488c4) their rivals or throwing them off the ship. When one of them finally wins the battle for power the other sailors will praise him by calling him “knowledgeable in piloting and in nautical matters” (488d1-2). In fact, however, the sailor who has successfully commandeered the ship actually knows nothing about the art of piloting. Instead, he has only proven to be “clever” (*deinos*: 488d2) at winning the power-struggle for the rudder.⁷

During this ugly battle one person has been entirely forgotten: the “true pilot” (488d4). Unlike the other sailors who are focused on the political machinations transpiring on board the ship, this person has been studying the “stars and winds and everything else that properly belongs to the art” (*têi technêi*: 488d7) of piloting. It is only by paying close attention to what’s going on up in the sky that a pilot can actually “govern” the ship effectively and guide it to its destination. The power-hungry sailors have no inkling of this fact and so they dismiss the true pilot as a “star-gazer” (488e3) and as “useless” (489a1). They do not realize that knowledge of the stars is

⁶ Later in the dialogue Socrates gives an account of the institution of philosophy as it exists in cities like Athens and explains why it, rather than genuine philosophy, sparks the anger of the many. He even suggests that were the many to understand properly who the philosopher really is they might even accept the third wave (see 501e). This may be counted as the most optimistic moment in the central passage.

⁷ The word *deinos* is frequently associated with those “clever” speakers, the Sophists.

required to sail the ship (of state) well. Indeed, they violently deny that this is so.

The import of this image, Socrates says to Adeimantus, is not hard to grasp. The relationship between the imaginary ship and “the true pilot” is like that between cities and “true philosophers” (489a5). Just as was stated in the third wave, if philosophers don’t govern the city—if they don’t pilot the ship of state—the city will be unjust.

Push this image one step further and an even more dire implication emerges. Because the true pilot is busy studying the stars he will be oblivious to the competition going on among the sailors on the ship. As a result, he cannot develop an effective strategy to gain control of the rudder. This implies not only that the one person who actually knows how to sail the ship will not govern it but, even worse, that he will never do so. Because the skill-set required to gain political power and the psychological disposition that leads to the acquisition of this skill-set have nothing do with the art of piloting, because the true pilot cannot be recognized or appreciated by the other sailors on board, and because the true pilot is not the least inclined toward acquiring the skills needed to gain control of the ship or to persuade the sailors, the ship of state is doomed to be governed badly.

To reformulate: in order to gain control of the ship a sailor must keep his gaze steadfastly horizontal; that is, he must keenly observe his fellow sailors and those who are competing against him for the rudder. By contrast, to guide the ship correctly one must look away from it, upward to the inhuman sky. Because of this intrinsic discrepancy, this fundamental discordance, the ship is doomed to sail badly.

Socrates' Empirical Excursus

Socrates makes the dire implications of the ship of state even more explicit as Book VI unfolds. As he frequently does when conversing with Adeimantus (who entered at 487b1), his focus becomes rather empirical. There are, he tells him, three reasons why philosophers “are not honored in cities” (489a8) such as Athens. First, there is the resistance that comes from the vast majority of citizens, which Socrates here attributes to “the necessary badness (*ponêria*) of the many” (489d11). As he explains, it is impossible, “for a multitude to be philosophical” (494a3). The reason why is similar to those discussed above. Most people are not able to “endure or believe” the fact that “the beautiful itself” (*auto to kalon*) is far more interesting and desirable, not to mention more ontologically significant, than the “many beautiful things” (*ta polla kalla*) (493e2-494a1). The word “endure” (*anexetai*) suggests once again that there is some psychological force working upon these people that leads them to dismiss the Socratic “what is it?” question. For they do not merely dislike that question, they hold it in contempt.⁸

The second reason why philosophers are not honored in cities is that the city is extremely seductive. The lure of money, fame and power is hard to resist, especially for talented and ambitious young people who (like Glaucon) are potential philosophers. With their ability to make and analyze arguments, learn quickly, and ask questions, they can, if they apply themselves, often succeed mightily in the public realm. Playing to, benefiting, or benefiting from a crowd is an attractive prospect for such people (see 492b-c).

Third, because the best and brightest abandon philosophy, as they so regularly do, their place is taken by “little people”

⁸ As suggested in footnote #6, Socrates' contempt for the many seems to relent at 499d-502c where he seem to concede that they are educable. It is, frankly, difficult to square this passage with much of Book VI.

(*anthrôpiskoi*: 495c9) who are eager to fill the gap. Even if the many are not genuinely philosophical they still hold the institution of philosophy in some regard. Unfortunately, at least according to Socrates' empirical analysis, it will be populated by professors rather than genuine thinkers. They will hardly inspire and certainly cannot guide the youngsters who might be interested in asking real questions.

To sum up so far: only "a few escape" (490e2) the seductions of the city, the resistance to genuine philosophy on the part of the many, and the vacuous pretense of professional philosophers. Socrates mentions two who have. One is his friend Theages (496c), who was sickly and so could not enter public life. The second is himself. His "demonic sign" (*daimonion*: 496c4), which belongs to him alone, kept him from entering the political fray.

The capstone of Socrates' empirical excursus takes the form of a simile. The philosopher in the flesh-and-blood city is like someone who takes shelter from a storm—from the turmoil and in-fighting of political life—by standing under "a little wall" (*teichion*: 496d7). Here he can be found "doing the things that belong to himself" (*ta hautou prattôn*: 496d6).⁹ As such, the philosopher becomes a witness to injustice rather than an actively political person who works and hopes for concrete change.

The Divided Line

What scholars call the "divided-line," presented by Socrates at the end of Book VI, provides resources for developing a conceptual account of why both the ship of state and the empirical excursus have such dire implications for political life. Before this (505a-509c)

⁹ Recall that justice was defined as *to ta hautou prattein* at 433a8.

Socrates had broached “the idea of the Good.” As the source of knowledge and truth, which it exceeds in beauty, it is “beyond being (*epekeina tês ousias*) surpassing it in rank and power” (509b8-9). This paper will not address this venerable passage.¹⁰ Instead, simply note that upon hearing Socrates’ description of it Glaucon is stunned and rather “foolishly” bellows, “Apollo! What daimonic hyperbole!” (509c1-2). Glaucon is hungry for elaboration—for such is his erotic temperament—and so Socrates supplies him with yet another image.

Socrates begins this extraordinarily dense passage by reminding Glaucon of the analogy between the sun and the idea of the Good. Each “is the ruler” (509d2) of one of “two forms: the visible and the intelligible” (509d4). He then tells Glaucon how to construct an image to illustrate what he means. First, he invites his young companion to imagine a “line” divided into two “unequal segments” (509d6-7). Perhaps Glaucon responds by actually drawing such a line in the sand. Whether he does or not readers would be well advised to follow Socrates’ instructions and to draw and then divide a line. Before proceeding to do so, however, note that Socrates does not tell Glaucon whether the line should be vertical or horizontal or which of the two segments is larger. Based upon a later comment where he describes one segment as “higher” (511a6) and for reasons supplied below, it is safe to assume it is vertical. For reasons that will soon become apparent, it is convenient to make the line 9 units long with the top section 6 units long and the bottom 3. The divided-line would now look like this:

¹⁰ Although do note that the first characterization of the Good is explicitly psychological: it is “that which every soul (*psuchê*) pursues and for the sake of which everything acts” (505e1-2).

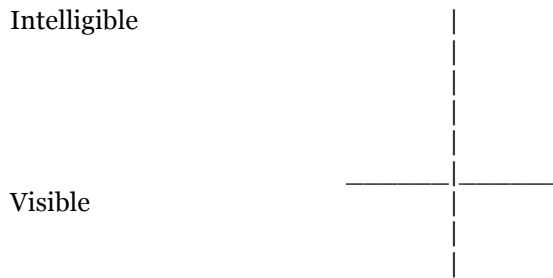


Figure #1

Next, Socrates tells Glaucon “again to cut” (509d7) each of the two segments “in the same ratio” (*ana ton auton logon*: 509d7-8) as that between the first two segments, which was 6:3. Making an analogous cut in both segments—that is, at a 2:1 ratio—will result in a divided-line with four segments. Label the top segment as A, the second one B, the next C and the lowest D. Recall that A and B together represent “the intelligible” while C and D represent “the visible.” If the assumptions mentioned above hold, the line now looks like this:

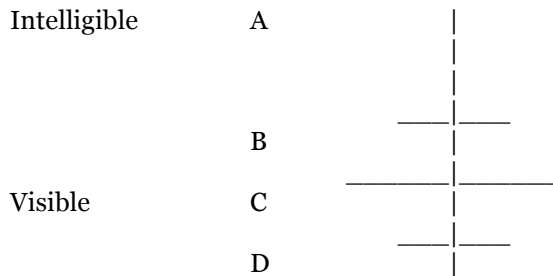


Figure #2

Readers will quickly discover that the two middle sections, B and C, are equal. (A is 4 units long, B and C are 2 and D is 1.) In fact, it can be proven that regardless of the length of the line or the ratio in which it is divided, following Socrates’ instructions will

always yield the equality of B and C.¹¹ This point is crucial and its meaning will be elaborated shortly.

Socrates then proceeds to discuss the four segments on both sides of the divided-line. At the end he will have eight items each of which is labeled in Figure #3 below. Note that two of these names have to be inferred and are not found explicitly in the text.

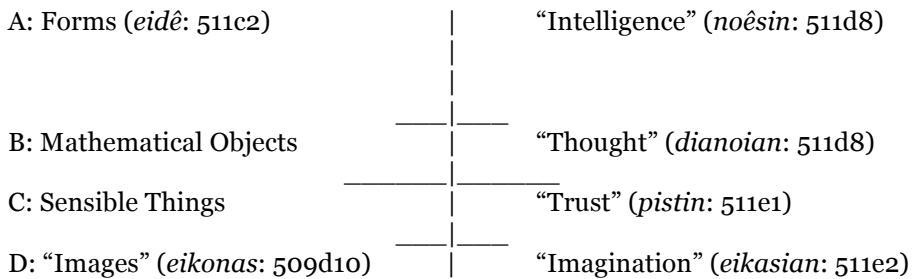


Figure #3

Socrates explicitly gives names to the four “affections of the soul” (*pathêmata en têi psuchêi*: 511d7), the cognitive or psychological states depicted on the right, that apprehend the corresponding objects on the left. The lowest (A) is “imagination” (*eikasian*: 511e2), which is the ability to apprehend “images” (*eikonas*). Corresponding to “sensible things” (C) is “trust” (*pistin*: 511e1). This word suggests the fact that most human beings simply trust that the things we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands are real. Corresponding to mathematical objects (B) is

¹¹ The algebraic (that is, modern) version of the proof is rather easy to construct.

1. $\frac{A + B}{C + D} = \frac{A}{C} = \frac{B}{D}$ (from Socrates’ instructions on how to divide the line)
2. $AB + B^2 = AC + AD$ (from 1.)
3. $AD = BC$ (from 1.)
4. $AB + B^2 = AC + BC$ (from 2. and 3.)
5. $B(A + B) = C(A + B)$ (from 4.)
6. $B = C$ (from 5.)

dianoian (511d8), the ability to think-through problems. Finally there is *noêsin* (511d8), which is the intellectual capacity to apprehend the forms.

At the bottom of the left side of the line in segment D are “images” such as “shadows” or reflections one would see in water. Above this in C is “that of which this [an image] is like” (510a5). These are sensible things. To understand what Socrates is talking about, imagine seeing a reflection of your face in a mirror. It looks like your face but “in truth” (510a9) it is inferior. For it is only an image and not the thing itself (namely, your face). Most important, it is entirely dependent on the original (sensible) thing of which it is merely an image. If you walk away from the mirror then your reflection will disappear. The image has no reality without the original. By contrast, if the mirror should darken and you no longer could see your reflection in it, your actual face would remain unaffected.

This notion of dependency explains why the divided-line should be drawn vertically. Images (D) are inferior to and thus lower than sensible things (C) such as the animals and plants of which they are images. More specifically, they are ontologically inferior. Because of their dependence on sensible things images have less “being” or reality than the originals that are responsible for them.

Glaucon has trouble following what comes next (510b4-8). This is hardly surprising since without warning Socrates starts talking about “hypotheses” (510b5). He explains that mathematicians who study subjects like “geometry and calculation” (510c2-3) treat “the odd and the even, figures and the three angles” (510c4)—what are called “mathematical objects” in Figure #3—“as if they know” (510c6) what they are. They “make them into hypotheses,” which means that they simply (and unreflectively)

“hypothesize or “put it down”—for this is the literal meaning of *hupotithêmi*, the root of “hypothesis”—that and what such mathematical objects are. They do not provide a “rational account” (*logon*: 510c6) or argument about their existence; they simply assume them. It may be difficult to see the relevance of these comments but the notion of the hypothesis will be returned to shortly.

Socrates’ next remark sheds some light on the relationship between B and C. Again, he reverts to the example of geometers. They draw diagrams and so use “visible forms” (510d5) when they are trying to prove their theorems. But in studying these diagrams they are not actually “thinking about them but about those things concerning which these [visible diagrams] are like” (510d6-7). And these would be mathematical objects like “the square itself” (510d7-8). In other words, when studying the objects located in B they use items from C.

Imagine you were being taught how to prove the Pythagorean theorem. You would first be asked to draw a right-triangle. Next you might be asked to draw three squares on each of the three sides of the triangle. With these figures now before your eyes you would then be able to follow the steps of the proof that demonstrated that $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. But in “thinking through” the steps of this proof—and this is the literal meaning of *dianoumenoi*—you would not be thinking about the specific triangle that you constructed. For that is merely an image or representation of all right triangles or of what Socrates would call the “triangle itself.” As a student of geometry you look through the figure, which by itself is a sensible thing, in order to ‘see’ the mathematical object that is the true subject of the proof. Or as Socrates puts it, the “soul” (511a5) of the geometer “uses as images the very things that had been imaged by the segment below” (511a7-8). In other words, the same relationship between D

and C—namely, that between the image and the original which is responsible for the image—also holds between the items in C and B.

Something astonishing has just happened. The sensible world, with which we are so hugely familiar and take for granted, has been transformed into an image of a higher reality, namely, mathematical objects. This is strange for mathematical objects are neither visible nor tangible. Their being is “intelligible” and so they can only be thought. Nonetheless, they are responsible for the sensible things in C that we see and touch. As such, the intelligible is ontologically superior to, because it is responsible for, the sensible.

Needless to say, most people don't see things this way. For them nothing is more real than what they can touch with their hands. But philosophers are different. For them what is most real is what can be thought. This tells us much about “who” they are.

When Socrates begins to explain segment A, which he describes as “the other cut of the intelligible” (511b2), he speaks cryptically. It is, he says, “that of which reason itself grasps by means of the power of dialectic” (*têi tou dialegesthai dunamei*: 511b3-4). To explain, he returns to the idea of hypotheses. As mentioned above, mathematicians simply assume that entities like “the odd and the even, figures and the three angles” (510c4)—the very entities that constitute their subject matter—exist and are what they are. They “make them into hypotheses” (510c6), which means that they do not attempt to justify or ground them in any higher intelligible principles. Philosophers also treat mathematical objects as “hypotheses” but they do so only in the most literal sense of the word. They “put them under” (*hupo . . . tithêmi*) themselves and use them as “steppingstones” (*epibaseis*: 511b5) and as “impulses” or “starts” (*hormas*: 511b5; from *hormaô*, “to set in motion”) to propel themselves forward and move upwards from B to A. Such is the “power of dialectic.”

Recall that segments B and C of the line are equal and this is the only fact about the line that is certain. (It is impossible to determine which of the two segments in Figure #1 is longer or whether the line is vertical or horizontal.) This glaringly salient geometric fact, this invariable and necessary feature of the visible diagram, stands in stark contrast to the otherwise ambiguous features of the divided-line. What it symbolizes, I propose, is the fundamental affinity between mathematical objects and sensible things. This insight dates back to the Pythagoreans and is something we take for granted today. Think of Galileo's famous teaching that nature is like a book written in mathematical characters. In other words, the laws of physics, which explain the movement of all sensible things, are expressed mathematically. Mathematics, then, articulates the structure of sensible reality. This is why mathematical physics can be so powerfully applied to sensible reality. Think of engineers. After having studied a bit of mathematics they apply what they have learned to designing bridges or airplanes. Their doing so is paradigmatic of what has come to be known as "technology" (derived from the Greek *technê*). Glaucon, sharp as always, intuits this point when he mentions "the arts" (*tôn technôn*: 511c6). The technicians use hypotheses as "principles" (*archai*: 511d7) from which they move downwards towards sensible reality (C) rather than as "steppingstones" to propel them upwards towards higher intelligible principles (A). By contrast, a practitioner of "dialectic," whatever exactly that is, "makes no use at all of the sensible" (511b5-6). Instead, he turns around and goes from B upwards to A. He resists the powerful lure of the sensible and thereby defies what could be called "intellectual gravity." He proceeds upwards until he reaches "what is non-hypothetical at the beginning of the whole" (*mechri tou anupothetou epi tēn tou pantos archēn*: 511b5-6). Presumably this is the "idea of the Good" (see

517b8). When the dialectician arrives at the top he then reverses direction and “comes back down” (*katabainêi*: 511c1). However, in doing so “he uses forms themselves and goes through forms into forms and finally ends in forms” (511c2). In other words, he gives an account of all lower sections of the line but does so purely in terms of the forms. In some manner that Socrates does not describe, mathematical objects (B) seem now to be images of the forms (A).

On the one hand, the divided-line might be construed as an image meant to depict all of reality, interconnected and whole; in other words, as a representation of a metaphysical theory. On the other (and for the purpose of this paper more important) hand, it is also a grid on which to map two basic intellectual temperaments. Most people use their intelligence technically; that is, in the practice of “the arts” (*technai*). As such they are moved by the force of “intellectual gravity.” So, for example, having learned a bit of mathematics they apply their knowledge to effect change in the sensible world. They make something or get something done. The fact that segments B and C are equal symbolizes how efficacious such work can be. For the image suggests that the sensible world is structured mathematically. As a result, the attraction of the *technai* is nearly irresistible and it is no wonder that the engineer is held in such high regard. By contrast, those who practice dialectic resist the force of intellectual gravity. Their erotic propensity is to fly upwards, to reject the prospect of application and the downward pull of the sensible world as they inquire into the intelligible grounding of mathematics and the rest of reality.

In Book VII, when discussing the curriculum that philosophers must master, Socrates makes this point explicit. When they study mathematics—when, that is, they ascend from C to B on the divided-line—they must be prevented from going back down, from returning to C. They must not behave in a “common

fashion;”¹² that is, they must not apply their knowledge for the sake of useful application in the sensible world but instead use it for “turning the soul itself around, away from becoming and toward truth and being” (525c5-6). The philosopher, unlike even the best and brightest of the many, exerts great psychic energy to resist the pull of gravity. And only a very few souls have the erotic disposition that allows them even to attempt doing so.

To conclude this section: Socrates provides only minimal guidance as to how the image of the divided-line could be translated into a detailed and compelling metaphysical theory. Perhaps that is because he is more interested in deploying it for the sake of repelling the attack of the naked men and explaining to them “who” the philosophers are.

The Cave

Perhaps because he is aware of how difficult it is to unpack the conceptual implications of the divided-line (not to mention the idea of the Good), Socrates shifts gears at the beginning of Book VII. He turns to yet another image, this one concerning human nature with respect to its “education and the lack of education” (514a2). He instructs Glaucon to imagine that there are human beings living in an underground “cave-like” (514a3) dwelling. Since childhood these strange creatures have had their legs and necks “in shackles” (514a5). As a result, they are unable “to turn around” (*periagein*: 514b3). Because they can only look forward they are unable to see that behind them is a “fire” (514b4) and that between the fire and

¹² The Greek here (525c2) is *idiôtikôs*, which would be more familiarly translated as “in a private fashion.” But the word can also mean “commonplace” and given the context here, where it refers to those who are not philosophers, that is the better choice.

the “prisoners” (515a4) there is a “little wall” (*teichion*: 514b5),¹³ which Socrates likens to the kind built by “conjurers.” What he has in mind here is probably something like a puppet show. For along the wall there are people carrying all kinds of “utensils” as well as “statues of men” (514c1) and other animals. The shadows” (515a7) cast by these objects on the wall, or what we can imagine as a kind of screen, in front of the shackled prisoners is all they can see.

At this point, and characteristically, Glaucon cannot contain himself. “Strange!” he blurts out. “You are talking about strange images and prisoners!” (515a4). Nonetheless, Socrates assures him, they are “like us” (515a5). The divided-line helps explain why. Refer to figure #3 and recall that the image-original relationship spans all four segments of the line. Shadows (D) are images of sensible things (C), which in turn are images of mathematical objects (B), which in turn are images of forms (A). Most people—think again of the “lovers of sight” from Book V—are preoccupied with sensible things and at best learn only a bit of mathematics, which they (driven by the force of intellectual gravity) then apply. In other words, having reached B they turn back down to C and use their knowledge of mathematics to manipulate sensible things. As such, they are firmly ensconced within images. Because they are, to shift to a contemporary metaphor, “glued to the screen” they mistakenly think that what they see before them is the sum total of reality. Like the shackled prisoners who are unable to turn around, they are unaware that sensible things, and even mathematical objects, are no more than images of a higher, intelligible reality, namely forms that stand behind or ground everything else.

The next story Socrates tells is about the liberation of (a few of) the prisoners, the “loosening” of their shackles and the

¹³ Socrates used the same word at 496d7 to name the “little wall” under which philosophers in the empirical city take shelter.

subsequent “cure” of their “thoughtlessness” (515c4-5). At some point a prisoner is released and “compelled (*anankazoito*) to stand up suddenly and to turn his neck around and to walk and to look towards the light” (515c6-8). Note well that this prisoner must be forced to stand up. This makes sense. After all, if you had been sitting strapped to a chair for your entire life it would be difficult for you to stand on your own. Equally important, Socrates makes much of the fact that the prisoner who undergoes this process—which we know to be an image of education—“would be in pain” (515c8) when he sees the “bright flashes” (515d1) emitted by the fire. His eyes, having been accustomed to the dark pallor of the cave, would have trouble adjusting to strong light. (Note the mention of pain at 515e1, 515e7 and 516a1.) At least according to Socrates, then, philosophical education not only hurts but requires a teacher or guide of some sort to compel students to undergo a painful experience that they would otherwise avoid.

The pain experienced by the newly liberated prisoner would become particularly acute if “someone were to tell him” (515d2) that what he had been seeing before his shackles were removed was “nonsense” (515d3).¹⁴ Only as he nears the bright light of the fire will the prisoner actually get “closer to reality” (515d3), to “being” or what really is, as opposed to the images in which he had previously been saturated.

Imagine someone were to drag you away from your computer or phone and tell you that everything that has ever appeared on your screen, every web-site you have visited, every text you have sent and picture you have seen, is worthless trash. Imagine learning that your entire life has been wasted among images and shadows and that you don’t have a clue what is real. This would hurt. Such, at

¹⁴ Note that at 336c1 Thrasymachus uses this word to describe what Socrates was saying.

least, is what Socrates predicts for his prisoner. He will be “perplexed” (*aporein*: 515d6) and even want to return to his shackles! For he will “suppose that the things he had seen then”—namely, the shadows cast by the fire—“are more truthful than what is now being shown” (515d7). The force of intellectual gravity is that strong. Once again, the prisoner must be compelled to resist it and thereby continue his education. Someone must “force him to look at the light itself” (515d9). Only then will he acknowledge that his previous existence had been a sham.

The prisoner must go higher yet and eventually leave the cave altogether. Whoever is guiding him must next “drag him by force through the difficult ascent” (515e6) until he sees “the light of the sun” (515e7). Because his eyes are not accustomed to such strong light at first the prisoner will be unable to see “the things that are now said to be true” (516a3). Presumably this phrase refers to the intelligible entities on the upper segment of the divided-line, which are here represented by the things that exist outside (above) the cave.

The prisoner/student will require a period of “habituation” so that his eyes can adjust to the bright light of reality. Only gradually will he be able to “see the things above” (516a5). At first, he will only be able to make out “shadows” (516a6). Note, however, that these are different from the shadows he saw in the cave, which were cast by the various artifacts carried by the puppeteers. These shadows are images of natural things “themselves” (516a8). Again, a parallel with the divided-line is suggested. The shadows in the cave are like the images at the bottom of the line (D). The shadows above ground are like sensible things (C) which are themselves images of mathematical objects (B). The student makes progress and slowly develops the capacity to look at the sky, the stars and the moon. Finally, when his eyes are fully activated he will be able to look at the

sun “itself with respect to itself” (516b5). The liberated prisoner has somehow managed to resist the force of intellectual gravity and so has reached the pinnacle of the ascent.

Conclusion

The Socrates of Plato’s *Republic* is profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of empirical cities like Athens ever becoming just. His reasoning is psychological. Human beings, virtually by nature, are intellectually disposed toward the *technai*, the technical application of bits of knowledge to the sensible world. Their paradigm is mathematized science for, as the equality of the two middle sections of the divided-line symbolizes, it is uniquely and powerfully efficacious in the sensible realm. Simply put, it works. And most people want to do what they think is real work.

But not philosophers. They are the strange birds, few in number, who want to fly rather than descend back into the cave, who want to continue their study of the stars rather than redirecting their gaze to the sailors on the ship of state. For whatever reason—and it may be one like Theages’ sickliness—they are erotically oriented to what is beyond human touch and time. They strive mightily for being and truth, for what is changeless and present. Even to attempt this, not to mention succeeding, they must resist what for most of humanity is an enormously powerful force: that of intellectual gravity.