

POLITY AND ECONOMY IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC**

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*Abstract: Although the architectonic of Plato's best city is dazzling, some critics find its detailed prescriptions inimical to human freedom and well-being. Most notably, Karl Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies* sees it as a proto-totalitarian recipe, choking all initiative and variety out of the citizenry. This essay does not directly respond to Popper's critique but instead spotlights a strand in the dialogue that positions Plato as an advocate of regulatory relaxation and economic liberty to an extent otherwise unknown in the ancient world and by no means unopposed in ours. His contribution to liberal political economy thereby merits greater attention and respect.*

KEY WORDS: Liberalism, Plato, political economy, *Republic*, spontaneous order

I.

Not least within Plato's array of skills is his flair for casting in dramatic relief points he wishes specially to highlight. Complementing this capacity is a facility for de-emphasizing episodes in the text, hiding them, as it were, in plain sight. In no dialogue are these rhetorical tropes more pronounced than in *Republic*. Construction of the ideal society in the first half of the dialogue is tied together by navigation of "three waves" that imperil and attract Socrates' young interlocutors and, not coincidentally, scores of generations of readers. The waves are presented as preposterous yet indispensable, each more so than its predecessor. First, the ruling guardians of the society, both male and female, are themselves to forgo ownership of private property. Second, they similarly are to eschew spouses and children they can identify as their own. Finally, atop this guardian pyramid, serving as kings to all those below are . . . philosophers! From Aristotle to the present these proposals have received endless discussion.¹

* Earlier versions of this essay were presented to the 2018 PPE Conference in New Orleans and then in December 2018 in Tucson. Particularly at the latter venue I received numerous helpful suggestions, as I did from an anonymous referee for this journal. James Cargile, Linda Gosnell, Ian McCready-Flora and David Schmitz helped me avert various errors. The essay began as an extended conversation with Jeff Carroll concerning the central passage investigated above. It would not have been written without this stimulus.

¹ Of course the wave motif is not the only high-profile aspect of *Republic*. From the death-match between Socrates and Thrasymachus in the opening book through the vivid analogies in the middle books to the myth of Er near its end, there is no shortage of peak moments. Other de-emphasized episodes include Clitophon's provocative suggestion in Book I 340a7-b9 which is then conspicuously ignored by all parties.

Snuck in between the waves is a proposition much less visited, almost anonymous in most recountings of *Republic*. At an apparent lull in the discussion of Book IV, we have this exchange:²

SOCRATES: [W]hat about all the marketplace business, the contracts people make with one another in the marketplace, for example, and contracts with handicraftsmen and slanders, injuries, indictments, establishing juries, paying or collecting whatever dues are necessary in marketplace and harbors, and, in a word, the entire regulation of marketplace, city, harbor, or what have you—dare we legislate about any of these?

ADEIMANTUS: No, it would not be appropriate to dictate to men who are fine and good. For they will easily find out for themselves whatever needs to be legislated about such things. (425c9-e1)

No rationale is cited for this exchange. It doesn't fit in any obvious way with what precedes—conventions of decorum for the young—or what follows—criticism of excessive reliance on health care. Adeimantus takes Socrates to be inquiring whether he and the brothers should at this point put forth some rules concerning such economic activity or whether the entire matter should be left to subsequent determination by the guardians of the city. Socrates does not confirm that understanding but neither does he reject it. Nor do they return to the subject subsequently. It would appear that the episode leads precisely nowhere. Of course even Plato is entitled to some downtime, but before concluding that this passage is a nullity, alternative interpretations ought to be considered.

Had Adeimantus read to the end of the dialogue in which he has a co-starring role, he would not have been so quick to suppose that Socrates is strongly motivated to avoid bothering the guardians-to-be of his best polis with tediously intrusive tasks. First, it is not yet announced that the rulers are to be philosophers for whom metaphysics is the highest of callings; that is the final of the three waves. Second, once philosophers do assume the helm of the best city, they are required to occupy themselves with several varieties of distinctly unphilosophical minutia: arranging matings, for example. Third, the dialogue has already offered a preview of fine-grained regulation: subjects to be included in the guardians' education, permitted and prohibited musical modes, and, of course, the text of the Noble Lie that serves as the catechism for all citizens. Deference to the future rulers does not seem to have much bearing on Socrates' program. Rather, as will be argued in this essay, it is the nature of the particular tasks cited in the passage that render them fraught with peril for the workability of the Kallipolis (the Best City). Practice of economic regulation is not simply being postponed for later adjudication; it is being quarantined as toxic to guardian

² Plato, *Republic*, trans. with introduction by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2004).

integrity. Why? A satisfactory answer requires mining *Republic* for clues as to why Socrates might believe that the marketplace and its workings must be made off-limits to those who will be at the helm of society.

II.

At the end of Book III Socrates had explained why the guardians shall not possess personal property, may not even touch money. Does it follow from this that they should not be involved with regulation of the economic affairs in which non-guardians engage? It is not difficult to cite reasons supporting that prescription. Effective superintendence of workplace matters cannot be performed on an a priori basis; it requires knowledge in depth of the particular practices through which commerce is conducted in a particular environment. Each line of business will have its own customary modes of transacting and implicit understandings of where the boundary between permissible and impermissible lies. It is altogether implausible that anyone who has not immersed herself in the business of business will possess the requisite knowledge. Guardians do not, however, rise to that status from prior careers of shepherding, captaining ships, merchandising; that would violate Plato's principle that individuals stay in the one line of work for which they are best fitted. Could regulators gain the requisite expertise vicariously, studying how the various workers do what they do without themselves having ever become part of that workforce? Even if that is possible, the amount of study that would have to be invested comes at the cost of other curricular matters: either the gymnastics and music studies that occupy so much of their primary education or the graduate courses that take them to the threshold of philosophy. Commerce is too demanding a preoccupation to be shared with any other.

It is also potentially too seductive. Immersing oneself in the "art of the deal" may prove habit-forming. (No particular reference intended.) Studying a subject matter in depth while holding at arm's length the charms of that field is extraordinarily difficult. One who is not drawn to the inherent beauties of mathematics or cooking or chess—or economic affairs—is not apt to be very successful at the enterprise. Guardians, however, are specifically raised to disdain the attractions of moneymaking and the means thereunto. If required to adjudicate commercial relations they will either do it poorly or, worse, come to do it all too well. As *Republic* proceeds, what the guardians shall love is progressively elucidated; it does not include the goings-on of the cave.

It gets worse. Those who regulate economic relations inevitably make determinations that will put money in some hands and remove it from others. They will, therefore, be targets of suasion. Some lobbying is benign insofar as it simply transmits knowledge from the governed to the governors. Affected parties will attempt to go further, however, proffering inducements both emotional and pecuniary. In theory the guardians have been socialized to reject motivations of personal profit. How realistic this is will depend on the environment in which they operate. In Socrates' telling

they are isolated from the remainder of the society in their barracks where the propriety of each is reinforced by the like character of all the others. It is barely plausible that under such circumstances their integrity will be maintained, much less so if they are implicated in the strivings of other social classes. This does not have to be developed in an altogether sordid way. It need not be supposed that guardians will routinely seek back-handers, although corruption, even in highly successful polities, is hardly unknown. Instead they may naturally develop sympathies with those whose affairs they adjudicate, coming to favor familiar parties over anonymous others. This is the phenomenon known to contemporary political economists as *regulatory capture*.³ Whether altogether innocently or otherwise, authority acts on interest, but interest also acts on authority.

Here as elsewhere in *Republic* and other works, Plato seems to be influenced by the example of Sparta, whose citizens are restricted from engaging in commerce or handling money. For Sparta, though, the difficulties that these prohibitions would otherwise create are obviated by the existence of an exploited underclass of helots who do the productive work so that full citizens can specialize in waging war (including war against the helots themselves). This option is not available in *Republic* because Socrates insists that the city must truly be one. This is evidenced in the Myth of the Metals expressing through a noble lie (414b-c) the conviction that all citizens are brothers and sisters irrespective of differences in talents and position and that one individual or class is not to gain at the expense of others.

Even less does Athens provide a useful analog to Socrates' city. During its and Socrates' prime, Athens evolves from the lead member of the defensive Delian league to the acknowledged hegemon of an Aegean empire, receiving massive inflows of cash each year from subsidiary polises in exchange for protective services. Another major source of income is harbor fees that flow into this major entrepot of the entire Greek world. Economic activity is not only entangled with political authority; it is central to the policy deliberations of the Athenian demos. If Athens serves as some kind of model for *Republic*, it is as an object lesson of what is to be avoided.

These reflections are illuminated by particular episodes in the history and biography of the two cities. The great Spartan general Pausanias, hero of the climactic battle of Plataea in which Persia was once and for all turned away from the Greek homeland, appears to have lived a life beyond reproach while ensconced in the bosom of Spartan life. That rectitude did not survive a posting distant from his home territory where he was allegedly corrupted by blandishments of Persian wealth. Upon returning home he defeated charges against him once but ultimately fled for asylum to a temple in which he was starved to death by the Spartan civil authorities.

³ George Stigler is prominent in developing this theory. His and subsequent contributions are usefully presented in Ernesto Dal Bó, "Regulatory Capture: A Review," *Oxford Journal of Economic Policy* 22 (2006): 203–225.

The great genius of Athenian resistance to the Persians, Themistocles, experienced a similar fate. He too was accused of corrupt dealings with the Persians and was compelled to undertake successive migrations to Greek hinterlands and then to Persian territory until his death far from home. Two generations later, even the dominant Athenian political figure of the era, Pericles, was forced to meet charges of personal corruption. These and other similar cases would have been well known to Socrates and his interlocutors. Corruption by avarice was not some unusual intrusion into Greek political history; time and again it became central. Is it plausible that Socrates and the brothers would pay it no mind in the design of their ideal regime? The burden of proof surely lies with those who claim that it is irrelevant.⁴

Socrates' insistence on guardian purity is extreme. It begins but does not end with radical communism. Unlike other communist regimes of more recent vintage, removal of rulers from the market is total, embracing not only participation but also, I am arguing, governance. Is the fear of contamination excessive? Experience in our own era with the ruling elites of self-declared communist societies suggests that Socrates was on to something, but this caution is all for naught if there is no better way to solve the governance problem than to place the Best and the Brightest in positions of rule. That assuredly is what Plato does in *Republic* in the person of kingly philosophers. It is not obvious how they can exercise that capacity while remaining detached from economic policy.

I am not claiming that the guardians have nothing whatever to do with lower social strata; they are, after all, guardians, and those they guard are precisely those who form the economic base of the society. Presumably theirs is the job of discerning and advancing *justice*. That justice will be expressed in a legal framework that binds all citizens and thereby constitutes them genuinely one city rather than an assemblage of contentious factions.⁵ But although the guardians are custodians of *law*, they stand removed from the arcana of *regulation*. That contrast cannot be spelled out further here, but it is central to Socrates' best city and remains viable in our own polities.

III.

Commerce is complex, even in the relatively simple environment of Plato's city. Producers are continuously providing outputs that become the inputs of other agents' activity in cycles that endlessly repeat themselves

⁴ The primary source for these lives is Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Herodotus offers supplementary discussion in his *Histories* and Plutarch provides later reflections. Historians are divided concerning the reliability of these accounts, but that debate is not relevant to this essay's claim that the theme of corruption by wealth is very much "in the air." during the periods of *Republic's* staging and composition.

⁵ Socrates to Adeimantus: "You are happily innocent if you think that any city besides the one we are constructing deserves to be called a city." 425e3.

but do so under varying conditions of supply and demand. Surely, one might think, direction from above is necessary to achieve order. As Zeus brings order to the universe thereby rendering it a *Kosmos*, and as semi-divine human lawgivers bestow *Nomos* as the constitution of the polis, duly constituted authorities are the agents who bring about efficient functioning of social institutions. Nothing could seem more evident to the world of antiquity, but the cited passage suggests that this was not Socrates' view, that he envisioned as an alternative to direction from above processes of continuing adjustment from below. As parties interact on an ongoing basis they develop behavioral conventions that serve to regulate their expectations of each other. Even in the absence of rule-makers, there are rules! Instead of having been *handed down*, these *emerge*. The natural question this audacious leap of imagination prompts is: How? What sort of process can, as it were, generate the higher from the lower, produce something from nothing?

So far as I can see, neither at 425d nor elsewhere in *Republic* does Socrates specify the mechanism of emergence. If he possesses a basis for conviction, it is not shared. Or perhaps it is only a matter of faith on his part. If so, it would hardly be the only one in his construction of the city.⁶ The question is whether it is well judged, that is, whether it is an assumption that pays significant theoretical dividends. Apparently it does. Here is a simple reconstruction of the implicit argument:

1. Unless there is an order-generating tendency (OT) inherent in the city's economy, order will have to be imposed from above by the guardians.
2. If the guardians successfully impose economic order, they will have had to immerse themselves in the economic affairs of the city.
3. If the guardians immerse themselves in the economic affairs of the city, they will thereby be corrupted.
4. If the guardians are corrupted, the city fails.

Therefore

5. If the city is not to fail, then OT must obtain.

If the city-construction project is to proceed, then OT must be posited. Of course that does not constitute empirical evidence but rather is something like a postulate of practical reason; should it not be granted, the great and glorious project grinds to an ignominious halt. That would be sad. A preliminary verdict, then, is that Socrates is pragmatically justified in making the assumption.

⁶ See for example the repeated queries from Adeimantus and Glaucon as to whether this best of cities is really possible and Socrates' feints in response.

It is important to realize that the OT assumption has been anticipated earlier in the project of design. In Book II 369b-372d Socrates begins construction of justice in the city by running through the various crafts that will necessarily be present in a well-functioning, self-sustaining polis. He starts with agriculturalists and then those who supply the accoutrements of their crafts—carpenters, weavers, metalworkers—and those who in turn serve the first two classes through commerce domestic and foreign. And that is it. Socrates declares great satisfaction with the simple city's construction, Glaucon less so. ("City of pigs" is his preferred term of reference.) Socrates then offers negligible resistance to the brothers' wish to adorn the city with luxury goods. In retrospect it is clear what had been lacking in the simple city. For Glaucon and Adeimantus it is the absence of *politics* that most keenly renders it deficient; for Socrates it is, of course, *philosophy*. Both of these practices amply get their due in the next several books. Was this first construction, then, essentially a warm-up exercise, a trial run of no continuing importance?⁷

It cannot be denied that there are crucial human activities lacking in the first city that disable its status as an exemplar.⁸ More to the point for this essay is what is not lacking: economic stability. Each individual does the one job for which he or she is most fit, and the overall structure is maintained despite potential external or internal pressures. Simple though it may be, the original city is a going concern. Craftsmen of different goods and services produce and exchange their wares on a basis of voluntary agreement. Governors are conspicuous by their absence, yet Socrates depicts the arrangement as altogether stable. Therefore, even in this first approach to city construction OT is presumed.⁹

C. D. C. Reeve disagrees. "The First Polis is the Kallipolis for money-lovers. But it is not a real possibility because it includes nothing to counteract the destabilizing effects of unnecessary appetites and the pleonexia to which they give rise."¹⁰ It is not easy to assess the likelihood of this prediction because the history of the simple city is immediately drawn to a close. But viewed from a somewhat different angle, it is evident that pleonexia does extinguish this city: the pleonexia of Glaucon and his brother. They demand more of a city to which they will lend their enthusiasm and support. Luxury begets acquisitiveness, which in turn begets war; the simple

⁷ That seems to be the view of Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 78.

⁸ Except that Donald B. Morrison does deny it. See "The Utopian Character of Plato's Ideal City," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 232–55.

⁹ Stability is not everything, especially for young men with aspirations of renown such as Glaucon. The "city of pigs" epithet can be understood as an objection to doing without the delicacies of civilized living. It can also be an expression of dissatisfaction with the absence of an authoritative ruling class, that is, of the elite for which he himself is an aspiring member (and with which he is comfortable identifying in the Kallipolis. If so, this constitutes a backhand acknowledgment of the existence of OT.

¹⁰ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 171.

city is dead. In that sense Reeve's verdict, if accurate, is placed one step too soon. To be sure he may be correct in maintaining that the simple city, even if safeguarded from the critique of the brothers, is ultimately doomed. We discover in Book VIII that even the best of cities, the one that exists in our finest constructions, lacks the stability of metaphysical exemplars: "since everything that comes-to-be must decay, not even one so constituted will last forever" (546a). Stability cannot be absolute in a world of flux. Nonetheless, with regard to realistic human expectations, the first city, as well as the splendid one that ultimately follows, rests on an economic base that is resilient. Because this first city is evanescent, we are dissuaded from examining its foundations too carefully. OT here is important, though, as a forerunner of the assumption required to preserve the stability of Kallipolis. Socrates is theoretically justified in making it a fulcrum of his construction.

He is also lucky. What may have been just an act of faith then is considerably more than that now. One of the signal achievements of social theory over the previous three centuries has been the development of sophisticated and powerful theories of endogenous order-creation. David Hume is a noteworthy pioneer with his analysis of how conventions will develop even in the absence of rule-making from above.¹¹ Yet more potent is his friend Adam Smith's *invisible hand* and the hundreds of pages of close and careful analysis that give it something to grab on to.¹² More recently, Friedrich Hayek profoundly advances the argument of these Scottish forebears with extended investigations of the phenomenon of *spontaneous order*.¹³ It is well beyond the ambitions of this essay to represent, let alone defend, their arguments, but even a bare recitation of names will suffice to support the judgment that OT is an article of faith to which the progression of theory has been favorable.¹⁴

It is not unwonted partiality to suggest that Plato does indeed subscribe to a position that renders him a forerunner of theories of emergent order. There

¹¹ "The actions of each of us have a reference to those of the other, and are perform'd upon the supposition that something is to be perform'd on the other part. Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other." In similar fashion the formation of languages, monetary systems and, crucially, precepts of justice are attributed to bottom-up evolutionary processes. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978 [1739-1740]), III.ii, p. 490.

¹² Although the term "invisible hand" appears only once in *Wealth of Nations*, and also once in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the concept of unplanned, self-generating orders is ubiquitous in both works. For the particular occurrences, see Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Glasgow edition (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1981 [1776]), IV.v, p. 540; and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Glasgow edition (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982 [1759]) IV.i, 184.

¹³ An early and seminal examination of spontaneous order is F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35 (1945): 519–30. Over most of the half-century that follows, Hayek builds on this conception

¹⁴ Order-generating mechanisms are not observed only within the realm of political economy. They are also, for example, crucial to understanding the development of the common law. Most powerful of all, they underpin Darwinian evolution. All of these theories deal in what Robert Nozick, another great propounder of utopian political theory, calls *invisible hand explanation*. See Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 18–22.

is, however, a fundamental gap separating his ambitions from those of modern social theorists. For Plato economic stability is a necessary evil, or perhaps a necessary nullity. It is required so that higher ends may be pursued, not something to be nurtured for its own sake. For the political economists, though, stability takes a backseat to *growth*; it is accumulating the *wealth* of nations that propels Smith's analysis, not merely getting by.

The contrast is nowhere more prominent than in their respective theories of *division of labor*. In both the original simple city and its lustrous successor it is static. Innovation is not only unwelcome but actively discouraged insofar as it involves individuals transitioning from one line of work into another. When a satisfactory equilibrium has been achieved, to tamper with it is rash. That is true both of political order and processes of production and consumption.

It is quite otherwise for Smith. His conception is dynamic, not static. Concern for the nation's wealth requires identifying particular mechanisms that promote growth and, conversely, those that retard it. For him, extension of division of labor within the framework he calls the "system of natural liberty" is the key to progress. Stability is at best stagnation and, under less suitable circumstances regression to increasing desperation. He cites the experiences of China and India as cautionary in this regard.¹⁵ Hayek's project is not dissimilar, and for him the central mechanism underlying extension of the division of labor and thereby enhanced social outcomes is communication of dispersed knowledge through the price system of free markets. For Plato the mechanism that sustains a steady-state economy remains a black box. That is good enough for him. Indeed, an economy primed to generate increasing material wealth over time would not be a bonus but rather a drawback. Immoderate wealth corrupts insiders and stands as a dangerous temptation to outsiders.¹⁶ Its dubious charms are to be resisted.

IV.

I have argued that in 425c9-e1 Plato offers *en passant* a compressed conception of political economy that is novel and important. Why, then, does he not present it as such, as a fourth wave to merge with and augment the other three? Is Plato oblivious to the potential significance of this aside? That seems unlikely. He has criticized poets as mouthpieces who spout words they themselves do not understand; a high burden of proof needs to be surmounted before consigning him to their dubious company. The default

¹⁵ Smith, *Wealth of Nations* I.viii, 89–91. Although Smith's knowledge of the history of growth and regression in China and India can be questioned, the importance he attributes to growth of a society's product is undeniable.

¹⁶ See 421d-422c in which Socrates argues that conspicuous wealth engenders corruption in the society while its absence actually renders the city a less inviting target to potential foreign aggressors.

presumption should instead be that he is aware of what he is doing and is in full command of the mode of presentation employed. This is, after all, Plato.

I suggest that Plato knows that the point raised here is important in itself but that he believes *it is not important specifically to the project on which he is primarily engaged*.¹⁷ Book IV has him on the verge of introducing philosophy into the city as the culmination of these increasingly counterintuitive waves. As we proceed along with Socrates' recitation, less of *Republic* is addressed to city architecture and more to the attractions of the philosophical life. All the dazzling metaphors and analogies that illumine the second half of the dialogue have the purpose of displaying philosophy in its most seductive light. It would be remarkable if his young interlocutors were not moved to appreciate this point of view. Conversely, the passages in which the overtly political tasks of the rulers are detailed (arranging matings, testing children's aptitudes for higher studies) are sufficiently tedious to lead a talented and ambitious youth to rethink political governance as a vocational choice. Socrates does not exactly declare that this is his aim, but of course it would be rhetorically counterproductive for him to do so. Those who fail to respond to the lure of philosophy, whether the young men with whom he is talking or the many readers who participate vicariously in the adventure, are thereby proved unfit to take up the challenge. Their souls are comprised of base metals, not the silver or gold that would allow them to ascend to greater heights. They might, however, be fit for some other intellectual pursuit. *Republic* is a work of political *philosophy* (with the emphasis increasingly on the latter term). If Plato had wished instead to present a treatise of political *economy*, then he would have composed the work quite differently, focusing on interactions between political and economic institutions. That would have carried him through much more than the brief exchange between Socrates and Adeimantus highlighted above.

One may speculate whether Plato could have added to his masterpiece of political philosophy a similarly profound treatment of political economy had he wished to do so. Less speculative is the assertion that he did not wish to do so. The *téchne* of moneymaking is of even less interest to him than are the crafts of shepherding, saddlemaking, and the like. Why should someone occupy himself with phenomena of buying and selling when there are so many nobler pursuits to occupy an elevated mind? Political science is worthwhile, but metaphysical contemplation is yet more fitting for human

¹⁷ Malcom Schofield observes of Plato's construction of the economic base of society: "They constitute the invention of something like the concept of an economy: a sort of transcendental deduction of the market. But that has been little noticed by the commentators. And in a way they are right not to notice it. Nothing in *Republic* or any other dialogue suggests that Plato thought understanding the economy was a project to be undertaken for its own sake, as something of independent importance" ("Approaching the *Republic*," in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 210). This essay concurs with both observations, but disagrees with the suggestion that commentators do well to pass by what is not for Plato of independent importance.

beings of higher capacities. This prioritization is maximally explicit in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, but it is hardly disguised in *Republic*. Given conceptions of value widely shared in antiquity and transmitted to the medieval world, the absence of sophisticated treatments of economics could not have been otherwise.¹⁸

Immediately following 425e Socrates and Adeimantus turn from economic practice to medical practice. This occupies them for only a short time but nonetheless considerably more than their exchange concerning the marketplace. That is not, I believe, because Socrates has an abiding interest in medical ethics but because here the connection to philosophical themes is more pronounced. Socrates deploras inordinate attention to bodily health or, more accurately, partial mitigation of bodily disease. The implied contrast is to *health of the soul*, a kind of well-being that is generated not by poultices and potions but by philosophy. It is possible to read Plato as pursuing policy analysis, but although I do not deny that the contemporary practice of bioethics can find usable resources here, it is to misconstrue the role of this discussion within the overall architectonic of *Republic*. Or if not to misconstrue, then to misjudge relative importance. The argument is not that Plato offers here nothing of value with regard to health care policy but that this is not his primary quarry. All the more so, it is not being denied that in the spotlighted passage Plato offers a seminal reflection on economic governance. (If that were not the case, then this essay would hardly be worth the writing.) Unlike most other thinkers, Plato can toss off reflections distant from his primary intention but of enduring significance.

It can be argued that the foregoing is to make rather a lot out of precious little. We, after all, weren't around there and Adeimantus was. Perhaps he correctly gauges Socrates' intention to leave the subject of economic regulation to the guardians. I concede, albeit without joy, that sometimes a straightforward reading is best, even with Plato. There are, however, two reasons to question Adeimantus's understanding. First, it leaves the passage dangling. Why say that we are not going to talk about X instead of, well, just not talking about X? Second and more important, Socrates really does need to say something about the potentially corrupting effect of economic involvement by the rulers. That he is aware of the pernicious attractions of wealth is manifest in the radical communism imposed on the guardians. If Socrates believes that nothing more is required to sequester them from unwonted temptations, he is naive. That is not a quality that one would ordinarily be inclined to attribute to him. To put it slightly differently, if Adeimantus's understanding is correct, then *Republic* is a less incisive work than if the alternative proposed here is correct. Rarely if ever

¹⁸ To his credit, Aristotle in *Politics* I provides a (relatively) extended discussion of economic activity as a kind of proto-politics. To something other than credit, this discussion may well be a major factor in having held back for centuries the development of credible economic theory.

are interpreters justified in imposing a weaker reading on Plato if a stronger one is available.¹⁹

The straightforward interpretation (that is, Adeimantus's understanding) takes the interlocutors to be offering a sort of constitution which upon construction will govern the particular legislative enactments of the guardians-to-be. So understood, Socrates is thereby channeling something like the regulative principle of constitutional supremacy embodied in the American regime. If so, however, we should expect to see this concern for proper levels of governance expressed elsewhere in *Republic*, but I am unable to find any examples. Moreover, we should expect that once the regime is fully constructed we would then be told how the guardians do approach economic regulation. It's not as if the sustainability of the economic foundations of the city is unimportant for the feasibility of the overall project. Has Socrates just tired of the task of city construction or might he instead be ignoring the practice of economic governance *because that has already been resolved in our focal passage*? The latter seems better attested.

That Plato is a philosopher of surpassing genius hardly needs to be argued here. However, even genius has its limits. Not even Plato can be channeling the social theory of twenty centuries hence. Hume and Smith offer theories of endogenous order creation, but it would be special pleading to ascribe the same to Plato. I agree that he offers no *theory*, but *the fact* of OT has made its initial appearance back in the simple city/city of pigs. That earlier construction is not popular with the interlocutors, with the possible exception of Socrates himself, but nowhere is it objected that without authoritative guidance from above economic sustainability is unachievable. If OT is implicit in the opening frame of city construction, its reappearance in the final product is not surprising; rather, its absence would be. And if this interpretation is correct, it underscores the theoretical virtuosity of Plato's progression from the first city to Kallipolis

The preceding paragraph raises a larger issue about the interpretation of classic texts. If free rein is given to harnessing them in the service of issues beyond their time and place, anachronistic readings will follow. Alternatively, exposition restricted exclusively to the context of the author's own environment and concerns risks arid antiquarianism. Philosophy is properly free-wheeling, but for an enquiry to be considered history of philosophy (or better, historically-grounded philosophy) it must take itself to be constrained in some real way by facts concerning authors and their texts, what actually was believed and written rather than what might make for a compelling story.²⁰

Evidence external to the text in question can serve as a constraint on interpretation. I do not believe, however, that it is feasible to assemble

¹⁹ That Plato rejects Adeimantus's interpretation is given further support by the glib way in which the dialogue has him declaring that the rulers will "easily" solve the various problems of economic regulation. That one adverb eloquently testifies to Adeimantus's obtuseness.

²⁰ Compare "original intent" as a principle of legal interpretation.

evidence from sources external to *Republic* for or against the reading that has been offered here. In particular, not much help is to be had by contrasting the prescriptions of this work with Plato's other great political discourse, the *Laws*. Several decades separate the composition of these dialogues; *Republic* is from Plato's middle period while *Laws* is very late, quite possibly the last of Plato's works. How might the views of a continually creative and ingenious philosopher have developed over this extended period? *Laws* Book 8 does indeed offer prescriptions for economic regulation, but there cannot be any firm basis for assuming continuity with the author's understanding of proper economic governance for a strikingly different polis. Without wishing to encroach on the territory of dedicated scholars, I content myself with the observation that we cannot suppose that Plato's beliefs would have held constant. Indeed, it is the reverse that seems more plausible; why go to the trouble of producing an additional work if it is not to convey importantly different thoughts?

One difficulty endemic to Platonic interpretation is that Socrates' remarks are attuned to the character of his interlocutor. To be sure, he has philosophical points to make, but their expression is not independent of the conversational situation in which he finds himself. For example, one need only compare the gentleness and tact with which he addresses his old friend Crito in the eponymous dialogue with the sharper tone of his rhetorical thrust and parry against Calicles in the dialogue *Gorgias*. Philosophy for Plato is not some freestanding set of propositions but rather a passion that lives in the souls of particular human beings. That is why scholars will find it challenging to abstract Platonic doctrine from Socratic discourse. The challenge is greatest of all with regard to interpreting *Laws*, in which the philosophical pivot occupied on every other occasion by Socrates is now given to an unidentified "Athenian Stranger." Perhaps one is entitled to maintain that this character functions as Plato's mouthpiece in precisely the same manner as does Socrates. Or perhaps not. Hermeneutical obstacles are daunting here, enough so that the arguments of this late and idiosyncratic dialogue cannot, I believe, provide any guidance to interpretation of *Republic*. Rather, questions of meaning stand or fall on the kinds of internal cues that have been adduced in these pages. This should not be understood as dismissing the value of charting Plato's philosophical evolution over the course of his career. It is, though, to reject the status of any one dialogue as a touchstone for others.²¹

I freely acknowledge that my own favored regulative hermeneutical principle is that if among admissible readings one is relatively banal and another is exciting, charity commends preferring the latter. Or at least it does when the author is known on other grounds to be intellectually formidable.

²¹ The literature addressing evolving Platonic themes is vast. Two useful works that focus on developments within the political theory are Christopher Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); George Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

(For example, press releases from the White House do not fall within the domain of this principle.) But because no one more fully qualifies for that characterization than does Plato, there is a very strong onus for presuming that an otherwise ambiguous episode is diamond, not cubic zirconia.

V.

There is much to be said on behalf of rigorous fidelity to texts and also much for interpretive liberality. Sidestepping this debate, I observe that Plato scholarship in particular has often shown itself at its most dazzling when afforded extended latitude. In the ancient world, Plato was the titular fount of the various philosophies of the Academy and of Neoplatonism, strands of which wandered freely and thereby creatively from the source. More directly relevant to this essay is Karl Popper's great work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.²² It is the most influential Plato reading of the previous century. Popper's Plato is a proto-totalitarian, someone who endorses brusque exercise of state powers to ensure conformity and stasis. Control from above applies to speech, artistic and religious expression, employment occupation, and political role (or lack of same). Innovation is, for Plato, the great enemy of utopia.

Open Society is a magnificent work of political philosophy, belonging on any shortlist of the most influential and profound liberal tracts ever penned. Its Plato is unforgettable, larger than life, a figure to conjure with. It is not, however, the only Plato that can be brought to political theory. Another is a Plato who advocates limits to political authority, both because rule when unlimited undermines itself and because individuals who are left free to exercise their own agency are able to generate outcomes superior to those they would achieve if rendered mere pawns of their overlords. That latter picture is, of course, the version sketched above. One reading is a *bête noire* for ideologies of liberal toleration, the other a putative forerunner. The problem is that both readings cannot be justified—or can they?

Republic is not an essay in which Socrates serves as a puppet to mouth Plato's own views in as accurate and consistent a manner as possible. Rather, it is a dialogue in which each of the characters possesses his own motivating principles and in which each is aware that this is true of all the others. Socrates is initially forced to dodge the attacks of Thrasymachus and, more mildly, Polemarchus. He then turns to attracting the brothers to an inquiry that is at once political and philosophical, with the balance between these themes continually shifting in favor of the latter. His assertions range from the tedious (such as musical modes) to hyperbolic (such as the waves). He underscores some points, camouflages others. Young men are not

²² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945). Originally published in two volumes, the first of which is subtitled *The Spell of Plato*. The second volume indicts Hegel and Marx as conspirators.

known for the fixity of their attention spans, but here they are held rapt through what would have been a remarkably extended night. That could not have been achieved via a monothematic discourse. Diverse ideas and rhetorical tropes are broached without regard to their ultimate coherence. The motto of letting a hundred flowers bloom has rarely been realized to such great effect.

Popper is quite capable of speaking on his own behalf, as are his numerous respondents. He discerns in *Republic* a seminal forerunner of totalitarianism and is maximally ingenious in assembling evidence to make that indictment stick. If one has decided to take on the momentous task of producing a multi-volume narration of the emergence of totalitarian thought it is not unexpected, however, that the lead-off protagonist will be displayed without a great deal of nuance. Popper shows himself to be a masterful advocate, and as advocates do he emphasizes those items that most support his own case and steers away from those that tend to impugn it. In particular, the passage that has been put up for examination in this essay is not any part of his itinerary through *Republic*. A proto-Lenin is not likely to insist on the relative autonomy of the productive base of the society.²³ For this and perhaps other reasons, *Open Society's* characterization of Plato is strained. This is not, however, an anti-Popper paper; I share with him the predisposition to read Plato as offering bold conjectures. This essay also aspires to boldness as it introduces another Plato, or rather another side of this multifaceted thinker.

Of the views that have been attributed to Plato in the preceding sections some are very well grounded in the text, others are more tenuous, but none are fantasy. Among *Republic's* most insistently voiced themes is that integrity of the guardians must be preserved at all costs. Removing these individuals from the practice of economic regulation is not among the means most emphasized in the text but it is entirely of a piece with those that are, such as disallowing private property possession. It has been argued that the core Book IV passage examined above isn't a stray digression but a lemma. The presentation of that proposition is brief because it elicits no opposition from Socrates' interlocutors; they require no persuasion to concede the point and then turn back to nobler pursuits. To be sure, Adeimantus misunderstands Socrates' intent, but the reader should not make the same mistake.

More speculative is the commitment to OT. It isn't overtly stated but rather inferred. The inference, however, is solid. It is implied not only in the Kallipolis but also in the prototype city. Absent some such commitment, both cities' designs are fatally flawed. Nor is it an especially bold commitment. Socrates is not trying to set out the features of a growth engine that will continually add to the city's coffers. Nor is he called on to work out the nature of the mechanisms through which economic society will prove itself to be mostly self-regulating; he only needs to posit that there exist such

²³ Of course the actual Lenin does resort to a market-tolerant New Economic Policy.

mechanisms. On second thought, this is bold enough for an ancient world in which invisible hands other than those of the gods are not much suspected. With respect to this conception too Plato merits the status of pioneer, although he himself may have had only the vaguest understanding of the nature of the frontier he is blazing. This is more reading out of the text than reading into it.

The proportions are reversed in presenting a Plato who is the liberal heroic counterpart to Popper's totalitarian villain. That would be to place a great deal of weight on one brief passage. If not liberal hero though then, contra Popper, liberal forerunner. I admit that it is only in an extended sense that Plato is part of a conversation with Hume, Smith, and Hayek. Further mining of *Republic* will be needed to render that characterization more firmly grounded, especially to discern whether Book VIII's ostensibly negative characterization of democracy displays any cracks within which individuals' self-directed conduct is actually viewed with appreciation.²⁴ It is, therefore, premature to extend Whitehead's bon mot to "all liberal political economy is a footnote to Plato." For the present, not all, but some.

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²⁴ Book VIII's critique of oligarchy is also germane. I believe it shows Plato to be not an opponent of wealth creation but rather opposed to that practice being mixed with the function of governance. It is not profit-seeking that is decried but rather rent-seeking.