

PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE IN BOOK ONE OF PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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According to the twentieth century German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, a philosophical text always arises as a response to a question; so, an important principle to keep in mind when interpreting a philosophical text is to read it in light of the question to which that text is a response. For Plato's *Republic*, for example, the questions posed are questions of justice and of the nature of virtue, or the overall 'best-ness' of an individual. Thus, the questions "What is Justice?" and "How can Justice be brought about in the soul of the individual and in the city?" are asked in different ways and in different forms in many of Plato's dialogues. It would seem that a good way to bring these questions better into focus would be to see them in the light of their cultural context. This would involve special difficulties, no doubt, for ancient Greek culture is many ways so distant from that of the modern Europe it inspired. But seeing Plato's concern for justice and especially for education in justice in the light of its cultural context seems not only useful but also crucial for a proper understanding of his text. In discussing the cultural context for ancient Greek philosophy, we do not intend to show a material or historical cause for philosophy. Culture is not a cause and philosophy is not a mere effect. There is no cause-effect relation between culture and philosophy. Culture and philosophy are not separate from one another, with culture on one side and philosophy on the other. Philosophy was within culture. Conversely, Greek culture was philosophical. Indeed, it would be difficult to isolate the philosophical tendencies in Greek culture, as they were seemingly everywhere, woven into the fabric of daily life as into their literature, their arts, their political systems and outlooks and into their ethical views. A classical philosophical text, a Platonic-Socratic dialogue, for example, is situated within a cultural framework or world, which, for the classical Greeks, was divided into the public and private domains. (On "world", cf. Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I, iii, p. 61,

translation by Joan Stambaugh) It would benefit anyone trying to interpret such a philosophical text, therefore, to know something about the cultural world from which it speaks. We shall attempt such a reading of Plato's *Republic*, Book One, especially the conversations first between Socrates and Cephalus, then between Socrates and the sophist Thrasymachus. But first, allow us to make some introductory comments.

I.

Not only for the beauty of their arts, ancient Greeks have been equally admired for their enquiring, restlessly inventive spirit. They are credited with practically inventing the Western European notions of humanism and democracy. They are credited with honoring and respecting the human individual – so long as that individual was male and a citizen of a *polis* (a city-state) — in a way no other ancient culture appears to have done. They enjoyed freedom of speech and their religion, being neither monotheistic nor orthodox, allowed for considerable freedom of worship. Science, philosophy, free inquiry, the visual and performing arts, all thereby flourished. Little wonder, then, that the Greeks have been the object of much fascination and study on the part of later philosophers and historians, or that their influence has been seen as extending far beyond their own time and historical situation.

One tendency in interpreting Greek philosophy and culture has been to look behind the shining achievements and seek their source in a social-psychological perspective. For such modern scholars as Jacob Burckhardt, for example, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, Greek culture and philosophy was inherently *pessimistic* in that the Greeks saw the human situation not in terms of religious salvation or of an after-life, but in terms of the “absoluteness of the here-and-now”. The Greeks were thus among the first to understand “what it is to be a human in the modern sense”, which is “to live in the present without hope for the future”, as beyond both hope and morality. In a strikingly modern way, they wrestled with the necessity of human beings to confront themselves and to affirm themselves in their own radical finitude, in their own being towards death, from which there is no escape. (*The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, translated by Sheila Stern and edited by Oswyn

Murray, St. Martins Press, 1998, the editors introduction, p xxxix). Thus, the Greek love of beauty, harmony, law, and order, was only a mask by which they looked into the death, horror and chaos that is in the midst of all human life. If such is the case, this speaks volumes for not only the cultural but also the philosophical outlook of the ancient Greeks. One could then see the harmony and balance of their arts as a beautiful illusions trembling over an abyss of death and nothingness.

But this deeply pessimistic outlook can also be seen as *optimistic*, if one follows Friedrich Nietzsche's interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy and culture. What is the background to this and what is meant by 'optimism'? Greek optimism lay in its will to know, and so to master the world around them. For the philosopher Nietzsche, this optimism was expressed most pointedly in its Socratic philosophy. "Philosophy" was, after all, a word evidently first used by Plato and meant the "love of wisdom", where to be wise was to know the principle of all things, especially one's 'self'. Because of our finitude, the darkness of the flesh and of the powers of our desires, Plato, for one, was not so optimistic about the chances of human beings every becoming truly wise, so there was an emphasis on the *search* for wisdom, and on the *quest* and the *questioning process*, the desire for knowledge, in short, rather than the actual results. So, for the Greeks, this philosophical attitude meant looking at the world with wonder. Perhaps this attitude was already detectable in their mythology, which Aristotle described as being "full of wonder", but it was especially philosophy that said to actually begin in wonder. To wonder about the world is first to be aware of one's ignorance and therefore to desire knowledge. Plato's *Symposium* shows how human beings are possessed by an erotic desire for knowledge, a desire, a true *eros*, which carries the human soul to ever-higher domains of truth and beauty. Everywhere, then, as they looked upon particular things and human actions in the world and admired their beauty, the Greek philosopher and scientist sought their concept, the universal dimension for all things. By seeking the universal concepts for all things and for all human actions, they could then master those things and those actions. Hence, not only science but also ethical life was brought under a powerful will to knowledge. Virtue, in the Socratic view, thus became identified with knowledge, and implied mastery of life and human excellence

achieved through attaining both theoretical and practical modes of knowledge. These classical lines of inquiry helped open the paths that would later be followed by modern ethics, politics, science, logic, and mathematics. The Greeks thus demonstrated a powerful desire for knowledge, a ‘will to knowledge’ and an optimism that greatly impressed such later thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, in the second half of the nineteenth century. He saw both Greek classical, tragic culture and its philosophy as essentially ‘optimistic’, in the senses just described. But for him, the word “optimism” also has ironic, even negative connotations. This points out the ambiguity in Nietzsche’s reading of ancient Greek culture. In his *Twilight of the Idols*, for example, he wrote a section entitled “The Problem of Socrates” in which he describes the Socratic optimism as the reverse side of a deeper decadence. With Socrates, the rabble rises to the top of society. Socratic philosophy expressed, Nietzsche thought, a deep contempt for life. “Life is no good”, Socrates might have thought. Perhaps this came about as a result of his having penetrated into the finitude of life, into the death and impermanence that characterizes all things human. But in his earlier book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 18, Nietzsche wrote that Greek culture was “Alexandrian” (“Apollonian” as opposed to “Dionysian”) and “Socratic”. As such, it was characterized by an over-bounding desire to know whereby to know was to conquer as Alexander the Great had conquered the whole known world. It was also to be thus under the spell of a beautiful illusion: namely, the “cheerfulness of (the) theoretical man” blindly possessed by an insatiable desire to know and by the “delusion of being able thereby to heal the wound of existence.” And this, Nietzsche thought, still characterized the situation of modern Europe in the late nineteenth century. It, too, is a culture energized by a will to know, and in knowing, possessing, and above all, mastering.

But whether pessimistic or optimistic, classical Greek culture and philosophy both began to look at the world with a new wonder and to question the relations and possibilities of human existence in ways unheard of before them. This has been called their “enlightenment” (a cultural period dating from, roughly, the middle 6th to the fourth centuries), and the philosopher, in the form of Socratic man, was an essential part of it.

But the relations between the philosopher, especially in the person of Socrates, and the Athenian *polis*, were not always so harmonious and accommodating. Excessive (*hubristic*) in his desire (*eros*) for beauty and knowledge and somewhat aristocratic or oligarchic in his political inclinations, he quickly found himself at odds with Athenian society. He asked too many questions and the results of his inquiries were rarely satisfactory. He was thought arrogant in his dealings with other people, especially with the Athenian court, and appeared to meddle in the business of others when he questioned them about the kinds and quality of lives they were living. His attitudes about the gods and goddesses were controversial. He was seen communing with strange spirit deities. He asked about things in a way that was outside of accepted religious and ritual frameworks and that was implicitly critical of those frameworks. Although he appears in his last days as arguing in support of the democratic laws of Athens, addressing them as though democratic laws were the philosopher's virtual parents, he was long suspected as being an ally of a kind of Spartan oligarchy and an enemy of Athenian democracy. He claimed (see Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*) that his work, his questioning and questionable work as a philosopher, was a continuation of the work of the gods and that he had been stationed in Athens like a soldier on a mission from god. Little wonder, then, that people thought him odd, bad mannered, and potentially dangerous. Little wonder, too, that the Athenian youth found him so irresistible. Alcibiades, for example, the brilliant, corrupt, and traitorous Athenian general, blamed for the Athenian military disaster at Syracuse in 415-413 B.C., was particularly smitten, if one can believe what he says about Socrates in the *Symposium*. All of this came to a head in the trial of Socrates that was finally conducted in the year 399 B.C., after the end of the Peloponnesian War. Here, the philosopher was charged with impiety and with corrupting the youth. These may have been cover charges, perhaps, because to an amnesty following the end of the war with Sparta, crimes alleged to have been committed during the war years could not be brought to trial. So, these charges were drafted instead of the ones the enemies of Socrates would have liked: namely, that Socrates was an enemy of Athenian democracy and that his philosophical practice was undermining its constitution and its institutions. Especially because

Socrates had so closely defined philosophy in terms of education (*paideia*) in justice and in the Good, and because his educational programs were so critical of the given mythological, religious, contexts, and because he had thereby become identified with another potentially dangerous lot, the Sophists, he thus became the target for a conservative backlash in Athens which had no doubt been brewing for some decades before 399 B.C.. So, in Aristophanes' comic play, *The Clouds*, for example, produced in the spring of 423 B.C., Socrates is shown swinging from a basket suspended from a high wire as he attempts ludicrously to study the clouds as meteorological phenomena rather than as divinities. Caricatured in the play as the strange director of a kind of "school for sophists", a man unkempt and contemptuous of social conventions, Socrates was also shown teaching the young how make weaker arguments seem stronger and, when not doing that, pursuing his nonsensical and materialistic questions and theories about the natural world ("that there is no Zeus and that the sun is a stone", and "how many flea-feet can a flea jump?"), and finally, and most dangerously, he taught the young how to question the authority of their parents and even to physically beat them if necessary. That there were no hard feelings on Socrates' part because of the rough treatment he received in this parody of sophistic teachings is shown in an anecdote repeated in Charles Rowan Beye's *Ancient Greek Literature and Society* (Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 104). Beye relates how Socrates was in the audience at the performance of the play and that he even stood up to show the audience how well the mask worn by the actor resembled his own real face. But, Socrates also claimed in his 399 B.C. defense speech before the Athenian court that this play had contributed to a prejudice against him and that this prejudice was, indeed, the background to the present charges he was then facing, especially those of impiety and corrupting the youth. But, whether true or not, this does pose the question of the wider cultural and political setting for Socratic philosophy and the consequences and impact that philosophy had within Athenian classical society.

What was this 'enlightenment' that the sophists and philosophers offered to their students? The word 'enlightenment' refers in a general way to the retreat or withdrawal of an essentially religious or mythological outlook on the world and its gradual transformation into a more

recognizably philosophical and scientific outlook. In terms outside of religion or myth, in a discourse that both borrowed from and transformed the prevailing religious frameworks, the Greek philosophers, tragedians, and scientists had begun to question human existence in all its relations with earth and sky, gods and men. During the Greek enlightenment of fifth-century, Athens was thus the stage for an explosion of experiments and invention in poetry and tragic drama, art, philosophy, and science. Many philosophers shared the perception of human existence as deeply divided between the desires of the flesh and those of the spirit. They saw human nature as defined and determined by its essential and radical finitude, that is to say, by death and all else that divides human existence and keeps it from becoming divine. Deep human spiritual yearnings for knowledge, immortality, beauty, harmony, and power are evidence of a definitively human desire to transcend the limits of the human condition.

Certainly, one finds similar expressions of this in other cultures. There was, indeed, an important tradition of wisdom in ancient China and India, and in some ways their reflections on ethics and politics parallel those of the Greeks (one thinks, for example of the parallels between the Greek *Kaloskagathos*, the beautiful and good gentleman, and the notion of the “superior man” or the “man of wisdom” found in the writings of Confucius or Mencius, or of the ways in which ancient Chinese philosophy posed the essential questions of good self government, or ethics, and the relations of ethics and politics, for another). But this should not cover over the uniqueness of either the Greek or the Asian examples. The word “philosophy”, especially in its Platonistic and Socratic usages, is, after all, a Greek word, and, as such, it is deeply rooted in a distinctly Greek outlook on life and the world.

Thus, the ‘enlightenment’ promised by Socrates required the face-to-face encounter of living conversation. This is how enlightenment was to be achieved. Not by private meditation, but in the public conversations among fellow citizens. Socrates thus adopted the dialogue form in which he questions both himself and others especially about ethics and about the best way for a human being to live. In the course of his conversations, Socrates must confront the forces of religious myths, and of sophistry. Both Cephalus and Thrasymachus, from Book One of Plato’s *Republic* can be seen as representing these outlooks. In his conversations with

them, Socrates was seeking a kind of enlightenment whereby one would live a better life in this life and in this world. And this meant a living life devoted in part to the overcoming of ignorance, especially self-ignorance. He called it “the examined life”. Realized through dialogue, Socratic ‘enlightenment’ was, thus, a kind of purging or purification of the soul of Socrates’ interlocutor of all the false opinions it held. This would allow the soul to then receive proper instruction in the truth. So, Book One of the *Republic*, for example, shows how, in order to bring the concept of true justice into view, it is necessary first to confront the forces of ritual and myth and, above all, sophistry, which stand in the way. Socratic enlightenment would thus amount to a turning of the human soul toward the Good and towards true justice. Standing in the way of this are not only the Sophists, but also the many religious myths that formed the backbone of classical Greek education, (see Book Two for a thorough discussion of the negative influence of Homeric and Hesiodic myths on education). These would be the enemies of this *paideic* turning of the soul, for they would only reinforce selfishness and fear at the expense of true knowledge.

We would like now to show the importance of these two cultural contexts – that of the religious and mythic-ritual culture and that of the competing sophistic movement — for the Platonic and Socratic ethical and political philosophy as found in Plato’s *Republic*, and to discuss why they had to be confronted by the philosopher.

II.

First, however, some general questions: What was philosophy for the ancient Greeks and what cultural factors nourished its emergence in Greece from the archaic through the classical periods (the 6th to the 4th centuries)?

Philosophy, in its Greek manifestations, has become associated with a feeling of wonder and a desire for knowledge. It posed the question of being, of ultimate reality, and of human existence, a question posed in such a way that it appeared to owe nothing to the context of religious experience. Unlike religious myth, the first philosophers did not identify the origins and sources from which existence springs with the gods. “What

directs the cosmos,” Heraclitus said, “is both willing and unwilling to be called Zeus.” As the young Nietzsche observed, the Greeks sought to formulate the essential being of existence not in terms of a god or goddess but in terms of an element, ‘water’, in the case of Thales, ‘fire’ for Heraclitus, ‘air’ for Anaxagoras, and so on. Where to know meant to know the ultimate principles and sources of all things, this knowledge sought not a divinity, but a material element, something more akin to the ancient words of Night, of Earth and Chaos than to the anthropomorphic deities of Greek mythology. This was certainly a change in perspective, and part of a more generalized Greek ‘enlightenment’. But the philosophers were also looking, somewhat in the manner of the mythological outlook, for a way to express the seeming unity and rationality of existence. The idea that “all things are somehow one” was an idea with a receptive ear in both the poet and the philosopher. For the philosopher, however, this unity, this “logos” as Heraclitus would call it, was rational rather than religious or mythical. Access to it was through thought, through questioning, through intellectual insight and conversation with others and in the face of others rather than through religious ritual.

Thus, the philosopher could well seem to a more conservative audience to be somehow at odds with religious conventions and to be perhaps a danger to a society in which social and political legitimacy often had mythic and religious foundations. A conservative backlash against the enlightenment in general and against the philosopher was evident, as we have already seen, in Greek tragedy and comedy.

Moreover, because of the way he questions, because, one could presume, of the power of his rhetoric and his skill in argumentation, Socrates was also taken to be a Sophist, not a philosopher, then, but someone intent only on false persuasions and on rhetorical virtuosity. This would be a dangerous confusion, in Socrates’ eyes, of true philosophy and Sophistry, for the latter does not teach truth. We shall return to this shortly. In his *Apology* Socrates denied that he is a Sophist on the grounds that he had nothing to teach and that he was poor and had never earned money for his work. But beyond those rather superficial issues, there was Socrates’ more important concern that philosophical education in the virtues, in justice, for example, was being taken as a kind of skillful

game that one plays for one's own benefit. To this Socrates replied that his one and only concern was for truth and for turning the souls of the young toward the good. Thus, turning the tables on his judges, Socrates repeats how his philosophical activity, his questioning of the poets, politicians, and the artisans, was an important way of continuing the work of the gods insofar as it sought the true grounds for the possibility of human happiness and well-being, (*Eudaimonia*, as this is called in Greek), and to oppose him thereby could itself be taken as a form of disrespect for the gods. An arrogant, heedless claim, no doubt, one that even he may not have taken all that seriously, but one that nonetheless earned him the cruel enmity of the state.

So, in answer to the question of the chief role and concern of philosophy, Socrates would have said that it is a true preparation for death in the sense that it is a mode of taking care of one's soul, taking care of the immortal dimension of every human individual. This was his path of 'enlightenment', which does not mean just the pursuit of theoretical wisdom, no matter how lofty the latter may seem, but the pursuit of a better human life in this world. For this, philosophy was above all education in the virtues, especially Justice, the unity of all the virtues and the sole ground for human happiness. Philosophy's chief concern was thus for education in justice and in the other virtues. It was the path that should be followed by all who seek the good and by all who seek thereby to realize the ultimate possibilities of human existence. And insofar as philosophy was education in justice and in the good, it was necessary for it to confront the forces of myth and ritual, on one hand, and sophistic rhetoric on the other.

Let us now focus on these issues as they develop in Book One of Plato's *Republic*. In *The Republic*, set perhaps in the year of 421 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War and during one of the lulls in that war, the Peace of Nicias, these issues are again strongly evident. Socrates is much younger in this dialogue, yet in the images and allegories he presents in the course of his night-long conversation with the young Glaucon and Adeimantus, brothers of Plato, on the question of Justice, he seems to already know the fortune that is to befall him in the year 399 B.C. He recognizes already that the wisdom seeker will be at odds with conventional society and common opinion and that there will be dangers,

especially when the philosopher seeks to educate others and lead them out of the cave of human political life and onto the true paths of the just life. He shares these visions with his young interlocutors, emphasizing the risks of the philosophical life as well as its divine-like pleasures. But first, Socrates must show his young interlocutors how both the mythic view and the sophistic views of justice are mistaken, and how they have misconceived both the rewards and burdens of the just life.

There are readings of Plato's *Republic* for which the whole dialogue is set in a mythical context. Not only does the dialogue open with Socrates and his friends on the way to see a certain spectacular Thracian festival featuring horsemen bearing torches, but also the dialogue can itself perhaps be interpreted as presenting the mythic journey of the soul as it seeks the higher, transcendent realms of knowledge and existence. The dialogue's visions and allegories show a journey of the soul, one taken perhaps after death, as the soul ascends the ladder of true being and knowing.

No doubt Plato placed the human soul and the care, as he called it for the human soul, at the center of his concerns, for the soul, he held, was the immortal dimension of human existence. So there should be no surprise in seeing this theme as central to the *Republic*. But, in Book One of the *Republic*, where an old man, Socrates' host for the evening, is shown preparing himself for ritual sacrifices at the altar of the gods, the question of the proper care for the human soul is raised in connection with the question of Justice.

As the dialogue opens, Cephalus, who is described as aged and as rich, is concerned about what will happen to his soul after his death. He is concerned about whether or not he has lived a just life. Old age has its benefits, he tells the younger Socrates, specifically in the ways it frees the human soul from being a prisoner to physical, sexual lusts. But it also brings trepidations aroused by the terrors and tales told in the myths about what happens to the souls of the unjust. Greek poetry and myth were replete with stories about how the unjust are tortured after death and how the gods reward the just. What should one do in order to be favorably remembered by the gods? Is it enough to perform ritual ceremonies and to attempt as though in a business arrangement to purchase the good will of the gods, as though one's true character counts

for little and one's purchasing power counts for everything? Should one only be concerned for the just life when one is old and presumably too old to learn about justice and the living of a just life? Isn't it too late then, when one's life is over, to worry about whether or not one has lived justly?

For Socrates, a poor and younger man, it would seem Cephalus' concerns would suggest that he, Socrates, could neither be just nor in the position to raise the important concerns of justice. So, when Cephalus defines justice as making sure paying what one owes and as telling the truth, all but the latter component in this definition would seem to leave Socrates out, for he was poor and by all accounts, cared nothing for money.

No doubt Cephalus represents a prevailing strain of conservative thought and action in classical Greek culture. Whether or not the Greeks believed in their myths, they certainly placed stock in the idea that how one lived might influence the kind of torments or rewards one might receive in the next life. There was widespread belief in the idea that the soul survived the death of the body. Belief in rebirth or reincarnation was widespread, even among philosophers, Plato included. But Cephalus seems only concerned about the next life, whereas Socrates' idea seems to be that one must first get this life right and that if that is the case, one need not worry about the next life. Indeed, Socrates only speaks of the next life in mythic terms. What comes after death cannot be a subject of knowledge. There is only myth. But, for Socrates, one must live one's life as though one's actions and the choices one made counted for something. No harm can come to the good man, he is fond of saying, and education in justice can bring about a condition of the human soul in which one can live best both in this life and in the next. By the time one is old, it is too late for sacrifices, and little can be done finally to assuage the lingering suspicions that one has not lived one's life in the best manner possible. Justice and the just life, where these are defined in terms of virtues and of human excellence of living, cannot thus be brought about merely through proper business dealings. They require thought, and they require critical thinking about what one is doing and what the principles for one's action really are and whether they are good principles and how those principles have indeed guided one's actions. Cephalus has never taken these dimensions into account because, for him, justice is a simple

matter of lighting the incense at the altars and of purchasing one's peace of mind through the exercise of religious ritual. How one has lived, what one was in the course of human life can be altered or arranged through the proper ministry of ritual. Of course, should one be unburdened of any fears for the next life or for the mythic vengeance of the gods, there are no longer any reasons remaining to be just. Then, there is only this life, and one should then pursue it with all the gusto one can muster. One can then let one's full appetites and lusts rule one's actions.

Socrates dialogues with Cephalus because no doubt he in some way represents the conventional elements of Greek religious culture. So, Socrates, the philosopher, felt obligated in the name of truth to interrogate and to critically examine the claims of myths and ritual practices to be guides for human action. Should one ground one's life on or base one's life on fear? Fear of what may befall one in the next life? For this is what the poets taught. In any event, the real issue for Socrates is to elaborate a definition of justice that owes nothing to the rewards or fine consequences that may come from justice. Glaucon and Adeimantus rightly demand an account of justice in which justice is perceived as desirable in itself and not for its rewards. This is the challenge Socrates must face and it is one that is first and most forcefully presented in the person and in the arguments of a sophist named Thrasymachus.

Who were the Sophists and what were their goals? According to Jean-Pierre Vernant, especially three major cultural transformations contributed to the emergence of philosophy. First, discussed above, was the transformation of religious and mythic culture. Secondly, there were the economic and technical transformations that brought about not only the use of money as a medium of exchange but in the opening of new markets and foreign exchanges and relations. This brought new ideas and perspectives that enriched the philosophical culture of ancient Greece. But thirdly there was the sophistic movement and the use of persuasion as playing an important role in Greek political life. As there was no king or monarch to dictate the course of political life in Greece or to proclaim by decree what the laws of the land would be, persuasion and skills in persuasion became more important in deciding the types and nature of

law to be obeyed by all citizens. In Greek democratic society each and every citizen, no matter how modest their station in life, stood a chance of becoming head of state, or occupying some other strategic role in Greek political society. Thus, the sophists were traveling teachers who taught skills in rhetoric to young men desiring political success.

For Socrates, the sophists were especially dangerous in that they taught the powers of persuasion over those of truth. To speak the truth (*Parrhesia*) in political contexts was something of a political right in ancient Athenian culture. Yet, the sophists had turned this into the teaching of rhetoric, (speeches made especially to the Assembly and to the law courts), the art of the powers of persuasion, but did so at the expense of truth. Nietzsche showed how rhetoric belongs to a culture that still lives in the grip of mythic images. Such a culture, he said, has not yet developed a sense of historical fact. Its people want to be persuaded, seduced, by images and conventions rather than be instructed in the truth. (see his “Description of Ancient Rhetoric”, texts from a lecture course given in 1872-73) Thus, there are links between the mythic culture of Cephalus and the sophistic culture of Thrasymachus. The sophists practiced and taught the art of persuasion rather than truth telling. This is an important issue for Socrates. His defense speech before the Athenian court and the jury of 501 begins by telling the court that Meletus has been so persuasive in his opening remarks to the court that even he, Socrates has almost forgotten who he is. Socrates’ accusers have been very persuasive, yet they did not tell the truth about who he, Socrates, is. So, Socrates says that it shall be his mission that day before his fellow Athenian citizens and before the judges and his accusers alike to tell the truth, to present himself to the court as he is in truth. The risk, of course, is that truth is not persuasive. So, from the beginning of his defense speech, his *Apology*, Socrates points out a distinction, (which, one could suppose, he considered unfortunate), that truth telling, especially in cases such as this in which one has been a target of slanderous accusations, was not often persuasive. The distinction is also implied in the *Phaedrus* (247d), where Socrates proclaims, “the truth is my subject.”

Odd as it may seem, Book One of the *Republic* shows the ideal of telling the truth about justice as something actually shared by both Socrates and the sophist, Thrasymachus. The sophist here, too, intends

to tell the truth about justice. He will ‘give the show away’, so to speak, about successful tyrants and reveal the tricks and delusions by which tyrant, like the perfect puppeteer he must be, works the strings of the sheep-like people he governs. The sophist will show how justice, for the many, amounts to no more than legal conventionalism, or, obedience to the law, and which they, the ruled and the governed, foolishly take to be to their advantage, especially insofar as they are, like sheep, herd animals and find their safety and security in obedience. But, Thrasymachus continues, the law is not to their advantage but to the advantage of the ruler, the ruthless and cunning tyrant who has an eye out for one thing only, his own self-interest, which, Thrasymachus allows, he understands perfectly. Thus, the tyrant might seem to have perfect self-knowledge and to have, therefore, perfect self-master and self-possession. But as Socrates will show, the tyrant is defined and guided by his appetites, especially the irrational desire to always get more or to get the better of everyone, his likes as well as his opposites. So, he is always at war with himself and with others. The tyrant, Thrasymachus says, legislates the law, changes the constitution, and in doing so, slants and distorts the law so that it benefits him by feeding his interests. Those who obey the law, meanwhile, really end up benefiting not themselves, but the tyrant. Naïve, well-intended obedience to law, obedience to slanted and unjust laws, is by far the most economical and efficient way for the tyrant to maintain his grip on absolute power. No police force is needed in such a system to keep people in line. They are happy to obey, innocent as they are of the true nature of justice and its apparent opposite, injustice.

This is where the Sophist’s craft comes in. It shall be the Sophist’s job to teach the skill of persuasion to others, potential tyrants, so that they might employ it to create false images of themselves as just and lawful men so that they can appear to be just before the public and so be better able privately to practice perfect injustice. Justice then becomes a mirror game, a sucker’s game, and a technique in the most insidious sense of the word.

Against this, Socrates would like to uphold a vision of justice as stronger, more unified, and more successful, therefore, than injustice. But Socrates must first show the inconsistencies in Thrasymachus’s ‘truthful’ account of justice. Where Thrasymachus attempts to tell the

truth about justice, whereby justice is not a benefit to the just but only to the unjust, and where he further admits that this will work only if the just and obedient ones do not see justice for what it is but for what it is not, Socrates must show that this cannot be the case, and that Thrasymachus is mistaken. Ironically, Socrates shows that the only way for the unjust man to succeed in his dealings is for him to be just rather than unjust. Justice here implies not obedience to the law but cooperation and harmony with others, the way musicians play together to create beautiful music. Thrasymachus's contention that the unjust man will always try to get the better of everyone, just and unjust alike, is quickly shown by Socrates to be self-defeating. The unjust man can only succeed if he at some point agrees to cooperate with others. He will need allies and this will require justice. Even thieves do not steal from one another, for if they do, they will be defeated.

So, Socrates suspects that Thrasymachus is, beneath his Sophistic appearances, a true lover of knowledge, and Socrates would like to bring this out and enlist Thrasymachus as an ally in the struggle to find true justice and to provide an account of true justice that will also be persuasive in that it will indeed turn the souls of the hearers of the conversation and the discourse on justice toward the good. Thus, it will contribute to the education of the guardians. Their education will be effective and complete only when it is education in true justice. Thus, their education will bring about and maintain a stable condition (*hexis*) of justice in their souls that will shield them from all evil.

Again, the distinction between telling the truth and speaking in a way that persuades but does not tell the truth is strongly pertinent. By the tentative and unsatisfactory conclusion of the dialogue with Thrasymachus in Book One, Socrates has roughly sketched a conception of justice in which justice is more than merely a skill whereby one pursues one's self interests and always seeks one's own advantage over others. If justice is such a skill, it will, like many skills, be stricken by the ambiguity of being fully capable of doing either great good or great harm, as is medicine, for example. So, justice, too, would be a kind of *pharmakon*, the kind of thing that can equally kill or cure. This is especially the case where justice, as a deceitful technique practiced by the tyrant, is linked

to the technique of rhetoric and where the tyrant uses persuasive rhetoric to succeed in his attempts to get his own advantage over others.

But for Socrates, on the other hand, justice must be seen not as a skill, something instrumental, calculating, and linked to rhetoric, but as a virtue, an excellence of soul and practical action, and, therefore, a component essential to the well being of both the individual and the political community (*polis*). Because it is a virtue, justice shall benefit the just, for it is a life (*bios*) guided by intelligence and harmony rather than by the always restless chaos of the appetites. Justice becomes, then, a paramount virtue unifying the private and public domains by practically eliminating the distinction between the private and the public.

The private was always a threat, in Socrates' view, for the 'private' meant the home, women, private lives and private interests. Such environments only nourish self-interests by turning the individual away from the public toward his own private life (*bios*). Through his truthful and hopefully persuasive speech, (*logos*), Socrates hopes to secure a life, (*bios*), linked to the social and to the community rather than to the private sphere. But in this new logos on Justice, the *bios* Socrates seeks is one in which one's self interests, far from being set aside, are cultivated such that they become isomorphic with the interests of the whole political community. Justice pays. That shall be shown in the long account that follows Book One to be the truth of justice, insofar as a human being can know it and give expression (in true accounts, or true opinions) to it.

Throughout, though, one should not miss this connection Socrates is making between truth and persuasion, for what is at issue in these discussions is the link between *logos* and *bios*, between the principles that one adopts and the life one lives. This is what everyone must seek and question for themselves, especially when they meet Socrates. Whether politician, poet, or artisan, one must give an account of oneself, one must tell the truth about oneself and the kind of life one is living. (See also Plato's *Laches*, 187e –188e) So, the debate with the Sophists and Socrates' concern for the difference between telling the truth and merely being persuasive is a crucial one insofar as ethics and politics are concerned. For Socrates, justice itself, both an ethical and a political virtue, is largely a matter of human life (*bios*) being guided by right principles (*logos*) and rational desires, such that to flourish as both an

individual and as a member of the political community depends upon it.*

III.

Socrates' questions concerning the best life for the individual and for the political community resonated throughout Greek classical culture. In this concluding section, we would like to set forth a sketch of some of the background cultural questions and tensions that should be taken into account for a better understanding of yet another important question one finds in Plato's *Republic*, a question as relevant today as it was in classical times, namely, the question of the relation between the individual and the state, the private and the public domains.

First, what was an "individual" in classical Greek culture? Again, classical Greece is often identified with or defined by "humanism". By and large, humanism here refers the ways in which Greeks put the human dimension at the center of their concerns. As was quoted above, "Man is the measure of all things." Sculptures of gods and goddesses were anthropomorphic – the Greek individual written large, in bronze letters, and so made monumental. The bronze sculptures of Zeus found in the sea, or the so-called Riace Warriors, are all heroic visions of the Greek individual. He is shown athletic, free standing, proud, independent, and capable, as the weapons he brandishes testify. Earlier sculptures, the famous Kritian Boy (c. 480 B.C.), for example, show at an even earlier date many of the same features. Gods or men? It would be difficult to say. There were, and not only in Plato and Aristotle, but more generally in Greek culture, descriptions of the *Kaloikagathoi*, the beautiful, good, noble and 'just' individuals. They were those who had realized in their lifetimes a kind of special worth (*time*) that was so important for Athenian culture. *Time*- social worth, or reputation - was wholly in the eye of the beholder, so it was an important form of the social marking of identity. As such, the individual as *Kalloskagathos* was, literally, the beautiful

*My discussion of the relations between bios and logos is indebted to M. Foucault's "Discourse and Truth" unpublished transcript of a seminar given at U.C. Berkeley in 1983.)

man, the virtuous man who could lead others and lead himself as well. He was the one of special *time*, one whose life had become a work of art, a thing of beauty to be much admired, especially in the poems and myths, the memories, in short, that would be told about him and his *time* long after his death. So, the conception of the *kalloskagathos* is linked to the Greek awareness of human finitude and of the more general Greek conviction that such life at best is but a wretched shadow of life lived in the here and now. The man is beautiful and so the subject of legend and memory; so, in the language and the words of the *mythos*, he will live on, or at least the statue dedicated in his memory will serve to prompt the recall of what he, too, once was. Again, a link between *bios* and *logos*, where, in this instance, it is immortal life that is promised for the *kalloskagathos* insofar as he shall live on in the collective memory of the community. Perhaps this is the worth, the *time* that becomes the stuff of legends, that Socrates is implicitly holding out to the young Glaucon and Adeimantus an implicit promise that, not despite the intrinsic worth of justice, the just life will also bring about a condition of such *time* and such remembered beauty for them, as well.

Moreover, there is a related notion that may help us to understand the nature and purposes of the Platonic-Socratic dialogue technique, and that is the cultural and political fact that, insofar as one was a male and an Athenian citizen, one primarily lived one's life in the face-to-face encounter with others, and that to be recognized by others was all important, and that self-knowledge, a classical and humanistic ideal, was possible only through others, especially in the 'face-to-face', let us say, of the living conversation, the word, the *logos* shared with others, in the eyes and ears of the other. Aristotle's discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is quite clear on this point: self-knowledge is possible only through or by way of friendships with others. So, in the Socratic dialogue, wherein one must give an account of oneself, there is also an ongoing search for self-knowledge. But, what was this 'self' that was, or that could be known?

According to Vernant (*The Greeks*, translated by Charles Lambert and Teresa Levendar Fagan, Chicago, 1995, p. 19), the individual in classical Greek society was not the same as the individual in modern European society. The Greek individual was not a bearer of universal

rights. There were no “human rights” in humanistic classical Athens. Moreover, the classical or archaic (pre-classical period from late seventh to the early 5th centuries B.C.) individual was not a “person” in the sense of having a secret, singular inner life that would lie at the foundations of the originality and the possibility of anyone saying “me”. As the discussion of *time* has shown, everything seemed most importantly on the surface of appearances. There being no real inner life, the Athenian individual was essentially social and community directed. Having no concept of the private person, the Greeks used the word *idiotēs*, “idiot”, in modern English, to describe the person withdrawn from his ‘true self’ which was public man. (see *Ancient Greek Literature and Society*, by Charles Rowan Beye, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 104) But, and this will lead us to our next important point, there was in the democratic regimes of Athenian political history, despite all these communal and *polis* related tendencies, considerable emphasis placed on the private domain. So, Vernant, in his discussion of this, quotes Thucydides, (2.37.2-3) where he points out the freedom and privacy enjoyed by Athenians: “... Far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes...” But, in connection with *time*, there is an important, socially restraining dimension: how one appeared to others in the sight of others was an important part of the calculation of *time*. Knowledge, idea, (*eidos*), are all sight words, or directly imply the in-sight of intelligence, and self-knowledge was realizable only in sight of others, in the face-to-face encounter with others. So, the Greek individual was first and above all, a citizen, and the passage of the young man into full-fledged citizenship and adulthood were important transitions in life. For the philosophers, the individual was, most importantly, a public and political kind of animal. (Aristotle).

Thus, the lead issue for Socrates concerning his debate with the Sophists and with the poets and myth-tellers is how such *logoi* affect the *bios* of the individuals who hear them. Plato’s overt concern for this, expressed in the context of a discussion of the dangers of democracy in Book Eight of the *Republic* (557a-c), is precisely that free speech, (*Parrhesia*), something encouraged in democratic regimes, would be coupled with not only the freedom of each and all to tell the truth but

with the freedom of each and all to their own choice of life. Democratic tendencies with regards to logos would have disastrous consequences for both the *bios* of the individual and for the greater *polis*. (“...And isn’t the (democratic) city full of freedom and free speech? And isn’t there license in it to do whatever one wants?...And where there’s license, it’s plain that each man would organize his life privately just as it pleased him...” *Republic* 557a-c). In other words, for Plato, the chief danger of speeches, and the freedom to speak and to tell the truth, is that it might lead to everyone choosing a free and private life, that it would thus bring harm to social cohesion. (see also Foucault, op. cited, p. 54.) How to persuade the citizens of a democratic regime of the dangers of democracy in which the freedoms promised are illusory and self destructive, and because of their emphasis on the private at the expense of the public domains, and how democracies then become the breeding grounds and hatcheries for the tyrannical souls that will grow to become the eager pupils of sophists such as Thrasymachus.

Thus, Plato’s great, almost mythic dialogue on the just life must be seen as written from within the cultural, historical and political context of an Athenian world that was dynamic rather than static, and that was endlessly involved in an ongoing and frequently violent debate about the virtues of democracy versus oligarchy and tyranny. Plato’s questions thus seem as essential to ancient culture as to our own, and in addressing his concerns in this way, we have shown how Plato’s texts still speak to us today, wherever there are societies in which human beings ask about the ways and possibilities of true human happiness and justice. For these seem, the leading questions in Plato’s *Republic*, the question of the examined life, the question and the quest that seeks a true account of justice that will succeed in persuading and so turning the human soul toward the Good; an account of justice that will show it to be the intellectual, conceptual principle of ethical life and, as such, the practical cause of excellence in the action for both the individual and the community. In the Platonic-Socratic conception of the just man, justice will be more than merely obeying the law. It will be that virtuous life that binds the individual to the community of his fellow citizens whereby both individual and community alike will attain to a kind of health, harmony and well being of soul that is the best possible for a human

being, given the radical finitude of the human situation. It is only in this that one can find from within the radical finitude of the human situation a true opening to infinite life, not only in that other men will remember the beauty of one's life, but that one will also be remembered by the gods.

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