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Republic's Political Idealism: between Utopia and Ideal Theory

In this paper I aim to analyse Plato's *Republic* in the light of a technical definition of utopia, as arising from the debate on the history of utopian thought. I will argue that a satisfactory and not vague definition of utopia entails three aspects. The first and most commonsensical aspect considers utopian a beautiful but unrealisable social setting (U1); the second one considers utopian every strive for a radical social change (U2); the third and most technical one (U3) views utopia as a specific literary genre characterized by (i) a detailed and (ii) complete portrait of a society that is (iii) located in a distant space (typically an island). Plato's *Republic* is surely the paradigm of U1 and U2. Nevertheless in many passages Plato proves to be well aware of the objections levelled against utopia by common sense and strives to demonstrate that *Kallipolis* is not impossible. U3, the most technical and specific aspect of utopia, is not applicable to the *Republic*. Indeed, Plato does not provide such a detailed and all comprehensive picture of the *Kallipolis*.

After elaborating on these categories, I argue that the notion of utopia cannot account for some of the most important aspects of Plato's *Republic*, that can, on the contrary, be better viewed in light of the notion of ideal theory, which I differentiate from the notion of utopia.

By ideal theory I mean a normative theory providing grounds for the justification the principles underlying a social order, but not attempting to establish how its citizens would concretely live. Both ideal theory and utopia are mental constructions whose validity is independent of their realisation, but an ideal theory is a reason giving enterprise, whereas a utopia engages more with representing in detail an imagined perfect society.

In particular, the concept of ideal theory can appropriately account for one of the most troublesome passages of the *Republic* (592a-b). This passage, as known, has been interpreted as a conclusive proof of the un-political nature of the *Republic*. On the contrary, I claim that the notion of ideal theory would let us better understand how a set of normative principles (such as that outlined in *Kallipolis*) is normatively valid for both individual and collective behaviour irrespective of whether it can be actually put in practice.

To conclude, I argue that, notwithstanding *Republic* is the first blueprint of later utopian theorizing, the notion of ideal theory better accounts for *Republic's* normative value and force.