Plato’s Republic in its Athenian Context

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Plato’s Republic is an internal, constructive critique of Athenian democracy as it was practiced during the years of the Peloponnesian War, the extended dramatic date of the dialogue.\(^1\) While I do not claim to exhaust the purposes of the dialogue with such a sweeping statement, this aspect of Plato’s approach has been neglected in the crossfire between, on the one hand, those who take Plato to be a utopian and his dialogue a blueprint, and, on the other, those who take Plato to be an anti-utopian issuing a dire warning against any polis established on such a blueprint. I argue that Plato’s Socrates’ proposals for a kallipolis, the key features of which contrast sharply with those of Athens herself, are a mark of a deliberate argumentative strategy played out against the background of an equally deliberate rhetorical strategy.

I. Plato’s rhetorical strategy.

The Republic is shaped like a temple pediment or letter Λ, with aspects of the second half of the dialogue arranged in correspondence to aspects of the first. It is a commonplace to mention the language of descent and ascent in the Republic. Indeed, one could hardly fail to notice the structure of the Republic insofar as its principal elements are concerned: the generation, followed by the degeneration, of the kallipolis. But the parallels do not stop with the grand elements. In the literature of Plato’s time, ring composition or pedimental structure was common,\(^2\) and Plato used it not only in the Republic but in at least Crito, Phaedrus, Symposium, Theaetetus and Phaedo.

It is almost as commonplace to mention that a work’s structure may have an important influence on how it should be interpreted. What I sketch here suggests that, even if it were possible to transform the kallipolis from words into reality, the resulting polis would nevertheless fail—so new political proposals are needed,\(^3\) not the particular counterweights set against the

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\(^1\) Thucydides is the primary source for much of the material relevant to the conduct of the democracy during the Peloponnesian war; I cite the translation of Paul Woodruff, who explicates a number of parallels between Thucydides and Plato in: Thucydides, On Justice, Power, and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993). Xenophon’s Hellenica and Diodorus Siculus are the chief sources after the Sicilian defeat.

\(^2\) The two are now sometimes treated as identical, sometimes as distinct. Holger Thesleff, Platonic Patterns (Las Vegas: Parmenides Press, 2009: 28 with nn. 78–79) gives the history of scholarship on pedimental structure in Plato. Mary Douglas, Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) describes ring composition in literature more generally, taking pedimental structure as one of its species. Among the views I reject, or at least subordinate to my own, is one that I find appealing, namely, that the Republic was written as a dialectical progression, out of the cave and beyond, with ever-finer resolutions of its topics. See, for example, David Roochnik, Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato’s Republic (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Rachel Barney, “Platonic Ring-Composition and Republic 10,” in Mark L. McPherran, ed., Plato’s Republic: A Critical Guide (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), ch. 2.

\(^3\) Proposals from the Politicus and Laws, perhaps. I will return below (x) to the distinction in Politicus between two types of democracy: the lawless democracy in which the Assembly was sovereign, characteristic of the war years, and the constitutional democracy introduced in 403/2, wherein the laws were sovereign (indeed, it was a capital of-
Athens of Socrates’ time. Other implications of the structure—more obvious on the diagram—include how one should interpret the religious myths of book 10, for example. Religion is assigned a minor role in the philosophical ascent: the festival honoring the new goddess is not attended by the characters because the would-be connoisseurs of spectacle have fallen into a philosophical conversation that rivets them (1.327a–328b); religious myths frighten old Cephalus in book 1 (328b–331d), and we find just such myths—Glaucus (611a–612a) and Er (613e–621b)—in book 10, the matching bookend. Religion, then, is appropriate for those who cannot make the steep central climb to the unhypothetical first principle of the all. Likewise, Homer and the tragic poets are banished in book 10 (595b3–7) for that same audience of religious believers who lack the antidote (φάρμακον, 10.595b6) that the philosophers are able to attain (cf. 3.392c2–5).

The effect of the pedimental structure is seen as well in books 2 and 9 where the challenge posed in the form of an argument by Glaucon and Adeimantus in book 2 is answered—also in the form of an argument—by Socrates in book 9. A detail not as obvious on the schema will return below: failure to achieve the knowledge offered at the pinnacle of the pediment characterizes not only religious believers but all those who mistake the examples and simulacra of justice for justice itself, thus it characterizes the political theorists who are not also philosophers.

A very old, complementary, and controversial thesis that buttresses the elaborate craftsmanship reflected in the diagram is that the original Republic was the ‘proto-Republic’, so-called since the 18th c.—not the detached book 1, though indeed it was detached, but large parts of what we now call books 2, 3, and 5. Gilbert Ryle called the proto-Republic Ideal State. It is summarized at the beginning of the Timaeus (17b–19b), spoofed by Aristophanes’ Ecclesiazusae, alluded to by Isocrates in Busiris (17), and mentioned by Aulus Gellius (Noctes Atticae 14.3.3) who, in the 2nd c. CE said that Xenophon had seen the two-scroll version of the Republic that “had first reached the public” and wrote his Cyropaedia in criticism of that early version. Ancient silence argues in its usual suggestive but ineffectual way that the Republic as we know it was not published in Plato’s lifetime: we have no contemporaneous discussions of the sun, line, and cave, or of the corruption of the kallipolis. Because it is not impossible, however, that the Republic sprang full-grown from Plato’s head, and because Plato’s rhetorical strategy does not require it as a premise, I will forbear to say more.

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4 All references not further identified are to Platonis Rempublicam (S. R. Slings, ed., OCT, 2003); quotations are from C. D. C. Reeve’s revision of the G. M. A. Grube translation (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992).
5 I make this bald assertion here, not because the matter has been settled—the literature is large—but because it is irrelevant to my current thesis and because my view is developed in “The Dramatic Date of Plato’s Republic,” Classical Journal 93:4 (1998), 383–96.
6 Book numbers (on the outside of the diagram) correspond to the dialogue’s division into ten books. They were not Plato’s but those of the Alexandrian librarians who collated and catalogued the papyrus scrolls sometime before the 1st c. CE. Dotted lines on the diagram show that the action continues without a break.
8 Xenophon’s criticism is answered at Laws 3.694c.
9 The scholarly history of the proto-Republic begins with J. Hirmer, “Entstehung und Komposition der Platonischen Politiea,” Jahrbücher für Classische Philologie, supp. 23 (1897), 579–678: see pp. 592–598. It is Thesleff (2009: 519–39) who develops all the arguments I mentioned, and others, with originality and in detail; he also canvasses the vast literature on the proto-Republic. See also Antonio Capizzi, “La Struttura della Republica Platonica,” AION (filol.) 6, 131–9 (1984, though it appeared in 1988) who argues that the Republic is a combination of three ensembles composed at three different times, each reflecting Plato’s times. My contribution to the subject is limited to chapter 7 of my Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).
Plato's *Republic*: its structure

Unhypothetical First Principle of the All
Divided Line

### VI

**Ship of State**

**Metaphor of the Sun**

**Myth of the Cave**

Three Waves. Who are the PHILOSOPHERS?

**VIRTUE DESCRIBED** as social justice:

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**PHILOSOPHERS’ curriculum:**

**VIRTUE ACTUALIZED:** reason leads the psyche from perceptions to intelligibles (arithmetic, plane and solid geometry, kinetics, harmonics); then dialectic leads. Knowledge of the good reveals one’s true advantage.

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**MYTH OF THE CAVE**

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### IV

**Myth of the Metals**

**GENERATION OF KALLIPOLIS:** Education of the guardians:

- music, gymnastics, the gods’ goodness, courage, modesty, truthfulness, and health. *Imitative poets* are opposed.

Three tests of the guardians’ nature results in the separation of guardians from auxiliaries.

*Pleonexia* brings private property and a LUXURIOUS POLIS, so war is inevitable. Guardians are thus required whose natural disposition is that of a philosophical guard-dog.

“Justice writ large”: communal human society is the TRUE & HEALTHY POLIS, originates in mutual human need and specialization of labor.

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### II

Glaucon & Adeimantus argue **JUSTICE** is

- **P1** practiced unwillingly; and
- **P2** that perfect injustice is better. So
- **C** it is best to seem just but to be unjust.

**QUESTION:** Is justice better than injustice?

### I

**DESCENT** to Piraeus from Athens; religious festival.

Conventional **APPEARANCES** of justice: to tell the truth and pay one’s debts (Cephalus); to give each what is due (Simonides via Polemarchus); to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies (Polemarchus); the advantage of the stronger (Thrasymachus).

### X

Socrates argues finally that INJUSTICE is

- **P1** practiced unwillingly; and
- **P2** that justice is better. So
- **C** it is worse to seem just but be unjust.

**ANSWER:** Justice is better than injustice.

**Imitative poets** who deal in **APPEARANCES**, and who lead others to do the same, are opposed in light of the discussion.

**DESCENT** to Hades. Myth of Er: a religious story about rewards and punishments, like those that tormented Cephalus, and where each individual chooses the next life to be lived.
II. Plato’s argumentative strategy.

Plato’s argumentative strategy is to heighten the contrast between wartime Athens and the kallipolis through a series of proposals that are usefully understood as counterweights to Athenian democracy at its most extreme, much as Glauncon polishes the statues of the just and unjust man in his choice of lives (2.360e2–362c8). The diseased city Plato’s Socrates says he is attempting to purge is Athens, and his improvements should be evaluated in that context rather than absolutely. Plato’s Republic is “good fiction,” as internally defined in book 2 (382c7–d4), for it is an imaginative transformation of the Athens Socrates and Plato experienced. They lived through some of the democracy’s worst abuses, but remained its friends by being its critics. Like Socrates, Plato had opportunities to reside elsewhere—in the justly governed Tarentum of his friend, Archytus, for example (Diogenes Laertius 3.21–22, Letter 7.349e–350b). But Plato, like Socrates, remains in democratic Athens and tries to cure its ills. He constructs in the Republic a reaction to the Athenian democracy from the beginning of the war up to 403/2—not a snapshot. Much of the dialogue should be understood in relation to, and as counterbalancing, Athens’ harmful institutions and practices of that time. In what follows, I lay out eleven historical points, paired with aspects of Plato’s Republic.

(i) The demographic distribution of Athens is reflected in the class backgrounds of the twelve featured participants gathered in Polemarchus’ house in Piraeus (1.327a1–328b8). Athens, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, was a proud example to the known world—or so Pericles proclaimed in his funeral oration (Thucydides 2.37); and its gates were open to foreign visitors (2.39). The Attic population was then roughly 300,000. That included ≥100,000 slaves; <50,000 metics; and >150,000 citizens. Of the citizens, 45,000 (15%) were adult males; 17,000 (<6%) were citizens over 30 in the 3 highest propertied classes, i.e., eligible to hold all offices. The overall figures are misleading for the Republic, however, because they are for Attica as a whole; the dialogue is affected by the fact that eighty percent of Attica’s metics lived within just seven demes, all inside the city walls, including Socrates’ deme, Alopece; Collytus, the deme of Adeimantus and Glauncon; and the Piraeus of Cephalus and his three sons, increasing the proportion of metics in the urban area as opposed to the regions of Athens outside the walls.

Plato’s audience would have known or known of most of the men who gathered in Polemarchus’ house in the Piraeus harbor for a discussion of justice. There is excellent evidence that Adeimantus and Glauncon were still alive in 382, and Lysias in 380.

The diversity of characters is intriguing, compared to other Platonic dialogues. Ignoring the unnamed auditors (1.327b), there is one Athenian oligarch, Clitophon (pseudo-Aristotle,
Athenian Constitution 29.2–3, 34.3); one elderly Athenian aristocrat, Charmantides of Paeania (Inscriptiones Graecae I, 299.39, 324.56, 350.62, 1328); one Athenian with newly acquired wealth, Niceratus, son of the general Nicias; one impoverished Athenian, Socrates; and one foreign visitor, Thrasymachus of Chalcedon. It is unlikely that Glaucen and Adeimantus, the only young men present, were from very wealthy families because there are no attested liturgies, and no records of high office, for anyone in Plato’s family. Old Cephalus, a metic with roots in Syracuse, has retired, leaving the management of the family’s shield factory and its 125 slaves to Polemarchus. Athenian law had no primogeniture, so all three sons could expect to inherit equal shares. Although foreign residents could own property and paid taxes in their demes of registration, there was no path to Athenian citizenship, so Cephalus’ sons were also metics. No distribution of Cephalus’ wealth was to occur because, as we know, the armory was to be seized and Polemarchus executed by the Thirty (Lysias 12), prompting another of the sons, Lysias, to become a prominent supporter of the democratic resistance. Niceratus will also be executed by the Thirty (Xenophon, Hellenica 2.3.39). If Thrasymachus was sent to Athens for negotiations held in 407, after Chalcedon had mounted an unsuccessful revolt against Athens, his diplomatic mission will have added reason to be sympathetic to both his speech in the Republic and the speech preserved as DK fragment 1.

Plato calls his readers back to Polemarchus’ house each time Socrates mentions Thrasymachus, and also in book 6 where the situation of all the men in the room is described: they are “lucky to be an invited audience when others are doing philosophy” (6.498a1–9), prompting us to consider how these men would receive the proposals for a kallipolis. There is one other person from the dialogue who should be noticed: the slave of Polemarchus. For the ancients, who spoke first in a work—whether god or man—was considered significant, and Plato’s Socrates has the slave speak first in the Republic. Plato typically does not let the reader forget that slaves are present in his dialogues.

(ii) Socrates’ proposed communal society based on the needs of its citizens (2.369b7–372c2) is rejected by Glaucen, who desires the luxuries customary to Athenians of his class (Ἀπερ νομίζεται, 2.372d8). Socrates proposes a just, cooperative, commercial community characterized by specialization of labor, reflecting the abilities its citizens have by nature (φύσις). It is a commune that enjoys vegetarian feasts, wine, choral music, and sex (with population control, 2.372c1–2), its residents living long lives in peace and good health (2.369b–372d), and passing their way of life to the next generation. That would be a truly ideal polis, and the Athenian visitor still calls this form of communism the best polity, though unrealizable, in the Laws (5.739b–

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14 His loyalties shifted opportunistically over the years, consistent with the extreme relativism he introduces (1.340b6–8). Other oligarchs lurk in the households of some of the characters. Glaucen and Adeimantus had a first cousin once removed, Critias, who would be a leader of the Thirty, the government established to reinstate the ancestral constitution (the patrios politeia) at the end of the war. Their maternal uncle, Charmides, was one of the Piraeus Ten, henchmen of the Thirty. What is often forgotten in the rush to present Plato as anti-democratic by citing his relatives is that Pyrilmakes—Plato’s step-father and great uncle, whom he praises, and the only father he ever knew—was Pericles’ intimate friend (Plutarch, Pericles 13.10), and was himself so democratic that he named his son ‘Demos’.

15 I suspect that the Syracusan origins of Cephalus’ household make it likely that book 1 and the deterioration of the kallipolis were added to the proto-Republic to make the dialogue attractive to Plato’s Sicilian audience—whether or not the ‘digression’ of books 5–7 was included at the same time. There is a controversy of long standing over whether Lysias was eventually given Athenian citizenship for his role in funding the democratic resistance which I discuss in some detail in The People of Plato (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), pp. 190–94.

e). In the *Republic*, we see why it is not realizable for human beings. No cooperative commune can flourish where there live some people who are already contaminated by greed (*πλεονεξία*), a willingness to obtain for themselves luxuries that they want but do not need, and a willingness to do so even if the welfare of others is thereby diminished. Plato’s brother Glaucon misses the culinary delights to which he is accustomed (2.372c3–4), so Socrates suggests more vegetarian dishes, in a final attempt to secure a peaceful, healthy community. They are not enough; Glaucon insists that Socrates include conventional comforts to fill unlimited desires (2.372d–373d): furniture, condiments, perfume, incense, prostitutes, and puddings—although he agrees with Socrates that such extravagances must bring with them hunters and swineherds, imitative artists, beauticians, and chefs (2.373b), who in turn require the city to bring in doctors to attend to the people’s resulting ill health, and lawyers to write speeches defending private property, and soldiers to invade neighboring cities to make room for the expansion (2.373d7) as well as to defend the luxurious city from attack. Glaucon’s experience of fat and feverish Athens gives content to his desire for unnecessary luxuries, objects of his *pleonexia*. The only good that Socrates is able to wring out of Glaucon’s suggestion is that the origin of injustice may become clear along with the origin of justice (2.372e4–6), as it does (2.373e6–8).

We have reached the crux of the *Republic* and of our own time as well—a crux that is both psychological and political. It is common to say with Thucydides (1.23) that *fear* was the truest reason why the Peloponnesian War was fought, and why wars more generally are fought; but that is unfair to the historian in light of Plato’s analysis, for Thucydides also stipulates that what the Lacedaemonians feared was Athenian expansion. That expansion is exactly what Plato’s Socrates describes in this part of the dialogue—complete with the inevitability of war—and giving the reason for the expansion as overreaching, desiring beyond what is necessary, *pleonexia*. Greed is more fundamentally and more certainly the cause of conflict than is fear. With even a few such greedy people in a city, the institutions must change for laws must be written to protect the vulnerable. Some political theorists dismiss the commune as a “city of pigs” but the inadequacy of the commune is Glaucon’s judgment, not that of Plato’s Socrates. In fact, for Socrates, the communal life remains preferable to the kallipolis throughout, as shown in the similarities to the philosopher-rulers’ communal lives. They live in barracks, owning nothing, sharing everything, their quarters open to inspection at all times by all citizens (3.416d4–417b5; 5.464b8–c3), having no sexual partners except as the polis decrees (5.459d8–e4)—but also philosophizing and passing on their way of life to the next generation (7.540a4–b5).

(iii) Athens’ citizen militia, says Socrates, must be replaced by a professional army (2.373e10–374d7) because the citizens already have their specializations, and no one can “practice many crafts or professions well.” Glaucon at first suggests that the existing citizen militia will be able to seize neighboring lands and defend the city, referring to the actual military practice of Athens at the time. Athens maintained a citizen militia under which each of the ten tribes elected a general annually but where the Board of Generals was subordinate to the Assembly. It had been worse in former times, when Athens had been so very democratic that even generals were selected by lot—a military calamity. By the time of the *Republic*, an able-bodied male, in the year of his turning eighteen, was presented to his father’s fellow demesmen for scrutiny and registered as a citizen; he then began two years of compulsory military service when he was expected to defend the city if she came under attack, but was not allowed to campaign outside the borders of Attica.17 There is no evidence that the citizen militia engaged in any formal tactical training.

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whatever. Pericles makes a virtue of the lack of preparation for war in his funeral oration, contrasting Athenian and Spartan practice: “We do not rely on secret preparation and deceit so much as on our own courage in action. And as for education, our enemies train to be men from early youth by rigorous exercise, while we live a more relaxed life and still take on dangers as great as they do” (Thucydides 2.39). Even after years of war, in 418 at the battle of Mantinea, only Argos fought the Spartans with trained troops (Thucydides 5.67). This proposal of a professional army for the kallipolis might well be regarded as advising the adoption of the ways of the Spartan enemy in its time; by 391, however, Athens had both specialized troops, e.g. peltasts, and mercenaries. Plato is advising what Athens had already in fact adopted.

(iv) The Athenian educational practice of memorizing epic poetry should be reformed (2.376e1–3.394b3), Socrates argues, through a program of censorship. In Athens, early childhood education was based on memorization, and later recitation, of the poets, evident in the Republic already in both Cephalus’ and Polemarchus’ replies to questions about justice. One of the men present in Piraeus, Niceratus, was famous in his own day for having memorized the entire Iliad and Odyssey—which was not completely unheard of for those who competed among the rhapsodes, as he did (Xenophon, Symposium 3.5–6). Niceratus’ father, Nicias, had more than once attempted unsuccessfully to coax Socrates into undertaking the education of his son (Laches 200d); Socrates, for reasons not made explicit, sometimes suggested teachers (Damon, Prodicus) for those presumably unresponsive to his own methods.

If I am right that Socrates’ proposals for the kallipolis are intended to be evaluated in contrast to existing Athenian institutions, his proposals for censorship of the poetry appropriate for young children ought not to be considered absolute, but as precisely appropriate for a society in which poetry plays too great a role, usurping philosophy. In the Republic—and more generally in Plato—the best way to ensure that one does the right thing in the long run and in novel circumstances is to gain knowledge of the good and the bad. Otherwise, for example, one cannot know who one’s real friends and enemies are (1.334c6–8), or what one’s real advantage is (1.339c1–2). If, under the influence of the poets, one adopts a heroic code of conduct—imitate Achilles, say—one obviates reasoning about circumstances, ends, and means. In effect, one privileges poetry over philosophy. Poetic education and the privileging of poetry had real-world consequences that one sees, for example, in the conduct of the Peloponnesian War. Alcibiades’ speech to the Athenian Assembly (Thucydides 6.16), for example—persuading his fellow citizens to invade Sicily, invoking Achilles to rouse enthusiasm against Nicias’ realistic assessment of the dangers of a foreign war—led to Athens’ most catastrophic defeat.

Socrates’ proposed reform is based on two claims about the nature of children: that they are malleable (2.377a11–b2), and that they are natural mimics who become like what they imitate (3.395); together with two claims about the divine nature: it is the cause not “of all things but only of good ones” (380e9–10), and it is simple (ἁπλοῦς) and true (382e8). Thus the content of children’s stories—which is presented comically in the text by quoting all the passages that must not be quoted—represents gods (2.379a) and heroes (3.391d–e) accurately; and consists of stories that are instrumentally beneficial, whether about gods (3.386b–c) or humans (3.392b–c). With an allusion to the polished statues of the just and unjust person, Socrates adds that exact prohibitions must await agreement about what justice itself is (3.392c2–5).

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18 Socrates mimics what he has just said about the good: It is not the cause of all things but only of good things (379b15–16).
19 The form or style of children’s stories is also subjected to critique (3.392c–401a).
The early childhood education that is the subject of books 2–3 is superseded by a sustained educational effort, aimed at knowledge of what is real (5.475e3–7.541b5). The curriculum for the philosophers in book 7 (524d–535a) likewise implies a demotion of poetry from its pedestal, but its more direct target seems to be the ‘new learning’ parodied in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* and associated with such sophists as Gorgias and Protagoras, and others (e.g., Hippias and Prodicus) who sought students from among Athens’ upper class males.

(v) Socrates argues that the polis should have expert overseers (3.412a9–b2), a proposal that no longer seems radical, but was undemocratic by the Athenian standards of his time. Under the Athenian democracy, government officials were chosen by lot: the sovereign Assembly (ἐκκλησία) of 6,000 dissolved daily, the Council (βουλή) of 500 was divided into tribe-based executive committees (πρυτάνεις) of 50, each of which served for a tenth of the year; the executive committee leader (ἐπιστάτης) changed daily, the nine archons annually; and no one could serve twice in the same position. The Assembly had the authority to overturn laws, and to oversee the conduct of foreign and domestic policy. On several occasions, the Assembly would one day make a decision that the Assembly—constituted differently, or after sleeping on an issue—would the next day override or cancel. Conducting warfare under such conditions led to well-known debacles. Socrates recalls in the *Apology* (32b) one such famous case in which he was involved as a member of the executive committee (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 1.7.15) or its leader (Gorgias 473e, Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.8, 4.4.2). In 406, six generals, though victorious in the battle of Arginusae, had failed because of a storm to retrieve the dead and wounded. Misunderstandings, then accusations arose because of the poor means of communication available. The upshot was that the six were tried together over Socrates’ objections that, in accordance with the Athenian law of Cannonus, individuals charged with capital offenses were entitled to separate trials. The Assembly overrode the law and executed the generals. Predictably, the Assembly later changed its mind and convicted the man who had moved to decide the six fates as one. The Assembly often changed its mind when its victims were already dead.

Within the section of *Republic* 8 on democracy, there is a comment that has often puzzled commentators: “people condemned to death and exile under such a constitution stay on at the center of things, strolling around like ghosts of dead heroes, without anyone staring at them or giving them a thought” (8.558). The incident that provokes the remark is the sacrilege scandal of 415. Plato was then about nine, and about seventeen when the condemned and exiled men began returning to Athens and strolling around. To make a long story short, just as the Athenian fleet was about to sail on its disastrous invasion of Sicily, religious hysteria broke out when the city’s herms—boundary markers with the face and phallus of the god of travel, Hermes—were desecrated by vandals (a drinking club, as it would later prove). In the wake of that crime, a number of leading Athenians, including Alcibiades, one of the three commanding generals for the mission, were accused of profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries. Alcibiades deserted to the Spartans; some of the others were summarily executed; still others, realizing the danger, fled into exile. All were condemned, about fifty altogether, including several from Socrates’ circle (Phaedrus, Charmides, and Eryximachus). Four years later, however, the army in the Hellespont summoned

20 Thucydides provides telling examples. E.g., Mytilene was saved after such a turn-around in the Assembly (3.37–50), but not Melos (5.84–116); and Nicias, ill with kidney disease, tried to negotiate by letter with the Athenian Assembly from Sicily (7.11–15).
Alcibiades to take command. Eight years after the sacrilege, Alcibiades and at least two other of the condemned men were back in Athens, and no one cared anymore that they had been condemned, and their property confiscated. Word spread, and others returned as well. It’s another indication that the Assembly was sovereign but that its irrational, even contradictory, actions made it an object of fear, but not of respect.

(vi) In Republic 2, Socrates distinguished *lies* from fictions, the former unequivocally harmful, but the latter useful in preventing harm, whether by friends or by enemies (2.382a–d). When Socrates introduces his own useful fiction, the myth of the metals (3.414d1–415c7), he directly opposes the founders’ myth touted by the Athenians of his day. Their founders’ myth, autochthony, accounts well for the Athenian reputation for xenophobia and feelings of superiority toward neighbors. Thucydides tells a version, now better known among historians and political theorists than among philosophers. It is worth quoting a part of it to heighten the sharp contrast with Socrates’ story:

> [W]hat is now called ‘Hellas’ was not permanently settled in former times, but there were many migrations, and people were ready to leave their land whenever they met the force of superior numbers. … The best land was always the most subject to these changes of inhabitants… For the excellence of the land increased the power of certain men, and this led to civil wars, by which they were ruined; and all this made them more vulnerable to the designs of outsiders. Accordingly, Attica has been free from civil war for most of its history, owing to the lightness of its soil; and that is why it has always been inhabited by the same people. Here is strong support for this account: because of the migrations, the rest of Greece did not develop at the same rate as Athens, since the most able refugees from wars and civil strife all over Greece retired to the safety of Athens. There they became citizens, and they added so much to the citizen population that Attica could no longer support them, and colonies were sent out to Ionia.” (Thucydides 1.2)

In short, Athenians are entitled to Attica because the land has always been theirs and they have always been superior to others. Accordingly, resident aliens—the family of Cephalus, for example—could live in Athens for generations and never be granted citizenship.

Socrates’ replacement myth-of-the-metals, implies universal siblinghood, and divisions based on natural capacities: mother Earth gave birth to all the citizens, and to their weapons and tools; thus to attack the land is to attack the mother. All the citizens are amalgamations: those equipped to rule have gold mixed into them, the auxiliaries silver, and the farmers and artisans, iron and bronze. One result of the Socratic story is that Solon’s four classes are replaced by four occupational groups based on the natural abilities individuals exhibit, their talents. The four existing classes of Athens at the time of the *Republic*—against which to contrast the merit-based system—were rigidly based on birth and wealth: (1) the “five-hundred-measure men” (*pentakosiomedimnoi*, where *medimnoi* means ‘measures’) whose estates produced that much wheat, (2) knights (*hippeis*), whose property produced the equivalent of 300–500 measures, (3) yeomen (*zeugitai*, from *zeugos*, ‘yoke’)—whose property produced 200–300 measures, and (4) *thetes* at the bottom, still citizens, but not eligible for all the offices in the city. The four occupations are soon treated as three since both farmers and artisans are providers. As strange as the proposal of three kinds of occupation may sound in isolation from traditional autochthony, it is a shining al-

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24 *Thetes* and slaves served as rowers on triremes, and—theoretically—the yeomen were the hoplite combat force, but any man with a suit of armor could be a hoplite, so that is better conceived as a military rank.
ternative to the class system based on wealth and birth, so let it be judged in relation to what it is proposed to replace.

(vii) The democratic practice of keeping Athens’ administrative tasks so simple that any citizen selected by lot could perform them competently is replaced by a strict specialization of labor introduced in book 2 (369e–370a) and emphasized repeatedly, demanding expertise in a single task (4.434c7–435b7). Under the existing system, few Athenians had the time or opportunity to develop competence, much less expertise. Even the inclination to do a job well may have been uncommon when one was expected to leave one’s familiar tasks to take up a new one for a month or a year and then drop it again. But if one’s name was drawn, one served. This year, or this month, one might supervise the weighing of bread loaves, or collect the harbor tolls; next year one might have to leave one’s farm in the north to serve as one of the city’s nine archons—or as a magistrate for one of the civil or criminal courts. Developing expertise was hindered by one’s rotating out of office after a day, a month, or a year. There were, however, two exceptions to the lottery process: the generals, whom I’ve already mentioned, and the treasurers. Originally, only the highest class, the five-hundred-measure men were allowed to serve as treasurers because it was feared that others would steal from the public purse. When it transpired that the rich embezzled public funds, a regulation was passed to allow members of all but the lowest class to serve, but requiring that treasurers be scrutinized before serving, and audited afterwards. That regulation was in place by the time of Plato’s Republic.

Similar problems of competence and corruption arose in connection with jury service as the war ground on. Patriotic notions expressed in Aeschylus’ Eumenides had given way to Aristophanes’ stinging criticisms in Wasps (291–311). Because the disabled, the old, and the poor needed the three obols that jury duty paid, they tended to monopolize positions on the jury. What had once been strictly a lottery had been combined with volunteer service: Athenian men aged thirty or over were eligible to volunteer for jury service in midsummer as the archon year began. Lotteries then determined which six thousand of them would then be impaneled, six hundred per tribe, to be reconfigured daily to various civil and criminal courts all year. Each configuration lasted a single day, so that was the maximum length for a trial by jury, one day. Corruption, bribery in particular, had earlier been addressed by making juries prohibitively large to reduce the possibility that someone would be wealthy enough to bribe all the jurors. Anytus, later one of Socrates’ accusers, developed a way of bribing juries that had its own name, dekaizein. Although the details are obscure, it may have ensured that every tenth man—from among those willing to sell their votes for a chance at a return—would receive a large payment, with all corruptible jurors ‘betting’ on their chances of being one of the winners. After Anytus used the method to win acquittal for himself (Diodorus Siculus 13; pseudo-Aristotle, Athenian Constitution 27), the Athenians gave it a name and made it punishable by death.25

Socrates’ counterproposal of specialization of labor for governmental administrative offices would likely have replaced juries with expert magistrates. It would surely have improved the quality of public services. Perhaps its greatest advantage would have been the extension of trials beyond one day. Socrates criticizes the laws of Athens on exactly that point at his own trial (Apology 37a8–b2), and it had been a key factor in the Arginousae generals’ trial as well. As with his other counterproposals, the specialization of labor Socrates suggests, including its mythical beginnings with mother Earth, should be compared to the feckless and corrupt practices of

25 Anytus had been charged with failure to secure Pylos in 409 when he was serving as general. See Douglas M. MacDowell, The Law in Classical Athens (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 173.
the Athenian democracy against which it was being pitted.

(viii) Socrates’ proposal that females and males must be trained and educated together, and the series of arguments he uses to support it (5.451c3–462e3) are hardly controversial nowadays in most of the world, but they are received by Adeimantus and Glaucion as both risible and shocking. From such evidence as we have, Athenian education simply excluded girls to an extent unprecedented elsewhere among ancient poleis. Evidence for Greek schools goes back to Herodotus (6.27.2) who reports on a roof that collapsed on Chios in 496, killing some 120 children.

In the classical period, Spartan girls were schooled separately and together with boys, both at home and in public, clothed and naked, though the emphasis for girls, as for boys, was on physical training (athletics); reading was learned as part of their training in music (Harris 1989: 99). In Athens, partly because of the social pressure for females of all ages to be unseen and unknown, “whether for virtue or by way of reproach,” such basic learning as was available to girls was received at home, probably from household slaves or employees. There is no evidence whatever of public education for girls in Athens. Such educated women as are encountered in history and literature are Greek-speaking but foreign and educated outside Athens (e.g., Diotima of Mantaneia, Aspasia of Miletus).

If the proposal for the training and education of both sexes together applies to all children of the kallipolis and not only to the guardians, as I will argue that it does, then the passage marks a major improvement over the current Athenian practice of giving the most expensive educations to the sons of the richest citizens; it marks as well the West’s first explicit recommendation for universal education. The text provides several reasons to take the plan as universal: Socrates had already argued in book 3 that all the city’s offspring must be carefully watched for signs of special talent, indications of a dominant metal other than that of their parents, in the event that they should be transferred to a different occupational group (3.415c3–7). It would be impossible, however, to separate the gold from among the bronze if there were no early schooling opportunities enabling children to be compared on an equal basis. The discussion of propaedeutic education in book 7 (534d3–537d8) builds on book 3, making it clear that children are observed for twenty years for signs of special talent: stability, courage, a good memory, persistence, as well as the capacity for hard work and for study in diverse disciplines are the special talents expected of future guardians. The children being observed perceive the process as play at a wide variety of games, free of compulsion, though the rulers are in the background, tallying points in a

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26 This is often noted with confidence despite two methodological problems that complicate the evidence on ancient schooling: there is little secure information before the Hellenistic period, and most of the available information is Athenian.

27 The term paides is ambiguous between ‘boys’ and ‘children’ but, as pointed out by William V. Harris (Ancient Literacy, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 58 with n. 62, a “free population of more than 2,000” would be required to produce boys enough to fill the school; a population of 1,000 if both boys and girls were learning their letters. Harris assumes the paides “must all have been boys,” despite the surprising consequence for the free population of Chios. For his assessment of the education of Athenian girls, on which I rely, see pp. 96–102.


29 Pericles’ advice to the war widows was to “have as little fame among men as is possible,” continuing with the passage quoted (Thucydides, 2.45). Aristophanes often made jokes on the assumption that women were pale and pallid, presumably because they spent almost all their time indoors and heavily clothed. Xenophon’s Oeconomicus represents the young wives of both Critobulus (3.13) and Ischomachus (7.5) as having been brought up to see and hear as little as possible.

30 Harris (1989: 100) notes that the West’s first advocacy of universal education is found in Plato’s Laws (7.804c–e), presumably because he takes the recommendations of book 6 to apply only to the children of guardians.
rigorous selection process (7.537a9–11). Those judged best at twenty, go on to the second selection at thirty.

A second point in favor of conceiving Socrates’ proposal as training and education for both sexes of all the city’s occupational groups is that, if the great majority of children in the city, i.e., all those with provider-parents, were not to be given the training and education received by those of auxiliaries and guardians, two unacceptable results would follow: the moderation that is supposed to characterize providers could not develop properly; and the perceived interests of the far greater numbers of uneducated citizens would eventually swamp the smaller, educated group.

A third point in favor of universal training and education is that one of the arguments that Socrates made in defense of the training and education of females can be applied equally to the children of the providers: in particular, Socrates argued that not all differences in nature are relevant to the task to be completed (5.454c–7d1). If there were not a thorough testing procedure for determining the actual natures of the city’s children, it would be impossible to say to which tasks any of them should be assigned.

(ix) Socrates proposes to abolish the nuclear family by instituting mating festivals, an ingenious set of rituals whereby the rulers of the city will stage-manage marriage lotteries to determine who will have sex with whom, providing wet-nurses to the offspring so that motherhood will not place extra burdens on female guardians (5.460d6–7). To prevent parent-child incest, those who mate will call all children born 7–10 months afterwards ‘son’ and ‘daughter’, and the children will call all the parents who mated at that time ‘mother’ and ‘father’ (5.461d1–e1). The program advanced by Socrates promotes the unity of the polis much as the myth of the metals does, making of the polis a single organism for which an injury to one is an injury to all (5.462a); it is best conceived as a radical solution to a whole swarm of existing Athenian problems.

Socrates is explicit about some of those problems, some of the institutional failings that characterized Athens at the time. He expected factionalism, favoritism, and law-suits to disappear if the nuclear family were abolished (5.457c10–458d7). Moreover, to consider everyone ‘family’ would discourage nepotism, frivolous lawsuits (5.464d–e), discord, and even civil war (5.465b). Equality of opportunity would be promoted as a type of justice as fairness against justice as acting in one’s own interest by favoring one’s close relatives. At this point in the dialogue, the Platonic form of justice has not been apprehended, so Socrates’ argument is firmly based on the familiar psychological principle of determining one’s own self-interest. Whether I cannot promote my own interests by favoring my family because I have no family, or because my family includes everyone with whom I associate, the concrete result will be the same: neither familial preference nor non-familial prejudice will be rational. In another sense, however, Socrates’ proposal is an important contribution to our understanding of how Socratic egoism works as pursuit of the good: the better person is one whose ego is enlarged in sympathy with others, for whom the good of others is an aspect of her own good. Socrates may nevertheless overestimate the proposal’s beneficial results, given that there is no prohibition on favoring one’s perceived friends or discriminating against one’s perceived enemies; i.e., we still have no guarantee that we know who our real friends and enemies are.

Socrates’ proposal for the dissolution of the nuclear family should be considered in relation to another Athenian institution of the Peloponnesian War years, one that carried over into

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31 I mean the variety egoism developed in detail in Terry Penner and Christopher Rowe, Plato’s Lysis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
Plato’s time as well: appalling Athenian marriage practices. Marriages were property transactions, making it ideal for a girl to marry an uncle or first cousin, thereby keeping the estate together, obviating the need for large dowries. The most common marriage practice among the upper classes in Athens was for girls in their first year of puberty to be given by their fathers to men in their mid thirties, with no regard for female preference or sentiment. Marriages between paternal half-siblings were legal in Athens, and it was not uncommon for a man to adopt a son to whom he would later marry off his daughter—again keeping the estate intact. One sees a shadow of it in Socrates’ own proposal in that matings between siblings are not considered incestuous and are still allowed after the dissolution of the nuclear family (5.461e2–3). Since women were legal minors throughout their lives, if a woman was divorced or widowed, she was immediately transferred by law to a relative, the first male willing to take her on a list ordered by degree of kinship. He became her guardian (kyrios) and could marry her himself, give her away in marriage, or give her away as the dependent of some other male citizen. A woman’s marriage could also be dissolved by the démarche—the head of her husband’s deme—in the economic interest of the polis. A widow could not inherit her husband’s property and had no right its use, nor could she claim the right to keep minor children with her. If a man died leaving only female offspring, his estate was held in escrow for his daughter’s future sons. The law set down the list of male relatives at the various degrees of kinship to the deceased, beginning on the father’s side. The archon was responsible for offering the girl (the epiklêros) to each male relative in turn, until one was willing to take her; if he reached the bottom of the list, he could compel the deceased’s nearest male relative to take her. If the girl’s marriage had not already been decided when she reached her fourteenth year, the archon was required to hold a special hearing (diadikasia) to decide it.32

When an estate was large, however, such a daughter was highly prized as a marriage prospect, so bids could be submitted to the archon while she was an infant, and competing bids were common because whoever became her guardian controlled her father’s estate until she married and produced a son who came of age. The guardian could of course marry her himself if he was eligible. In fact, if the girl was already married but was childless or had only daughters, the nearest male relative could claim her in marriage anyway, nullifying her previous marriage in the interest of preserving the estate in the family for a potential son; if the nearest male relative was already married himself, he could divorce his existing wife in favor of the girl or abandon his claim. A female’s preference was at no stage relevant to any part of the process.33 Mating festivals are a rationalized version of the property transactions already in effect, though the goal is the good of the polis rather than the wealth of a family.

There is of course a famous catch to the mating festivals: deception. The lotteries are rigged to mate the best with the best. Even the rigging of the lottery, so offensive by modern standards, is less disturbing, if I am right, when it is set against its actual Athenian background. Rigging would be better tolerated at a time when existing civic lotteries were determining many of the most important duties of the democracy and when existing lotteries had already been ‘tweaked’ in a variety of ways to make their results more palatable (among those already men-

33 Callias, known to philosophers primarily as the man who paid so much money to sophists, was involved in what became a famous dispute with Andocides over one of the two young daughters of Epilycus, who died intestate in Sicily in 414/3. See Nails 2002: 70–72.
tioned, scrutinizing ‘winners’ before allowing them to take office, limiting the pool to one or more classes of citizen, and allowing volunteers to contribute their names). Understandably, the guardians want to pair the best males with the best females in hopes that goodness will breed true. Experienced with animals—gamecocks, dogs, horses, and probably pigeons—Plato knew that there were many exceptions to any breeding program. According to the myth of the metals, all citizens are amalgams, no one is pure, and all are related, so like cannot be guaranteed to produce like. Hence the need to monitor children’s abilities. One should not begrudge Plato’s imagining the experiment in social engineering or his Socrates’ suggestion of it. It is in many ways more attractive than the practices that Athenian women were already enduring.

(x) The proposal that philosophers must rule (5.473c11–e4) is a natural extension of the fifth proposal for expert overseers and the seventh for specialization of labor. It too is aimed at helping to correct the problematic consequences of having a constantly changing Assembly too large to perform effectively. Having detailed those harms already, I would add two further points.

First, Athens’ constant flux in government and administration may originally have grown out of the Athenian dread of tyranny (Thucydides, 6.54–59), but the unintended result was that there was nothing to prevent a persuasive citizen from keeping effective control indefinitely. Pericles was the most famous of the persuasive speakers to do so, and his leadership in Athens lasted nearly four decades, prompting Thucydides to say, “Athens was in name a democracy, but in fact was a government by its first man” (2.65). A succession of speakers held sway after Pericles died of plague early in the war. From Plato’s perspective, the existing Athenian system ranked rhetorical skill above philosophical wisdom.

Second, both the Assembly and the Council overruled laws frequently during the long dramatic date of the Republic, but that was something the Athenians tried unsuccessfully to stop after the brief oligarchic takeover in 411, the rule of the Four Hundred, so Plato was not alone in preferring a constitutional democracy. In 410, a commission was established to inscribe the Athenian laws in stone on the walls of the king-archon’s court—the Athenian Constitution, as it were. Just as the task was completed in 404, the Thirty abandoned the constitution entirely, understandable in that they had been established to restore the ancestral constitution of Cleisthenes. When the democracy was restored in 403, a Board of Legislators was instituted to write additional laws, assisted by the Council. A new legal era was proclaimed from the archon year 403/2: Athens then became a constitutional democracy. Plato, in the Politicus (302d1–303b5) distinguished democracies under good written laws from lawless democracies, or those where laws were forgotten, ignored, or overridden when the Assembly or Council so moved. The sort of democracy discussed in Republic 8 (557a–558c) is of the lawless sort for Socrates describes it as a polis of no one ruling, no one ruled (557e)—very like the contemporary understanding of ‘anarchy’. Thus the criticism of democracy in the Republic is not so much a condemnation of rule by the people per se, but a condemnation of a system under which some governmental bodies were above the law.

(xi) Both the six endoxa about justice and the four aspects of justice developed in the text are superseded by the Platonic form of justice previously mentioned (4.435b1–2) and presented implicitly among the forms of the divided line (6.511c2). The Athenians’ common opinions about

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34 Plutarch (Pericles 17) exaggerates only a little when he says that Pericles led Athens for forty years.
35 Something interesting to note about the various accounts of justice is that, under the political construal of justice, Socrates was guilty of impiety; under the philosophical or formal connotation, he was innocent.
justice, even when refined and modified, fail to do the work of formal justice—a standard against
which all other candidates for justice might be measured and by participation in which the en-
doxa take such justice as they have.

Account 1 Justice is truth-telling and debt-paying (1.331c2–3, cf. 7.520b–c).
Account 2 Justice is to give people what is due to them (1.331e3-4).
Account 3 Justice is to help (benefit) friends and to harm (mistreat) enemies (1.332d7–8).
Account 4 Justice is to benefit our real friends and to harm our real enemies (1.335a).
Account 5 Justice is nothing other than the advantage or interest of the stronger (1.338c2–3).
Account 6 Justice is the mean between doing injustice without penalty and suffering injus-
tice without being able to take revenge (2.359a5–7).
Account 7 [Civic] justice is doing one’s own work and not meddling with what is not one’s
own (4.433a8–9).
Account 8 [Legal] justice is having nothing that belongs to another and not being deprived
of what is one’s own (4.433e10–434a1).
Account 9 [Social] justice is for each of the three occupational groups—providers, auxilia-
ries, and guardians—to do its own work in the polis (4.434c7–10).
Account 10 [Individual] justice is for each aspect of the psyche to do its own work
(4.441d11–e1) in the person.
Account 11 [Formal] justice is justice itself, the Platonic form of justice (6.511c2).

If we look for political justice, we find it in the combination of 7–9. The form of justice serves
as a counterweight to justice as perceived, practiced and criticized in Athens, i.e., accounts 1–6,
but also as a principle from which accounts 7–10 can be derived.

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The grand interpretations of the Republic as a utopian unity, or as an anti-utopian unity, have
been productive for the literature on political theory; but both those extremes contribute to a
view that is wholly wrong: that Plato was abstracted from the real world. Thus there is also
something valuable to be gained from considering the dialogue in light of Athenian social and
political institutions under the democracy at the time when it is set. While I would not go so far
as to argue that I am offering the best way, or even a necessary way, of interpreting the Republic,
some aspects of the dialogue will be misunderstood if one reads it as a timeless piece of fiction,
and some other aspects of the dialogue will be better understood if the middle way is considered
alongside the others.