

Plato and the Republic

Copyright © 1997 Glen Dealy

Question 1: What makes Plato's *Republic* utopian or like a utopia?

Political Scientists, or rather, I should say politicians have a different view of what is utopian. Utopian characterizes whatever your opponent believes in, as unrealistic. Its always a pejorative word and always something your opponent is saying. Yet, Webster's Dictionary states that utopia is *a place of perfection*. And, if we ask what it is, where lies this perfection, it strikes me that from The Republic on, utopia always at least implicitly is an attempt to get *harmony without politics*.

HARMONY WITHOUT POLITICS

Well, going back, things in Greece had run amok and as Bill says this war had gone on and on --- the Perfidy of Alcibiades in Sicily --- these and other terrible things had happened and somehow Plato had to get away from these terrible things in the name of the Republic. So, if he could fashion a system in which one didn't have to depend upon this human nature, man's hubris, that would be a whole that would run on somehow in a higher level it would be worth the effort. Now, it strikes me that this is the contribution that The Republic makes in that it switches, hopefully, from the evil of individuals to some kind of collective perfection.

The question is, of course, how are we going to get such harmony without political action? On what basis? Plato says in The Republic that we have to have *virtue*. He defines virtue as functional specialization. Now, many students over the years have told me that this is an absolutely crackpot idea. Functional specialization would prevent us from being able to do anything we want - jump up and down and change our ideas - as in the passage that was read by our colleagues earlier. But the other side of the argument is, of course, that a lot of us think that we are better at some things rather than other things. And wouldn't it be nice if we had the great American novel in us, to be able to write that novel and be allowed to specialize completely? I'm going at it in a rather lighthearted manner. But, here is really the heart of Plato's argument that specialization as a virtue will allow the whole state to go ahead; it allows happiness to prevail in the state even though some individuals won't like their place, their niche. The comedian Gallagher had his take on all this, he said we should put deaf people out in houses by the airport and Jehovah's Witnesses should deliver the mail. In other words, what would fit with their personality and their world view.

This *harmony without politics* approach is really what our founders were trying to accomplish. They wanted to set up a system where politics, defined as heroics, would not threaten the republic. No matter what clown, what evil individual we had elected we would have harmony because his actions would not be politically heroic. Individuals would *behave* rather than *act*. And in order to do that, of course, you have to make something else instead, and the founders substituted *interest and process*. But, they were terrified of heroic individuals who could do like Alcibiades did - intervene in the processes of government. The utopian constitution would prevent it. So, in a sense, we have had Presidents and Congressmen who don't seem outstanding in any way; and this is the utopia that the founders hoped for - harmony without heroics. We are still worried that someone might come into power like Eugene McCarthy and cite poetry or philosophy, acting outside the processes established. And in the same sense laissez-faire economics of course --- Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations was published in the same year as the Independence Charter --- is a utopian proposal that some of us don't think is so utopian, but that if you pursue your interest it will all work out and we don't need those damn people in Washington telling us how to do it. Like U.S. constitutionalism, *interest and process* are more critical than *virtue*.

Question 2: What features of Platonic thought speak to a present day Utopian thinker, and which do not?

At the risk of lowering the level of the dialogue from my colleagues here, I would like to make a few ad hominum comments. This is my thirtieth year of teaching Plato's Republic at OSU and I'll probably never have another chance to do this. Yet, I'm also in good company using ad hominum sorts of comments because as you begin to look at some of the most famous critics of Plato like Crossman and Karl Popper, you find that they all have some personal view they wanted to elucidate through Plato. Anyway, my comments have to do with the lasting benefits of reading Plato. What the Republic and Marx's Manifesto --- Marx wrote his dissertation on Plato --- is to provide a kind of blueprint, something to use as a model, to measure how other societies shape up. Whenever there is some kind of what I would call a utopian frenzy or utopian impulse in people, for example, before the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, or even in the 1960s in the U.S., we need a vehicle for raising fundamental questions.

That's why I introduced the fact that I've been here thirty years because most of you would be absolutely astounded if you walked onto this campus thirty years ago. There was close to utopian frenzy, if you can believe it right here at OSU. I came from Berkley so, I have credentials to know what a frenzy is like. In those days when OSU was gripped by this mania, students were absolutely enthralled reading Plato and Marx. These utopian classics came alive. Students were eager to learn what they had

to say. What can they tell us about their own lives? We then had classes in political philosophy every term, with between 200-300 students. Now, classes like that if given each term in my department would probably bring 10-15 students. We've lost the frenzy, the utopian impulse.

Students, thirty years ago, were living communally, at least a good percentage of those in my classes were living communally in the hills in my classes were living communally in the hills around here, near Philomath, etc., and some right on campus. The texts that were always referred to were the Manifesto and The Republic. I'd just like to mention a couple of things. What did students want to find out about? Well, one was the division of labor. Students were interested not abstractly in who was going to do the cooking, clean the house, take out the garbage, and what not. They wanted a principle and when they looked at Plato's The Republic well, there was a discussion of the division of labor. A very extensive discussion.

The second point of course is what all young people are interested in, sex. And Plato had a lot to say about sex and communal living and what not. And I remember students looking to Marx who had said that marriage is essentially prostitution, trying to find answers. One student in particular, I recall, who went around for weeks saying that something was wrong with him because he was extremely jealous living in this communal situation: he and one of his roommates were interested in the same lady. Theoretically, they both believed in free sex. And how could they work this out? Hadn't Plato suggested that there is something not quite right to have individual women divided among society's Guardians, etc.?

And finally, private property. Property is theft as Marx said, and of course we know in Plato's scheme, most people were not going to be able to own private property. And so, students, especially some of those who did not have as much money as they would like to have had, began to *liberate* goods. They didn't steal things, they were righteously *liberating* them because if these items truly belonged to all of us, why couldn't one follow Abbie Hoffman? And on that same point, I don't know if some of you remember, there was a student here named Marx, no relation to! --- and this was a few years later --- he was definitely filled with this utopian impulse. One day the administration announced that they were going to extend the parking lot over here next to Bexell and Social Science. Marx took them up on the threat and said, "no way". Some students went over there and staked it out. The administration was horrified and there was a stand off. Finally, the president of OSU said okay. But, you can keep this bit of ground free of cars only if, you take care of it yourself because our buildings and grounds people can't spare the time to do that. So, Mr. Marx and friends immediately planted a vegetable garden. And the administration caved in within a week. What would alumni think with beans growing over there! Right! Well, I can say

definitely, that the utopian impulse with its model of collective property is the reason we have this patch of ground over, this park, at present. Yes, ---

IDEAS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!!!