

# Plato and Utopia

William Uzgalis

Copyright ©1997 William Uzgalis

## I. What makes Plato's *Republic* utopian or like a utopia?

1. One central feature of utopian thinking is the attempt to articulate a better possible state than the one we live in. Both state and better are ambiguous. The utopian state is better than the one in which we live in that it specifies conditions which allow all the members of a community, and not just some small group, to live under conditions which will allow them to flourish -- to live up to their potential.

Plato is after similar game. Socrates at the beginning of the conversation with Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic* announces that they are pursuing gold or something more important than gold, they are inquiring into the best way for a person to live.

--This in turn leads to a quite systematic analysis of the parts of the soul, the parts of the state and the permutations of their combination, to yield a list of different kinds of lives, ranked from best to worst. He is thus in a fine position to answer the utopian question, under what conditions will most or all of the members of a state flourish. And he provides such an answer.

--This answer is explained and justified by his analysis of human nature and what Scanlan considers the preposterous notion that the proportion of individuals of a particular kind in the state will determine the character of that state. (I am inclined to think there is likely some truth to this, though no doubt it needs modification and amendment.)

2. Plato, like the Utopian, is dissatisfied with his own society. Plato had lived through a good deal of the Peloponnesian war -- a thirty year long war between Athens and its allies and Sparta and its allies, leading to the catastrophic defeat of Athens. One of the notable features of this war was that an individual state might have hostile Athenian and Spartan partisans within it. Usually the upper classes were pro-Spartan, the lower classes pro-Athenian. One of the great motivating fears for Plato is civil war. One need only read the account of the civil war in Corcyra in Thucydides to know what Plato feared. His uncle Critias and his cousin Carmides were killed in the civil strife surrounding the ouster of the Spartan imposed government in Athens (of which Plato's relatives were among the leaders).

3. Kirkpartick Sale did us a service in calling our attention to Absurdistan -- a silly society to be found on the internet. This should remind us of a fascinating feature of utopian thought. It is that that better state supposed must be sufficiently different from the present state to bring about a real and significant improvement in human flourishing. Because it is so different, we are led to wonder if in fact it is really possible to bring such a state about. Very likely to some it will appear that it clearly is not possible -- and so to those the proposals will appear as absurd utopian pipe dreams.

--Socrates visits Absurdistan in Books IV and V of the *Republic* (and book V in particular). There he confronts three great waves of paradox which would overwhelm him and drown him in ridicule and laughter. (Parenthetically, I would remark that I think Sale knows that he himself visits Absurdistan regularly, and wrestles with similar problems. Surely this is one of the marks of a genuine utopian).

4. Some of the particular proposals which Socrates makes have affinities with proposals made by later Utopian thinkers. i. One which I want to consider later in answering the second question (and so I will introduce it now) is that the rulers in his ideal society should do without private property or money, while property and the use of money should be allowed to the lower class. This is a proposal aimed at preserving the unity and stability of the state, and nipping in the bud tendencies towards civil war. ii. That women should rule along with men, that there be not only philosopher kings but queens as well, is another proposal which Plato thought would be greeted by derision. If you think that this was not the result, let me refer you to Emily Bluestone's excellent history of this proposal *Women and the Ideal Society* in which she traces the history of this book in the hands of male scholars. iii. Various of the other topics which Plato takes up, the role of education, of law and so on are staple topics for utopians.

## **II. What features of Platonic thought speak to a present day Utopian thinker, and which do not.**

Jared Diamond *Guns, Germs and Steel*:

Chiefdoms on Diamond's account have a redistributive economy. The chief collects the goods and redistributes it -- taking wheat from all the farmers, throwing a feast for everyone and redistributing the remainder over the months.

"...chiefdoms introduced the dilemma fundamental to all centrally governed, non-egalitarian societies. At best they do good by providing expensive services impossible to contract for on an individual basis. At worst, the function unabashedly as kleptocracies, transferring net wealth from commoners to upper classes. These noble and selfish functions are inextricably linked, although some governments emphasize one

function more than the other. The difference between a kleptocrat and a wise statesman, between a robber baron and a public benefactor is simply a matter of degree; a matter of just how large a percentage of the tribute extracted from producers is retained by the elite.

--For any ranked society, whether a chiefdom or a state, one has thus to ask: why do the commoners tolerate the transfer of the fruits of their hard labor to kleptocrats? (Pg. 276)

---

Plato knows perfectly well the power of self-interest and the love of wealth and the roles which these can play in producing a less than utopian society. Some of the most radical changes which Plato proposes are aimed at stamping out self-interest in the rulers of his ideal state.

--It is precisely as a curb on self interest that Socrates proposes to abolish the family unit among the guardians and abolishes the holding of private property and the use of gold and silver. (The model here, by the way is very likely Sparta) The guardians are to be maintained in simple style. They are to be given what they need to perform their function, but no more, by the state. They cannot accumulate possessions or wealth. Plato's motive here is to avoid the divisions caused by the varying success of different families in accumulating wealth, which might well cause conflicts between the rulers. Similarly, since the rulers have no wealth to seize, there is no anti-kleptocratic motive for the lower class to rebel against them. Thus the state is unified and stable.

What I want to suggest is that for a contemporary utopian -- the issue of kleptocracy and the unequal distribution of wealth is an important one. If one wants to take the kinds of problems which Kirkpatrick Sale and others see accruing to centralized, industrialized Western culture, then there is a virtue about which Socrates talks in the Republic which we might come to prize, and parts of Plato's massive conception of human nature we might consider adopting for our own. The virtue is moderation, and the part of human nature I have in mind is the distinction between necessary and unnecessary pleasures.

At 558 d Socrates defines the difference between necessary and unnecessary pleasures:

--Should we first define the necessary and unnecessary desires in order to avoid discussing in the dark? -- We should.

-- Those we are unable to deny we would be right to call necessary or those of which the satisfaction benefits us, for we are by nature compelled to satisfy them. Is that not so? --Certainly.

-- So we would be right to apply the term necessary to them. --Yes.

--As for those which one could avoid if one trained oneself to avoid them from youth, which lead to no good or indeed to the opposite, would we not rightly call these unnecessary? --We certainly would.

--Let us pick an example of each so that we may grasp them as a type. --We must do so.

--Is not the desire to eat to the point of health and well being, the desire for bread and cooked food, necessary? --I think so.

--The desire for bread is necessary on both counts, it is useful and it keeps one alive. -  
-Yes.

--The desire for cooked food is necessary too, if in any way it contributes to well being. --Certainly.

--What of the desire which goes beyond this for strange foods and the like. That can be restrained from youth, and schooled to leave most people; it is harmful to the body, and to the soul also as regards thought and moderation. Would it not be correct to call this unnecessary? --Very correct.

--Shall we say then that these are spendthrift pleasures, while the others are profitable because they are good for doing work? --Surely.

--And so with the pleasures of sex and the others. --Quite so.

Thomas More's distinction between genuine human desires and those for luxuries is similar. It is this feature of both Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* which a contemporary utopian theorist might want to explore to see if we still agree with this distinction, either on the basis of common sense or science. If so, it would provide the basis and the justification for putting real limits on consumerism and the accumulation of wealth.

We have had little chance in this series to praise Thomas More's *Utopia* and so I want to finish my work here by suggesting that More, from our perspective, removes one of the more objectionable features of Plato's proposals -- that to distinguish in nature a

ruling class and the class of the ruled, and to engage in eugenic practices to foster the distinction between them, in order to be sure, so far as that is possible that the ruled are ruled by those who are better able to rule than they are. We might still be interested in eugenics, by the way, to make all of us smarter, and better people. But this project would not longer have the dark dystopian shadows which linger about projects of permanently dividing people into classes on a biological basis. More extends Plato's rejection of private property to everyone, and makes the rulers come from among the ruled. This seems like a very promising improvement, though it requires that we reject much of Plato's account of human nature. That deserves a lengthy discussion which I clearly do not have time to begin.