

An Ideal Education

A Reading of Plato's *Paideia*
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The philosopher in Plato's *Politeia* is a complex and heroic figure. At once concerned with the pursuit of the *idea* of the good, and with that which truly is, he is also able to justly rule the *polis*, bringing into harmony the various parts of the *polis*. He appears at first in the *Politeia* as something of a tensive figure, caught between two sets of seemingly contradictory imperatives. He is prohibited from owning many possessions and from acquiring wealth; he cannot determine his own fortune, but is marked from birth for philosophy and rule--partially frustrating his erotic desire to pursue only knowledge of the *ideas* and simultaneously required to rule the *polis* in its vast potential for disorder and viciousness. By the same token, in fulfilling his role as philosopher and ruler, he is at once actualizing the potentiality of his nature in its dual capacities and obligations. One of the most important conditions for this is the proper training and education the philosopher-king must undergo. The *paideia* described in the *Politeia* is more than merely the imparting of knowledge and of learning skills. As the allegory of the cave so aptly illustrates, education turns the soul away from the shadowy appearances of the sensible world, toward the real *ideas* which constitute the being of the reality we apprehend. It is when the philosopher-king has come to know that which truly is, and has been tested in his implementation of that knowledge upon the city he is to govern, that he may finally come to rule the *polis*.

The role of education in the *Politeia* is primarily developed in relation to the person and formation of the philosopher-king. The dramatic characters of the *Politeia* are concerned to determine what is justice, and how one might both be just and do justice. But in order to

understand justice in its instantiation in the individual just person, they agree to first come to an understanding of the just *polis*, and from there to determine where one might find justice in an individual. In this discussion, the philosopher-kings, the rulers of the just *polis*, play a significant role. It is through understanding their nature and their education that the dramatic characters come to an understanding of true knowledge as that which knows intelligible ideas.

There are three significant passages in the *Politeia* in which Plato, through Socrates and, primarily, Glaucon and Adeimantus, describes the sort of education he advocates for those in the *polis* who will be the philosopher-kings. In Book II, he describes the guardians of the *polis*, what sort of nature they are to have, and their education. This discussion of their education spills over into Book III, and the interlocutors continue building their model (or theoretical) city, which reaches its penultimate “completion” (since the description of the philosopher-king and his rule of the model *polis* is what finally completes this *polis*) in Book IV. In Book VI, the discussion of the philosopher-kings resumes, delineating what sort of persons are these guardian philosophers (philosopher-kings) and how their education, if improperly undertaken, can fail them and corrupt their nature. Book VI ends with a discussion on knowledge that sets the stage for a more rigorous discussion of the education of the philosopher-kings in Book VII. Having completed this intensive, and lifelong, *paideia*, philosopher-kings may begin to rule, having attained an age of about fifty years. At this point, the philosopher-king is best able to both understand the idea of justice and its implementation in the *polis*. Given the connection between Plato's presentation of the place of education in forming the philosopher-kings (Book VII), and his presentation of knowledge as that which grasps the intelligible *ideas*, it would seem that for Plato's dramatic characters, and one might assume for Plato himself, the education of the philosopher-kings is meant to train them to know the *idea* of justice and to wisely bring the parts of the *polis* into

harmony so as to best recognize and instantiate the *idea* of justice in the *polis*.

Education in the *Politeia* involves the turning of the soul (518d) from the shadowy images on the cave wall to the sun. As the allegory of the cave suggests, it is a process as opposed to an instantaneous event, a process in which education is an important factor. As described in Book II, education is comprised of three aspects: music and poetry for the soul and physical training for the body. Music educates the guardians, and the philosopher-kings among them, through habit (522a) but does not give them knowledge. For the model *polis*, knowledge is essential for its completion. The philosopher-king must know that which truly is, if he is to rule philosophically and bring about an instantiation in the *polis* of justice. Music provides the foundation upon which knowledge can be built, if you will, but does not itself yield that knowledge. Music has to do with that which changes, with that which comes to be and passes away. It is the counterpart to physical training, which also does not give knowledge.

But while music itself does not give the knower knowledge of truth, because of its changeableness, nonetheless, in its harmonic relations, which depend on unchangeable number, it can point to the realm of being, the *ideas*, that which is; and it is in this arena, that of things which are and are not coming to be or passing away, that the knower is enabled to know that which is. But one cannot know that which is through number alone, since number, in its varied subjects of plane and solid geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, yields hypotheses. That is to say, the relations of number yield the kind of knowing that dialectic can sift and confirm of it that which truly is. So, while hypotheses are a fuller sort of knowledge than are beliefs or opinions, they are not yet that sort of noetic understanding which is pure knowing. That which enables one to know purely is dialectic.

So, Plato, through his dramatic characters, further modifies the *paideia* of the

philosopher-kings. They begin with "sanitized" stories, myths and poems, calculated to inculcate the virtues of the *polis*, and to order their souls and bodies. Included in this early *paideia* is calculation, geometry, and an incipient form of dialectic (536dff). This is followed by more explicit physical training, so that by about age twenty, they synthesize, or bring into unity through dialectical reasoning, their childhood subjects. After about a decade of training under this schema, their dialectical abilities are tested, but not in a way so as to embitter them or turn them to flattery. About age thirty-five, they return to the cave so as to rule--partially, being given "command in matters of war" and occupying "other offices suitable for young people" (539e). In this way they gain experience and are tested in their ruling skills. After about fifteen years of such testing, they are then free to finally rule as philosopher-kings. This rule is characterized by their (true) knowledge of the model city and justice. Each ruler takes his turn at ruling, at the completion of which turn he returns to philosophy with which he spends most of his time (540b).

The educative role played by the various subjects in the *paideia* of the philosopher-kings and the formation of the three parts of the soul in the philosopher (that is, the appetitive, spirited, and rational parts), are outlined in these passages I've mentioned, and to which I will return below. Gymnastics and physical training help calm and develop the appetitive part of the soul. Music and poetry, properly sanitized, help form the spirited part of the soul. Number and calculation assist the rational part of the soul to know that which truly is.

The goal of such a *paideia* is that the philosopher-kings will come to know that which truly is, and not that which is not or which comes to be or passes away. As is defined in Book V (473d-480a): Knowledge is knowing that which completely is, opinion is opining neither what is nor what is not, and ignorance is not knowing that which in no way is. The question then is how

does one come to know that which truly is? Or to put the question another way: Whence might one come to such a knowledge of things that are?

This question is clarified at the end of Book VI (508e), "what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form [lit., *idea*] of the good." But while many opine that the most important thing is knowledge of the *idea* of the good, because it is by their relation to the *idea* of the good that just things (and other virtues) become useful and beneficial, Socrates clarifies that we have no adequate knowledge of the good, precisely because it is the condition and power which enables knowing (505a). Further, he says, "Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is something but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs about it has about other things" (505e). However, though the *idea* of the good is the cause of knowledge and truth, Socrates goes on to say, "it is also an object of knowledge" (508e). This is something of an *aporia*, for "not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, though the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power" (509b). If the good is an object of knowledge as well as the condition of knowing, how is it that one can know the *idea* of the good? If such a knowing must be incomplete, is it really knowing, or is it a lesser sort such as hypothesis? Neither Socrates and his interlocutors, nor Plato as author, are very clear about this.

Part of the difficulty here involves the use of the word *idea*. Not only does Plato use *idea* in different contexts in the *Politeia*, and thus use it with differing shades of meaning, but also complicating its usage is its translation in the Grube/Reeve translation as *form*.

Plato uses the Greek word ἰδέα about 21 times in the *Politeia*. The word itself carries various connotations in Greek literature. The intermediate Liddell-Scott lexicon lists meanings

such as form; appearance; and kind, sort, or nature. The translator of the class text utilizes "form" for ἰδέα in all instances, except for 369a ("the *ways* in which the smaller is similar to the larger"), 507e ("an insignificant kind of *link* that connects the sense of sight and the power to be seen"), 544c ("another *type* of constitution"), and 588c ("many different *kinds* of things," "single *kind* of multicolored beast," and "one other *kind*").

This does not seem to me to be a felicitous translation. In three of the earliest uses of "form" for ἰδέα in the *Politeia*, Socrates is asking whether a god can appear in different "ideas" sometimes changing his (the god's) own "idea" into many shapes, or whether a god can step out of his own "idea." By translating ἰδέα as *form*, and juxtaposing it, in this instance, to shape or some sort of thing that one may "step out of" gives the impression of a materiality insofar as ἰδέα is concerned. Similarly, in the last cluster of uses of ἰδέα in Book X, at 596b, the translation *form* is related to concrete objects that a craftsman makes, namely beds and tables, once again conveying a notion of some material relation between ἰδέα and a visible object.

In nine of the remaining passages, ἰδέα is qualified by "of the beautiful" (478e) and "of the good" (505a, 508e, 517b, 526d, and 534b). At 486d and 507b, ἰδέα is referred to as the "*form* of each thing." And at a second reference at 507b, is said, quite tellingly "we say that the many beautiful things and the rest are visible but not intelligible, while the forms are intelligible but not visible."

It seems to me, then, that this use of *form* for ἰδέα is in many important respects, inadequate. While it is true that Plato's use of ἰδέα is itself somewhat polyvalent, nevertheless since the translator utilizes a different translation of ἰδέα in six other instances (and in at least four of these instances--"type" of constitution, and the three instances of "kinds" of beasts--it is

not clear why he switched from *form* to these other translations) he clearly could have used a consistent translation, or even transliteration, of the word ἰδέα. This is especially so, since *form* is also occasionally used to translate εἶδος in the text.

I am not sure that *idea* is itself a better translation, or transliteration, of ἰδέα but with explanatory footnotes in the different contexts, it could be less misleading than *form*. Take, for example, the final uses of ἰδέα in Book X, in which the craftsman makes beds and tables in conformity with their respective "*ideas*." If *idea* is used to translate/transliterate ἰδέα in the other instances, it retains the individual nuances of the differing contexts, and allows the full range of meaning(s) Plato grants to ἰδέα to come forth. By translating ἰδέα as *form*, as the translator does, but not in every context, the reader loses the opportunity to discover the full range of meaning Plato employs in his use of ἰδέα.

In any case, the role played by the *ideas* is that which instantiates itself to the knower in particular objects of knowing. The *ideas* are that which truly is, in which the objects of knowing participate. Too much study of the objects of knowing (the appearances) may lead one away from that which is (the ideas), and thus lead to a corruption of philosophic souls. But by progressing on from objects of knowing to their respective *ideas*, from instantiations of being to being itself, the philosopher may truly come to know.

The role played by the *idea* of the good in knowing is analogous to that of the sun in illumination. It makes knowing possible, as the sun makes seeing possible. It illuminates that which is intelligible. It is not knowledge itself, just as sight is not the sun. But apart from the good, knowledge would not be possible. As indicated above, the *idea* of the good gives truth to the things known and power to know to the knower.

I have been examining the *paideia* of the philosopher-kings, particularly as it relates to knowing and the *idea* of the good. However, for Socrates, this knowledge while worthy of pursuit in and of itself, nonetheless must be tempered by its application to the *polis*. The philosopher-king, freed from the shadowy images of the cave, is obliged to return to the cave. Similarly, having been educated and trained in true knowledge and the virtues, the philosopher-king (and as Socrates similarly admits, the philosopher-queens), rules the city, conforming it to the truth and knowledge which the *ideas* enable the philosopher-king to know.

This rule by the philosopher-king is characterized by the knowledge of the idea of justice. Justice, insofar as its instantiation in the *polis* is concerned, is the harmonious ordering of those aspects of the *polis* which correspond to the appetitive, spirited, and rational aspects of the soul, and thus the virtues. Wisdom is that which orders the rational aspects of the soul and corresponds to the philosopher-kings. Courage is that which orders the spirited aspects of the soul and corresponds to the guardian warriors. Moderation is that which orders the appetitive aspects of the soul and corresponds to the merchants of the *polis*. A just person is one in whom these tripartite regions of the soul operate in harmony according to their nature and purpose. Similarly, a just city is one in which each part of its citizens operates in harmony with each other part according to their own nature and purpose.

Thus, insofar as the *paideia* of the philosopher-kings is one in which the tripartite soul can be brought into harmony among its various parts, justice is inseparable from education, for the purpose of education is the turning of the soul toward the *ideas*, among which is justice. Further, if the philosopher-king is educated toward the end of ruling philosophically, he cannot but have knowledge of the just that he might truly rule.

This is why the connection between philosophy and politics is at once so necessary and

so fraught with danger. Philosophy is necessary for the governing of the *polis* if the *polis* is to be healthy, justly harmonious among its various parts. By the same token, if the *polis* does not have the most suitable constitution for the *paideia* of the philosopher-kings, then those rulers who might otherwise have truly philosophized (or, conversely, those philosophers who might have otherwise truly ruled), will either be corrupted by the disorder of the *polis* and pursue not the *ideas* of the good and the beautiful, but their many pleasurable instantiations, and in so doing become especially vicious; or draw away from the disorder of the *polis* to pursue the *ideas*, and thus become useless to the *polis*. Neither scenario is acceptable. So a constitution (literally, a *politeia*) which enables the proper education of philosopher-kings, and which requires their administration of the *polis*, as outlined above, is vital.

As will become clearer below, when I discuss the comparison of the philosopher-king with the tyrant, the role of the constitution (*politeia*) of the *polis* plays a vital role. More than merely a legal document, as is commonly conveyed to modern U. S. Citizens by the term, a constitution is a way of life characterized by a city and its citizens. These “life ways” may and do find themselves described and formalized in legal documents. But there is more to the constitution of a *polis* than its legal instantiation.

This is the reason for the lengthy construction of the model city, covering the discussion from Book II to Book VII. Clearly, this construction is meant as a paradigm for the human soul. The model city is, as Socrates suggest, the soul written in large letters. But the interplay between the *polis* and the *psuche*, the city and the soul, is bi-directional. There is, as will be seen below, five kinds of *poleis*, and correspondingly, five kinds of souls. The best, or aristocratic (lit., virtue-ruled) city is capable of producing and training the philosopher-king. The philosopher-king, likewise, is capable of ruling the *polis* in such a way as to produce and train philosopher-

kings. This is the point of the discussion of Books II-VII. What city is most just? Having answered this question, Socrates and his interlocutors can then answer, Who is the just man? Conversely, the worst city produces and trains the tyrant. Socrates will describe the devolution of the aristocracy into timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally tyranny.

Having examined the education of the philosopher-kings, the aspects of the philosophic knowledge that they are to be trained to pursue, and their obligations to the *polis* to implement this knowledge, it is clear that the philosopher-kings of the *Politeia* are more than philosophers and more than rulers. The philosopher-kings are by nature and education called to know that which truly is. But this knowledge is not some merely impractical knowledge for its own sake, attractive as this is for philosophic natures erotically inclined to the good and the beautiful. Rather, because this knowledge is the knowing of that which truly is, it is precisely the philosopher-kings who are best able to rule the *polis*. They are not swayed by the majority opinions of the citizens over which they have oversight, since the philosopher-kings are able to distinguish between the many and varied instantiations of the *ideas* and the *ideas* themselves. Furthermore, these rulers who are "friends with wisdom," because they are wise, are able to bring into just harmony the various disordered parts of their own souls and thus of the city as well. Themselves practiced in the virtues, they are by their own example, and by their ability to persuade their fellow citizens, able to bring about this virtuous order (497c-502c).

It is helpful to some degree to contrast with the true philosopher-kings, those rulers who are disordered in their rule: the timocrats (those who are ruled not by reason but by the spirited aspects of their soul desiring honor and good reputation), the oligarchs (those who are ruled by the baser of their spirited natures and by their necessary appetites), the democrats (those who are ruled by their unnecessary though lawful appetites), and, worst of all, the tyrants (those ruled by

their unnecessary and lawless appetites).

Each of these is deficient in the rational aspect of their soul, not knowing that which truly is, but only having opinions of that which comes to be and passes away, or even the ignorance of not knowing that which is not. This contrast helps highlight the role that reason, and most supremely, noetic understanding, plays in the soul of the philosopher-king and in his ruling. Apart from this wisdom, he cannot know that which justice truly is, nor can he turn those in the cave from the shadowy images of opinion and ignorance dancing on the cave wall.

Plato's structuring of the *Politeia* is clearly intended to contrast the philosopher-king with the tyrant (545a). In Books II-VII, Plato, through his *dramatis personae*, constructs the model *polis*, which is simultaneously the paradigm of the soul of the philosopher-king, as seen in Books IV-VII in particular. In Books VIII-IX, having laid both the psychological and metaphysical foundations necessary for sculpting the philosopher-king, Socrates and his interlocutors travel, by degrees, from the zenith of the virtuous ruler to the abyss of the vicious ruler. In constructing this model πόλις and model ψυχή, Plato, through Socrates, describes both the soul of virtue, of the philosopher-king, and subsequently the soul of vice, of the tyrant. Between these two extremes of virtuosity and viciousness lie the delineated intermediates of the timocrat, the oligarch, and the democrat, with their corresponding *poleis*, and the acknowledgment that there are innumerable gradations between and among these all.

These distinctions hinge on the understanding of the tripartite soul which has been developed in 435d-445e, and in 580d-588b (to which we briefly alluded above). The philosopher-king is the most human (and least beastly) of all the five main types of souls, and corresponding cities (589d). The tyrant is, conversely, the most beastly (and least human) of all the types. There are in humans three aspects, or "parts" of the soul: that which has to do with

knowing and calculation, or the rational part; that which has to do with honor and contest, or the spirited part; and that which has to do with the appetites, the appetitive part. In the construction of this tripartite man in Book IX--as a means to discern whether a just person is just for the sake of justice, or for the sake of the benefits of justice, or of both (as was set out in Book II, but interrupted by the attempt to discern justice through the “large letters” of the *polis*)--the person is understood as composed of a human part, corresponding to the rational; a leonine part, corresponding to the spirited aspect of the soul; and a multiform beast, corresponding to the appetites. Thus, to the degree that reason rules over the spirited and the appetitive parts of the soul, to that degree is a person human.

The philosopher-king, then, insofar as reason rules completely over the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul, is most human. The timocrat has dethroned reason and sat the spirited part of his soul on the throne of his person. He is more lion-like than human. The oligarch similarly has dethroned reason from the seat of his soul, and the spirited part now reigns. But the oligarch differs from the timocrat in that the oligarch allows the lesser (snakelike, 590b) types of the spirited part of his soul to rule. The democrat has ensconced not reason, nor the spirited part of his soul, but the appetite on the throne of his person. Though this is among the worst types of souls, multiformed and beastly, what differentiates the democratic soul from the tyrant is that the appetites that rule in the soul of the democrat are what Socrates calls the necessary (or “lawful”) appetites. These are appetites that are sometimes ruled by the “oligarchic.” That is to say, some of the baser aspects of the spirited part of the soul constrain the licentiousness characteristic of the democrat (560a). The democrat, though one day given to revelry, may on another day give himself over to the pleasures of physical exercise. The appetitive part of the soul is in control, but sometimes it may be led by its desires toward that

which might take part, if mixedly, in that which is beneficial. The tyrant, however, is the most beastly of all. This is the lycanthropic soul (565d) who has tasted the blood of the human, in its dethronement of reason, and wishes to devour the human, allowing the appetitive to dominate, served and guarded by the spirited part of the soul.

It is not hard to see here the dovetailing of the ethical with the political, of justice with philosophy. This, of course, has been the focus all along, but here in the culmination of the day's discussion, Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus clarify that the just *polis* is as necessary for the just man, as is the just man, in the person of the philosopher-king, for the just *polis*. An unjust *polis*, like the unjust soul, will result in disharmony among its various parts. If the philosopher-kings abdicate for the timocrat, through a civil war resulting from *pleonexia* regarding private property (547b), rather than being governed by the rational, the city is governed by the honor-loving and warlike. If the philosopher-kings are dethroned by the tyrant (actually, as Socrates describes the process, it is not so direct as this, but I am drawing a stark contrast), through the elevation of isonomic appetites over the noetic understanding, then it is not a just and reasonable man who governs, but one enslaved by his nightmarish and fearsome desires.

The justice of the *polis* is at stake when a just man is ruled in his soul by aught else than knowledge, or wisdom. I noted above the four virtues described by Plato and the corresponding roles they play in the ordering of the human soul. This has been an important part of the backdrop of Socrates' description of the justly ordered soul and the justly ordered *polis*. When wisdom rules courage and moderation, a state of justice prevails. If courage were to rule, then, wisdom itself having given way, courage becomes recklessness. If moderation were to rule, lacking the control of courage or of wisdom, it would eventually devolve to licentious, equalizing the various and multiform appetites. In the *polis*, if the warrior-class (corresponding

to courage in the soul) were to rule, then the city becomes most warlike. If the merchant-class (corresponding to moderation in the soul) were to rule, the city is similarly unstable in its inability to discern between necessary and unnecessary appetites. Thus, if a city is to be just, the philosopher-kings must rule. But if the philosopher-kings are to rule justly, they, themselves, must be just.

Plato ends the *Politeia* with the demonstration, delayed since Book II, of the pursuit of justice for its own sake and for its beneficent consequences. The role of the philosopher-king, insofar as he is enabled to know that about justice which truly is, changes from the seemingly tentative role between superficial contradictions in Book IV to a more heroic one in the final book. Here having pursued justice for its own sake, the philosopher-king also participates in the benefits justice brings, both that resulting from the harmony of his own soul, and that which results from the harmony of the *polis* under his wise rule.

The *Politeia* concludes with the myth of Er, in which Plato creates a story to illustrate the immortality of the soul, and how it is that just souls might choose their own just lives. Socrates asks Glaucon, rhetorically, “[H]aven’t we found that justice itself is the best thing for the soul itself, and that the soul . . . should do just things?” (612b). Indeed, the most important activity is to “seek out and learn those [subjects] that will enable him to distinguish the good life from the bad and always to make the best choice possible in every situation” (618b-c). In doing this, not only will the immortal soul be best able to choose the appropriate life, before the river of forgetting through which it passes on its way toward its human body, to live among the humans in the *polis*, but “from all this he will be able, by considering the nature of the soul, to reason out which life is better and which worse and to choose accordingly” for “this is the best way to choose whether in life or death” (618e). That is to say, even in the face of life and death, the

duly considered just life and its corresponding locus in the just *polis*, is the best choice. The *paideia* of the just *polis* enables the philosopher-king not only to know this, but to bring it from potentiality to actuality in the city which he governs.

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