

The Realization of Theory in Plato's Republic

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Plato's creation of a new literary genre has engendered many conflicts over his intentions and the main philosophical principles expressed in these dialogues. The traditional system lifted from his body of works has provided a backdrop for much of our philosophical tradition. But while this system is in itself a great achievement, it does not encompass the whole of Plato's thought. Assuming that it is constructive to the philosophical enterprise to give any great work an alternative reading if the text allows, I will assert that the Socratic emphasis on virtue that characterizes Plato's early dialogues is still the primary theme in the *Republic*. The text of the *Republic* is an *example* of how virtue is instilled and does not merely treat this theme as a theoretical issue. I will show that Socrates' development of theoretical models central to the *Republic* not only relies on rational discussion but on the character of his interlocutors, and that the idea of the realization of theory provides the catalyst by which virtue is inculcated. First, it is important to lay down the basic assumptions I will be making in this treatment of Plato's *Republic*.

The dialogue form that Plato used provides a text that allows for more broad and varied interpretations than the traditional philosophical treatise. One does not need to refer to Plato's statements in the *Seventh Letter* regarding his disdain for the treatise form and his refusal to record his own ideas to see that the dialogues do not present the body of Plato's thought precisely and orderly as a treatise might. When the *Republic* is treated as a dramatic piece, an alternative reading can emerge. Some of the more important considerations of such a reading are as follows: first, explicit statements made by Socrates are not to be unconditionally accepted as doctrine. Plato provides the reader with warnings as to the credibility of certain phrases and discussions. When the reader is aware of such warnings and incorporates their implications in an interpretation, as much sense can be made of the material as in a traditional interpretation. Second, due to the dramatic quality of the dialogue, it cannot be expected to present the ideas it contains in a strict and orderly fashion as a treatise would. Rather, many statements refer to both

preceding and later passages scattered about the dialogue. While the immediate context of a passage may sometimes lend itself to a traditional reading, these other scattered passages make possible a different interpretation, the strength of which will supply its own credibility. Third, the characters in the dialogue are just that—characters—and need to be treated as such. As will be shown below, the personality traits of Glaucon are just as important to the development of Plato's ideas as Socrates' explicit discussion of the issues.

The first step in this discussion requires that we establish the role of Glaucon and Adeimantus in the dialogue. A clear example of how Glaucon affects the course of the dialogue occurs in the second Book of the *Republic* where, following Socrates' agreement to help the group discover justice, they begin to construct a city. Socrates completes his description of the city with a passage that ends with this: "then, reclining upon a bed of strewn bryony and myrtle leaves, they will feast together with their children, drinking of their wine. Crowned with wreaths they will hymn the gods and enjoy each other, bearing no more than their means allow, cautious to avoid poverty and war" (372b). But before the party can attempt to discover justice in this model Glaucon interrupts and demands that Socrates include seasonings for the food and cooked dishes in his description. Socrates complies but is again interrupted when Glaucon calls the city a "city of pigs" and tells him to supply more comforts for their imagined citizens (372d). Socrates follows with this passage: "I understand. We should examine not only the birth of a city, but of a luxurious city ... Yet to me the true city is that which we described, like a healthy individual. However, if you wish, let us also observe the feverish city" (372e–373a). And so, for the remainder of the dialogue we are only given hints of the healthy city Socrates would have established and are left to contend with "purifying" Glaucon's city.

Two points are made here. First, Glaucon's overbearing drive for unnecessary appetites establish him as an unreliable source for dealing with philosophical truths. Second, Socrates is responding to the specific character of Glaucon and is willing submit to the demands of his personality traits. As they direct the course of the dialogue, these traits inform and help shape the developing theoretical activity.

The respective positions of Socrates and Glaucon are established in a later passage regarding the philosophical nature (Socrates begins and Glaucon answers):

Some people have a natural aptitude for philosophy and for leading the state, while others have not that aptitude and must follow the leader. —This would be the time for that definition.

Come then, follow me in this, if we can somehow explain it.—Lead on. (474c)

As we continue reading the dialogue, we can depend on Socrates to guide the discussion in some purposeful and constructive fashion. Socrates seems to have a broader purpose in mind, and is not necessarily attempting to reach a certainty concerning ontological truths. As Plato's idea of the realization of theory becomes clearer, Socrates' role as a teacher of virtue will be obvious.

The notions of theory and practice are first introduced by Adeimantus in Book II. Following the brothers' presentation of the problem of justice, Adeimantus asks Socrates to show them the nature of justice, but says, "Do not merely give us a theoretical proof ... but tell us how each [justice and injustice] affects a man" (367b). Socrates agrees to do so but only a page later proposes that they construct a theoretical city to direct the task they have set before themselves (369a). The difficulties that begin to emerge here define and direct the remainder of the discussion. How theory is related to practice, or more clearly, how word is realized into deed, is not understood by the brothers. Also, because Glaucon and Adeimantus do not know the respective roles of word and deed in regards to the nature of realizing theory, conflicts between the two notions begin to dominate their arguments. On the other hand, we can assume that Socrates, being a philosopher, is aware of this confusion and is directing the dialogue to a purposeful end. He begins defining the relationship between word and deed in this statement to the brothers:

That seems well deserved, my friends; you must be divinely inspired if you are not convinced that injustice is better than justice ... And I do believe that you are really unconvinced by your own words. I base this belief on my knowledge of the way you live, for, if I had only your words to go by, I would not trust you. (368b, italics added)

Here, Socrates has established that the discussion concerns virtue and has shown the mutual dependence of word and deed. The concern for the realization of theory is left undiscussed while they proceed in constructing Glaucon's city, but reappears in Book V, where Socrates himself asks whether the common sharing of wives and children is possible (450d;

452e). As he later lets the issue slip, Glaucon attempts to hold him to the task of proving its possibility and Socrates responds with the following:

Allow me, however, to indulge myself as if on holiday, as lazy-minded people feast on their own thoughts whenever they take a walk alone. Instead of finding out how something they desire may become a reality, such people pass over that question to avoid wearying themselves by deliberating in what is possible and what is not; they assume that what they desire is available ... I am myself at this moment getting soft ... I will assume that it is feasible. (458a-b)

Socrates' continued unwillingness to discuss this topic will eventually lead to more drastic conclusions than his merely assuming its possibility. But here, the following is established: Socrates has not dismissed the importance of realizing theory into practice, but he is not willing to *prove* that it is possible. Later, in the same Book, Glaucon, for the last time, calls Socrates' attention back to this issue and demands that he "remember the subject [that was] postponed before ... namely, that it is possible for this city to exist and how it can be brought about" (471c). Socrates responds with one of the most pivotal statements in the *Republic*:

It was then to have a model that we were seeking the nature of justice itself, and of the completely just man, if he should exist ... Our purpose was, with these models before us, to see how they turned out as regards happiness and its opposite ... It was not our purpose to prove that these could exist.

Well then, do we not also say that we were making a model of a good city in our argument? —Certainly.

Do you think our discussion less worthwhile if we cannot prove that it is possible to found a city such as we described? —Not at all.

And indeed ... *that is the truth.* (472c-e, italics added)

With the traditional interpretations so locked in our heads, it may be difficult, for the moment, to assume nothing about Plato's intentions. Anyone familiar with the Theory of Forms could easily be tempted to construe Socrates' mention of a model of the good city and justice as a precursor to the Forms. But at this point, based on the text, the reader has no reason to make this assumption. If we continue the above passage exactly where it left off, our alternative interpretation begins to emerge.

But if we must, *to please you*, exert ourselves to pursue this topic, then

you in turn should agree that the same thing applies to this demonstration. —What thing?

Is it possible to realize anything in practice as it can be formulated in words or is it natural for practice to have a lesser grip on truth than theory ... ? —I agree.

Then do not compel me to show that the things we have described in theory can exist precisely in practice. (473a, italics added)

Just as Glaucon misdirected the discussion regarding the establishment of a city that would provide a model for justice, he has achieved the same results here. Socrates, in his unwillingness to discuss the realization of theory and in his compliance to the wishes of Glaucon, establishes theory and words in a higher realm of reality than practice and facts. He puts a stop to any continued discussion with Glaucon regarding the possibility of theory. But because the careful reader remains skeptical of all Socrates' maneuvers, one has to ask: Is he actually revealing the true hierarchy of reality? Or, in accommodating Glaucon's unphilosophical demands, does the dialogue aim at a different purpose, namely, the inculcation of virtue? Socrates, in an earlier passage (472 c-e), affirms that the discussion about the city is worthwhile independent of any proof that it is possible. The following examination will first show that the dialogue fails to retain the ontological priority of theory. Also, while the discussion regarding the realization of theory has ended, Plato continues the development of this issue in *showing* rather than explicitly *telling* the reader how theory is realized. This account of realization will explain why theory is still worthwhile in philosophy and serves to inculcate virtue.

Although theory has been established in their argument as having more reality, a number of later passages fail to consistently uphold this assumption. In the beginning of Book VI, Adeimantus interrupts Socrates' exposition of the reasons for a rule of philosophers. He confronts Socrates with the accusation that the questions posed by the latter force small concessions in each answer that results in a fallacy at the end (487b). He continues with the following:

Just as inexperienced checkers players are in the end trapped by the experts and cannot make a move, so they too are trapped in the end ... in this different kind of checkers which is played not with counters but with words; yet they do not believe the conclusion to be in any way more true for that ... He cannot oppose you in argument, yet he sees that *in fact*, of those who turn to philosophy, [they are] quite useless

to the state. (487c-d, italics added)

Socrates tells Adeimantus that those who say this “seem to speak the truth” and he continues by explaining why he thinks that philosophers are considered useless (487e). Socrates does not question the importance of observation to the purpose of their discussion. Rather, he seems to imply by his statement, “they *seem* to speak the truth” (italics added), that he does not accept the assertion that philosophers are useless merely on a hasty observation by Adeimantus. In fact, he goes on to show that this reputation is a product of ignorance regarding the actual facts and not of an intrinsic worthlessness of philosophers. A page later, he recapitulates the discussion and confirms that this is the case. “You then interposed that everyone would be compelled to agree with what we said, but if he abandoned the argument and looked at the actual facts which the argument was about, he would say that some philosophers were useless while the majority had every kind of vice. So we examined the reason for this slander” (490 d). Socrates is not suggesting that Adeimantus’ recourse to factual data was a mistake, but that he had not gotten his facts right. By reasonably discussing their observations, Socrates reaches what is, *in fact*, the case; that philosophers are only useless because the many do not understand them. In a later argument, Socrates again recognizes that fact shares in reality and also begins to shed some light on the nature of theory: “Until the philosophers attain power in a city there will be not respite from evil for either city or citizens, nor will the constitution which we have imagined in our argument ever be realized in fact” (501e). Because the reader of Plato can assume from the *Seventh Letter* that the philosopher-king was an idea that Plato took seriously, we are inclined to take this statement at face value. The important element of this passage is his reference to the city as imagined in argument. Further passages reinforce this conception of the theoretical city and after an examination of the divided line, some conclusions begin to emerge.

As they create the image of the soul, Glaucon makes the following comment: “A work for a clever modeller ... however, as words are more malleable than wax and such things, take it as fashioned” (588d). Here, the suggestion is that the product of such a theoretical activity is seen as the creation of the modeller, not as the discovery of some already existing model. Glaucon and Socrates end the Book with the following words (Glaucon begins):

I understand ... you mean in the city which we were founding and described, our city of words, for I do not believe it exists anywhere on earth.

Perhaps ... it is a model laid up in heaven, for him who wishes to look upon, and as he looks, set up the government of his soul. It makes no difference whether it exists anywhere or will exist. (592b, italics added)

In the paragraph above, the ontological priority is once more shifted away from the conceptual realm. We are reminded of the beginning of the dialogue where words had only a partial influence in revealing the truth, and the last line of this passage reinforces Socrates' earliest contention that theory has value independent of its possibility for existence. The divided line continues this trend.

At the end of Book VI, in his treatment of the form of the Good, Socrates describes the divided line to Glaucon. The line is divided into two unequal sections, one being the visible realm and the other the intelligible. These sections are subdivided and also given names. "You will then," he says, "have sections related to each other in proportion to their clarity and obscurity" (509e). If this is the case, then by following Socrates' directions for dividing the line, the visible portion ends up longer than the intelligible, and consequently, contains more clarity. It is difficult to believe that Plato was not aware of what proportions would result from his formula, or that the divisions he suggested were arbitrary and of no concern to the developing discussion. Obviously Plato intended that these proportions reflect some ideas regarding the issue at hand. Some lines down Socrates concludes the discussion with these words: "Place these in the due terms of proportion and consider that each has as much clarity as the content of its particular section shares in truth" (511c). Plato is again suggesting the opposite of what previously has been asserted, that the weight of reality rests solely in theory. In the following Book, Socrates suggests changes in the divided line. Although the object of his activity is not clearly named, his speaking of two subdivided sections divided proportionately leaves no doubt as to his purposes. In this new division the visible realm falls away and all the sections are related to some kind of conceptual realm. The proportions change and the bottom section becomes opinion with its lowest subdivision being imagination. If Socrates is asserting this to be the case, then we can include in the section of imagination the theoretical city

discussed in the passages above.

While the explicit argument would imply that their theory of justice and city of words has more claim to actual existence than facts, Socrates' and Glaucon's discussion fails to continually uphold this notion. One may be led to speculate that it is Glaucon and Adeimantus who fail to perpetuate this belief, as their unphilosophical nature has prevented them from understanding the higher reality of theory. But two points make this doubtful. First, Socrates is not reluctant to agree with their statements, and will often amend these statements with more developed ideas (592b; 472c–e). Second, we are reminded of Thrasymachus' argument in the first Book. While Thrasymachus began by holding that justice was the advantage of the stronger, he was not able to retain this inversion of the truth later in the argument. Excitedly, Thrasymachus begins purporting that *injustice* "brings the greatest happiness to the wrongdoer," showing that he knew his version of justice was actually the opposite all along (344a). The discussion of theory likewise follows this pattern. While at first theory is given privilege, the text fails to support this assertion.

It is clear at this point that Plato is suggesting a relationship between word and deed different from the solution explicitly proposed by Socrates (in 473a). Throughout the *Republic*, Socrates stresses the importance of taking into account both word and deed when making judgements (368b; 382a–e; 383a). In an earlier passage, Socrates makes it clear that he would believe the words of Adeimantus if he had only these to go by and no knowledge of his life (368b). Finally, any relationship posed between theory and fact should also explain either how Glaucon's leading astray the dialogue does not alter the philosophical truths Plato may be trying to examine; or, if it *does* alter the development of a more accurate theoretical representation of reality, why Socrates fails to correct it.

The realization of possibilities becomes a kind of imitation. A similar imitation is attacked in the final Book of the dialogue, but differs from the former in an important respect. This difference is explained in the following passage: "I think that the poetic imitator though he knows nothing except how to imitate, gives colour to certain crafts with words and phrases so that others without knowledge, who judge by the words, believe that anything said with meter, rhythm, and tune ... is right." (601a). Socrates is suggesting that the poet, lacking the ability to reasonably theorize, indiscriminately imitates the objects of his experi-

ence. Those who, in turn, imitate the poems take an unreasonable and lawless model as their guide. Opposed to this is rational discussion. This kind of word-craft helps produces models based on the order and stability of reason itself. Imitation of such models will presumably result in stable and ordered behavior. In the discussions already mentioned, Socrates has suggested that theory acts in constructing models (472c–e; 592b). Although models such as the three-part soul, the divided line, and the just city are presented to Glaucon and Adeimantus as an account of reality, they are in fact only concepts generated in their discussion by which the two non-philosophers can learn to behave virtuously. These concepts have an ontological status only in so far as Glaucon and Adeimantus take them for reality and realize them through imitative practice. Here, the character of Glaucon is not only the object of Socrates' efforts but a necessary tool in developing the theoretical models that will serve best to inculcate virtue.

By replacing the myths of Homer with his own myths, Socrates intends to cultivate harmony and moderation not merely in the minds of the brothers, but in their actions. Socrates makes the necessity of practice clear in an aside during his discussion on the virtue of intelligence. “Now the other so-called virtues of the soul seem to be very close to those of the body—they really do not exist before and are added later by habit and practice” (518e). The nature of virtue as an order and stability is mentioned throughout the dialogue. Socrates explicitly states that “the philosopher, who consorts with what is divine and ordered, himself becomes godlike and ordered as far as a man can” (500d). In the discussion of the god at the end of Book II the “strongest and most knowledgeable soul would be least disturbed and changed by any outside experience” (381a). More evidence of this is provided in the discussion of a virtuous man:

He is not pure in his attitude to virtue because he lacks the best of guardians. —What is that?

Reasonable discourse ... with an admixture of the arts, for this dwells in a man as the sole preserver of his virtue throughout his life. (549b)

While they have not learned metaphysical truths, Glaucon and Adeimantus have engaged in a rational discussion with Socrates, who attempts to instill in them the preservation of a moderate and just behavior. From the beginning, Socrates is aware of the impossibility of

teaching Glaucon and Adeimantus the truth about reality. In fact, the reader is left to doubt whether Socrates knows or is at all concerned with transcendental knowledge. But because it is necessary for Glaucon to believe in the models as a reality, Socrates is willing to treat the dialogue as a metaphysical discussion. His emphasis on theory keeps Glaucon unconcerned with the model as serving any purpose other than truth. The appetitive nature of both brothers extends not only into the material world but into the conceptual world as well. Socrates indulges their desire for "knowledge" and constructs a mythological reality of theories to replace the myths they have previously imitated. Socrates is not teaching the brothers the nature of reality, but how to act. As these new myths are based both on rational inquiry and the character of the interlocutor, they supply a better ground for just behavior. Socrates' statement at the close of Book IX makes this clear: "it is better for everyone to be ruled by divine intelligence. It is best that he should have this within himself, but if he has not, then it must be imposed from outside"(590d).

In the end, rational discussion and theoretical activity become the device by which the ignorant many are to be taught virtue. Just as Socrates completes the "dream" of a model of justice in Book IV, so one "is in reality such as we said a man was in his dreams" (443c; 576b; respectively).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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