



## **Virtue, Education, and Political Leadership in Plato's *Laws***

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## Virtue, Education, and Political Leadership in Plato's *Laws*

### Introduction

The question of whether leaders in civil society must be virtuous people has been debated for millennia. Some have argued that virtue is *unnecessary* for good political leadership; others have argued that it is essential. A famous proponent of the latter view is Plato, who claims that a city's happiness is ultimately dependent on the moral quality of its leaders and the leaders' ability to foster virtue in their citizens. Social well-being is not determined by economic wealth, political power, or military might, but by the extent to which leaders and citizens embody justice, temperance, wisdom and courage.

Unfortunately, Plato's ideas on this topic have often been obscured by a tendency to misinterpret the *Republic*. It is assumed that the *Kallipolis*—the elaborate city developed in the pages of the *Republic*—is meant to represent Plato's political ideal, which includes a caste system of philosopher-kings, auxiliaries and producers. According to this interpretation, the philosopher-kings who are the leaders of the society are perfectly virtuous individuals who achieve unmediated access to the *Realm of the Forms*, which provides them with perfect knowledge of virtue; on the other hand, producers (and to some degree the auxiliaries) have no genuine knowledge of virtue and only participate in virtue by obeying the rules laid down by the philosopher-kings (Vasiliou, 2008; Bobonich, 2002). This caste system therefore places an *exalted* responsibility on the leaders and a *pedestrian* responsibility on the average citizens. The result is that the leaders seem more like gods than humans, and the average citizens seem more like pleasure-seeking conformists than genuinely virtuous human beings. On both counts, the image provided is an unattractive one to modern readers.

But does this interpretation of the relationship between the virtue of the leaders and the virtue of average citizens represent Plato's political ideal? I argue that it does not. Plato's views are more modest at both extremes: while he believes that leaders must be exemplars of virtue, he does not believe they must achieve the disembodied contemplation of the Realm of the Forms; and while he believes that the average citizen will not attain the level of virtue found in the leaders, they are capable of a level of virtue that goes beyond mere rule-following.

In order to understand his view, we must look to the *Laws*, which is his longest and most systematic political work. In the *Laws*, Plato not only outlines the virtues that leaders must have but also how they come to have them. He also outlines the ways these leaders are supposed to help the citizens become virtuous themselves. According to the *Laws*, it is not enough to force citizens to obey rules; political leaders must help citizens internalize the virtues. Plato claims that the fundamental goal of statesmanship is "the art which is concerned to foster a good character" (650b). He claims that the primary job of a statesman is to persuade his subjects, by "habituation, praise, or argument...that the unjust life is not only more shocking and disgraceful, but also in fact less pleasant, than the just and holy" (663c-d). He continues this idea throughout the *Laws*, culminating in the last several pages where he argues that political leaders must be "the expounders, teachers, and lawgivers" of the society who provide educational guidance for those who need it (964b-d).

To make my case that this is Plato's preferred model for political leadership, I first outline the evidence for my claim that Socrates' preferred city is not the *Kallipolis* of the *Republic*. Next, I provide evidence for Plato's belief that leaders must be thoroughly virtuous and that their ultimate responsibility is to inculcate virtue in their citizens. Next, I describe the

education these leaders must receive if they are to effectively guide others to virtue. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion regarding the contemporary importance of Plato's ideas.

### **Metaphor, myth and the Philosopher-kings in the *Kallipolis***

The reason to doubt that Plato intends the *Kallipolis* and the philosopher-kings who rule the *Kallipolis* to represent his political ideal is that the fundamental *raison d'être* of the *Kallipolis* is to illuminate justice *in the soul*, not to create an achievable political community. When Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus first begin to create a city that embodies justice they come up with a very simple city, which is often referred to as the "First City" or the "City of Pigs." It is called the "City of Pigs" because Glaucon dismisses it for its lack of luxuries and conveniences. This city embodies justice, and Socrates actually refers to it as the "true" and "healthy" city. Importantly, it is an egalitarian city where every individual is provided for and is given important work to do. On the other hand, the *Kallipolis* is never praised as a true and healthy city. Indeed, when he first mentions it, Socrates calls it an unhealthy one—a city with a "fever." Even after the *Kallipolis* has been purged of its fever and embodies justice, Socrates never once praises it as true or healthy. What is more, it is founded on the principles of acquisitive war, appetitive desire, potential lawsuits, unhealthy eating habits, and so on (373b-374a). Considering the entirety of Plato's corpus and his unrelenting pursuit of virtue in himself and others, it is perplexing that he has been interpreted as espousing a political structure that both discourages vice and actively promotes it in the vast majority of its citizens. And yet, this is what most interpreters have argued.

Of course, it might be claimed that by arguing that the city was founded on these principles, Plato makes it clear that the city is eventually purged of injustice and becomes a fully just city. This is partially true insofar as certain injustices are purged, but not the injustice found

in acquisitive war, appetitive desire, potential lawsuits and poor eating habits—all of these vices remain as staples of the *Kallipolis*. Injustice is purged only insofar as each of the three parts of the tripartite structure of society does its own work and does not attempt to do the work of another part—which is the definition of justice. But, importantly, this does not negate the above vices. Although there are limits that protect them from going to extremes, the auxiliaries still go to war to protect and acquire wealth, the class of producers are still encouraged to give in to their appetitive desires, citizens are given provisions to sue one another in court, and they still eat unhealthy meals, to name just a few behaviors that Plato believes are vicious and conducive of unhappiness. Moreover, these individuals are never given an education that would help them develop the virtues to overcome these vices. They are given laws that prevent them from indulging in these vices to extreme degrees, but they are given opportunities and are even encouraged to live lives rooted in the satisfaction of unnecessary desires.

Why then does Socrates go on to invent the *Kallipolis* if he claims that the First City is his preferred political arrangement? The obvious answer is that, as we have already seen, the point of the dialogue is not to create Socrates' *preferred political arrangement* but to create *a city which best illuminates justice in the soul*. The First City fails to meet this criterion and so a different (and inferior in the political sense) city must be created. Socrates explicitly indicates this when he acquiesces to Glaucon's desire to abandon the First City and create a city with luxuries in it. Socrates defers to Glaucon, claiming that creating such a city "may not be a bad idea, for by examining it, we might very well see how justice and injustice grow up in cities" (372e). The point of inventing the *Kallipolis*, therefore, is not to create Socrates' preferred political arrangement—a thing they had already accomplished in the true and healthy First City—but rather to create a political arrangement that showed justice and injustice. Socrates'

hope is that by juxtaposing justice and injustice, Glaucon would be able to better see justice in the soul.

The upshot of this brief analysis is that the philosopher-kings should not be seen as Plato's vision of political leadership. On the straightforward reading of the *Kallipolis*, the philosopher-kings were never meant to represent an actual class of people that Plato hoped would rule the perfect city, but it is rather intended to represent the rational aspect of the tripartite soul, which the *Kallipolis* is supposed to approximate. Framing her analysis in ethical terms, Julia Annas argues that the goal of the *Kallipolis* is to “grasp the *ideal* of virtue, which is presented via the picture of the ideal state. The message, however, is not the simple-minded one that [the individual] should wait for some philosopher-kings to come along, or try to become one himself. Rather, he should internalize the ideal of virtue as a ‘city of himself’ (592a7)—that is he should internalize in his soul the structure pictured in the ideal city” (1999, p. 81).<sup>1</sup> In other words, the point in creating the tripartite structure of the city—philosopher-kings, auxiliaries, and producers—is to help Glaucon understand the tripartite structure of the soul, where the philosopher-kings represent reason, the auxiliaries represent spirit, and the producers represent appetite. Robin Waterfield argues similarly when he claims that “it is possible to read the book as a predominantly individualist approach to the issue, with the traditional political terminology of the debate suborned and largely turned over to metaphorical purposes, to describe the inner state of the individual” (1993, p. xvi). Yoshi Nakazawa, James Bruan and I (2012) echo a similar interpretation when we claim:

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<sup>1</sup>She goes on to say:

If the ideal state is read, as I have suggested, as having the function of a model for the aspirant to virtue to internalize, then the elitist nature of proposals such as [the need for philosopher-kings to impose their moral knowledge on average citizens] need not trouble us too much, since they need not be read as political proposals which are both obnoxious and simpleminded. (p. 98-99)

Socrates' supposed requirement that the philosopher-kings are necessary for the apprehension of virtue is revealed to be what it is: a metaphor for reason, the virtue apprehending aspect of the human soul, which all individuals have to one degree or another. The philosopher-kings are, in other words, idealized representations of the rational part of the soul. The reason Socrates argues that only the philosopher-kings can apprehend virtue is because only the rational part of the soul can apprehend virtue so conceived (but this does not mean that reason is sufficient for the *acquisition* of virtue; for that, obviously, a body and desires and so on are needed). His goal in making such a sharp distinction between the philosopher-kings and the auxiliaries and producers in the Kallipolis is not to establish a political ideal but to establish an ethical one. (339)

To summarize, when Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus embark on their discussion to find a city with justice in it, it is not to construct a political philosophy *per se* but to rather use an image of a just city as a heuristic device to help them “see” justice in the soul. Socrates says “So, if you’re willing, let’s first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual” (368e). They are not precisely constructing the perfect city, but rather a city with *justice* in it. Their point is not to create a city, but to create justice *in* a city. This is a significant distinction because it reminds us that they are free to construct any city of their liking so long as it embodies justice in some way. Thus, there may be *many* cities—that might look very different in its setup—they could create and still meet the relevant criterion, namely embodying justice. There is no indication that the one they chose is the best one or even the preferred one *qua* city, but merely that it has one relevant characteristic, namely that justice is visible in it. In striking confirmation of this little-appreciated fact, Socrates creates two separate cities, both of which embody justice.

That this is the most plausible interpretation is supported by the fact that the philosopher-kings are found only in the *Republic* and not in other dialogues by Plato. In particular, the *Laws* and the *Statesman*—Plato’s most significant political treatises beyond the *Republic*—mention neither the philosopher-kings nor the other classes of individuals—the auxiliaries and producers. Rather, in these dialogues Plato advocates for the teaching of virtue to all citizens and he expects all citizens to willingly choose to live the virtuous life. In the *Laws* the Athenian Stranger indicates that older, more distinguished citizens ought to show respect for the younger and try to persuade them to be virtuous rather than force them to be so (729b-c). Connected to this, the Athenian claims that all children can be persuaded to live virtuously, so long as the entire community helps participate in their education (664a-c). He also believes that more simple people of the past are actually wiser and more virtuous than contemporary citizens (679e). While Plato makes distinctions between individuals and their respective chances of becoming virtuous, he does not claim that some individuals are innately vicious, but rather that because of the combination of their natural temperament and upbringing it is a matter of fact, and that not all individuals will achieve the same level of virtue; thus both laws and education need to be put in place in society to ensure a measure of virtue in it. Similarly, in the *Statesman* Socrates claims that *every* citizen ought to be taught “to share in a disposition that is courageous and moderate, and whatever else belongs to the sphere of virtue” (308e-309a), and only those who act unjustly will be excluded from full citizenship in the city. The same goes for public offices, which have the same criteria for participation—namely, having the capacity to be governed by the proper amount of courage and moderation as the situation requires (310e-311e). The goal of the society in both the *Laws* and the *Statesman* is to achieve to the best possible degree an ethical equality between citizens. As Bobonich puts it:



First, as we saw in the *Statesman* Plato suggested a new conception of a good city as an association in which all citizens aim at leading virtuous lives and at fostering virtue in the other citizens. In the *Laws*, Plato is much clearer and more emphatic in building on this conception of a good city and, as we have seen, restructures the citizens' education accordingly. Second, since the citizens are more capable of exercising good, ethical, and political judgment and engaging in rational discussion, they will be able to hold office and exercise political authority. (2008, p. 331)

With a clearer sense of the metaphorical role of the *Kallipolis* and the philosopher-kings who rule it, we are now in a position to examine Plato's non-metaphorical role of the political leaders in the *Laws*.

### **Education, Virtue and Leadership in the *Laws***

In order to understand Plato's vision for political leadership in the *Laws* we must first understand that his goal in the *Laws* is an ethical and educational one, and not a narrowly political one. In the *Laws* the main interlocutor is not Socrates, but the so-called Athenian Stranger. In the *Laws*, the Athenian explains that in order to understand the morality of certain actions he and his interlocutors must attempt to provide "correct theory of culture; and it is impossible to explain this without considering the whole subject of education. That calls for a very long discussion indeed" (*Laws*, 642a). It is true that the educational discussion transforms into a political discussion in Book IV (just like the discussion of justice in the soul transforms into a political discussion in the *Republic*), but at its core it remains an educational question. This is because Plato believes that having a correctly functioning political system depends on both its citizens and its leaders being educated in the virtues. Indeed, as Bobonich correctly points out, the dialogue returns to education over and over again;

In all his legislation [within the *Laws*] the lawgiver must aim at a single goal and that is virtue. In particular, the lawgiver must aim at fostering all the virtues—courage, justice, moderation, and wisdom—in the citizens as a whole. Plato announces this claim with great fanfare at the beginning of the *Laws*, returns to it at its end, and repeatedly stresses it throughout the text” (2002, p. 120).

The *Laws* returns to education over and over again because the most important task of a statesman is how to make his subjects good. The Athenian claims, for example, that the fundamental goal of statesmanship is “the art which is concerned to foster a good character” (650b), and later that “education is in our view just about the most important activity of all” (803d). The Athenian also claims that the primary job of a statesman is to persuade his subjects, by “habituation, praise, or argument...that the unjust life is not only more shocking and disgraceful, but also in fact less pleasant, than the just and holy” (663c-d). He goes on to say that “no man, you see, however old or however young, will ever excel in virtue if he has had...[a bad] upbringing. We repeat that this is the point the legislator must look out for” (696a). The reason the legislator must look out for it is because the state cannot tolerate individuals who are merely effective farmers or doctors or politicians, and are not virtuous. Even though they may appear to bring helpful skills to the community these individuals will ultimately prevent the state from being able “to survive to enjoy all the happiness that mankind can achieve” (697b).

The legislator must therefore prioritize an education in virtue for all members of the community, so that they may be “prevented from getting into the habit of feeling pleasure and pain in ways not sanctioned by the law and those who have been persuaded to obey it; he should follow in their footsteps and find pleasure and pain in the things of the old. That is why we have what we call songs, which are really ‘charms’ for the soul” (659d). The Athenian explicitly states

that this education must be given to every member of the society—no matter what their status—and all members must remind each other of what they have learned. He claims “that every man and child, free-man and slave, male and female—in fact, the whole state—is in duty bound never to stop repeating to each the charms” (665c; see also 696a-b). This is why the statesman “must think of every device to ensure that as far as possible the entire community preserves in its songs and stories and doctrines an absolute and lifelong unanimity” (664a).

The fact that statesmen are responsible for the development of virtue in their citizens and must use every device at their disposal to make sure that all citizens receive an education in virtue brings us to one last piece of evidence that the ultimate purpose of the *Laws* is educational. In the last several pages of the *Laws*, the Athenian argues for the need of a group of virtuous and philosophical “guardians” who must be the leaders of the society—leaders who must be “the expounders, teachers, and lawgivers” of the society and who provide educational guidance for those who need it (964b-d). Just like in the *Republic* these guardians represent the “soul and the head” of the state and are supposed to use “reason” to guide the state.

But *how* do reason and the senses combine to ensure the safety of a ship, in fair weather or foul? Isn't it because captain and crew interpret sense-data by reason, *as embodied in* the expertise captains have, that they keep themselves and the whole ship safe?...

And if the ruler of a *state* were obviously ignorant of the target at which a statesman should aim, would he really deserve his title ‘ruler’? Would he be capable of ensuring the safety of an institution whose purpose he entirely failed to appreciate?....

Well then, in the present circumstances, if our settlement of this territory is to be finished off properly, it looks as if we shall have to provide it with some constituent that understands (a) this target we have mentioned—the target, whatever we find it is, of the

statesman, (b) how to hit it, and (c) which laws (above all) and which persons have helpful advice to give and which not. If a state lacks such a constituent, no one will be surprised to see it staggering from one irrational and senseless expedient to another in all its affairs. (Laws, 961e-962c)

The importance of this passage must not be overlooked. Here Plato indicates that any state that does not have (a) a constituent of fully virtuous individuals, (b) who have complete knowledge of virtue, and (c) who can inculcate that virtue in their citizens, will never have a realistic chance to become a just state. Thus, all of the laws that Plato outlined in the first 300 pages, are useless for creating a just state unless there is a constituent of leaders who are virtuous and have been philosophically trained to know the nature of virtue. Unfortunately, Plato argues that these philosophers cannot come into being *ex nihilo*, but are necessarily a product of education. They do not exist in the world and thus a just state is currently not possible. However, if a group of individuals could be found who are virtue-seeking and willing to undergo a rehabilitation process to become virtuous and then undergo a philosophical education to become fully wise, then they might become a state's future leaders. In the very last sentences of the dialogue, the Athenian claims:

Athenian: We thought of our combined metaphor of head and intellect, of which we mentioned a moment ago, as idealistic dreaming—but it will all come true, provided the council members are rigorously selected, properly educated, and after the completion of their studies lodged in the citadel of the country and made into guardians whose powers of protection we have never seen excelled in our lives before.

Megillus: My dear Clinias, judging from what we've heard said, either we'll have to abandon the project of founding the state or refuse to let our visitor leave us, and by

entreaties and every ruse we can think of enroll him as a partner in the foundation of the state.

Clinias: You're quite right, Megillus. That's what I am going to do. (969b-d)

Megillus' and Clinias' concluding remarks in response to the Athenian illustrate what Plato wants the reader to take from the dialogue. They realize that the entirety of the *Laws* was meant as a mere preparation—a preparation meant to open their eyes to the fundamental and irreducible principle of creating a just state: the creation of virtuous leaders. Through their responses, Plato wants to communicate that the creation of a just political constitution will never ensure a just state. If one wants to create such a state—which Plato hopes will someday be a possibility—the first and most important task is not to institute the state and its constitution, but first to create virtuous leaders. The problem is that such leaders do not come into being *ex nihilo*; they must be carefully selected based on intellectual and moral aptitudes and then given a rigorous education to turn those aptitudes into realities. But in order to create virtuous leaders, one must create virtuous people, and from those virtuous people select those who have the most aptitude and give them a philosophical education in virtue. This is the plan which Plato articulates in the *Laws* and to which we will turn in the next section.

### **The Plan for the Philosophical Education of Leaders**

There is a question about the degree to which the guardians of the *Laws* are similar or different than the philosopher-kings of the *Republic*. One of the major questions is whether the guardians of Magnesia are supposed to be rulers in the strict sense where they have absolute authority including over the laws (which is how the philosopher-kings are described in the *Republic*) or whether they are a mere “institute of higher studies, with powers chiefly interpretive and advisory” (Morrow, 1993, p.576). For our purposes, however, this question is moot. On the

interpretation offered above, Plato never intended the philosopher-kings to be the radically autonomous leaders of an ideal society and therefore the differences between them and the guardians of Magnesia are of little practical importance—indeed we would expect to see differences since the philosopher-kings are a metaphor of the rational part of the soul and are therefore not full-bodied representations of actual human beings, whereas the philosopher-leaders of Magnesia are.

In order to understand the required education of the guardians of Magnesia, we need to understand the qualities they need in order to be selected as leaders. To begin with, the guardians must embody all the virtues found in the typical citizen of Magnesia, but they must also have the potential to achieve genuine knowledge of the virtues. The Athenian claims that “No one who is unable to rise above the level of the ordinary virtues will ever be good enough to govern an entire state, but only assist government carried on by others” (968a). In saying this the Athenian does not mean that potential guardians should have *different* virtues that are superior to the virtues of the typical citizen. Rather, rising “above the level of ordinary virtues” means having the knowledge of what it is about virtuous actions that make them virtuous. However, before potential candidates for leadership can be educated to have this knowledge they need to be identified.

The guardians of Magnesia must demonstrate a provisional level of intellectual capacity and moral virtue. The Athenian asserts that “candidates [are] qualified for the office of guardian by age, intellectual attainments, moral character and way of life” (968d). These potential guardians “must be particularly concerned with those studies which promise, if pursued, to further their researches by throwing light on legislative problems that would otherwise remain difficult and obscure” (952a). They must also have “won awards of distinction” and have to be

“well qualified by natural abilities and education” (961a-961c). Furthermore, the potential guardians must be “chosen for their natural gifts and the acuteness of their mental vision” and they must also have a good memory so that they can “store up in their memory all the sensations they receive” in their early training. The guardians must be able to take these natural gifts and combine them with a philosophical education so as to be able to provide “a full explanation and description of the effects of virtue and vice” (964b-e). Ultimately, the goal is to “make sure our guardians are more highly qualified than the man in the street to explain what virtue is and put it into practice. How else could our state function like the head and sense of a wise man, now that it possesses within itself something analogous to protect it?” (965d).

Once the potential guardians are identified, they must begin their philosophical education. Their studies include advanced mathematics, geometry and astronomy. Moreover the progress of sub-subjects within these studies are identical—they include arithmetic and calculating, measuring lines, surfaces, volumes, sounds, and motions (819d; 747a). And so is the description of the qualifications the philosopher leaders and guardians will have after they receive their advanced education. The guardians of Magnesia must not only know what constitutes virtuous actions but why the actions are virtuous.

So it looks as if we have to compel the guardians of our divine foundation to get an exact idea of the common element in all the four virtues—that factor which, though single, is to be found in courage, restraint, justice and wisdom, and thus in our view deserves the general title “virtue.” This element, my friends, if only we have the will, is what we must grip until we can explain adequately the essence of what we have to contemplate, whether it is a single entity, a composite whole, or both, or whatever. (965c-d)

Clinias agrees that this perfect level of knowledge is the ultimate goal for the guardians and agrees that they must come up with an education that could achieve it. Unfortunately, the Athenian then suggests that they “postpone the question of method” until later. The problem is that when he returns to the question of method on the last page of the *Laws*, he claims that it will “be a waste of time to produce” regulations about the curriculum because the leaders’ “curriculum must be decided by those who have already mastered the necessary branches of knowledge—and only previous instruction and plenty of intimate discussion will settle such matters as that” (968c). How does one come to master the necessary branches of knowledge? The answer is: dialectics.

### **Dialectics in the *Laws***

In order to see the function of dialectics in the *Laws*, we must first return to Plato’s pedagogical goal of the *Laws*. Plato is worried about the state of virtue in Athens, in the broader world, and in his readers. He believes that the vast majority of human beings do not know what virtue is, and even if they know what it is, they do not want to pattern their lives after it. He wants to change this and writes his dialogues in an attempt to create more virtuous people in the short run, and ultimately hopes that if enough people are converted to virtue, then a virtuous society could someday be developed.

In spite of his pessimism regarding the vast majority of people, he believes that there are a few virtue-seeking individuals who know what virtue is and want to embody those virtues in their lives. He hopes that these individuals will read his dialogues and will in turn be inspired to try to convert other people to virtue. Since these individuals are already converted to a life of seeking virtue, they do not need to become converted. Yet, Plato is not satisfied to leave these readers without inspiration and guidance on how best to create a virtuous society. The *Laws* are



written for these people. It outlines the general educational and political principles that would need to be put in place if ever a group of philosopher-leaders could be found to implement these principles.

Commentators have drawn attention to the fact that whereas the *Republic* requires that philosopher-kings be trained in dialectics and the understanding of virtue *before* they become rulers, the *Laws* does not require the guardians to master their understanding of virtue before they become leaders—they receive on the job training unlike the philosopher-kings. What does that training consist in? It consists of daily discussion with other guardians regarding virtue and law.

This council, which should consist partly of young men and partly of old, must have a strict rule to meet daily from dawn until the sun is well up in the sky...No member should attend alone: each is to bring a young man of his own choice, aged between thirty and forty. The discussion at their meetings must always center around their own state, the problems of legislation, and any other important point relevant to such topics that they may discover from external sources. (951d-952a)

The important point to note regarding this passage is that the function of the council is to have *discussions* about issues of statecraft and legislation. It is these discussions that function as dialectic. This is made clear the next time the Nocturnal Council is discussed nine *Stephanus* pages later. The Athenian gives a demonstration of the way discussions proceed in the examination and training of junior guardians. In this demonstration, the potential guardian undergoes questioning and answering regarding the nature of virtue. “Now it is the turn of the statesman’s reason to be investigated. Let’s personify it and ask the following question: ‘My good sir, what aim do *you* have in view? What is your single overriding purpose? The intelligent

doctor can identify his accurately enough, so can't you, with all your superior wisdom (as I supposed you'd claim), identify yours?" (963B). After Clinias fails to answer the question appropriately, the Athenian offers his own answer in terms of the acquisition of virtue. The Athenian then asks Clinias to become the questioner (although the Athenian is still the one coming up with the questions) so that Clinias can understand how dialectics works.

Athenian: Here's the question for you to put to me: "Why is it that after calling both by a single term 'virtue', in the next breath we speak of two 'virtues', courage and wisdom?"

I'll tell you why. One of them, courage, copes with fear, and is found in wild animals as well as human beings, notably in the characters of very young children...

So there's your explanation of why there are two different virtues. Now, it's your turn: you tell me why they are one and the same thing...Next after that we ought to ask ourselves what constitutes adequate knowledge of any object that has a name and a definition: is it enough to know only the name and the definition? On the contrary, if a man is worth his salt, wouldn't it be a disgrace in him not to understand all these points about a topic so grand and so important? (963e-964b)

This interchange effectively captures the essence of dialectic, with a formal questioning and answering about statecraft and virtue followed by further questions that more deeply investigate these questions. What is more, after finishing the demonstration the Athenian makes it clear that the reason that this kind of dialectical training is necessary is because they "must make sure our guardians are more highly qualified than the man in the street to explain what virtue is, and to put it into practice" (964d). But it is important to note that once a guardian knows "more than the man in the street" it does not mean that dialectics comes to an end. On the contrary Plato explicitly indicates that in the continued discussions of the council, after the initial dialectical

training comes to an end, the junior and senior members continue to use dialectics to further refine their knowledge. The elder members are supposed to “take advantage of the assistance and advice of their juniors in debating policy, so that the joint efforts of both ranks effectively ensure the safety of the entire state” (965a). This makes clear that although the guardians “must have *genuine* knowledge of [the laws’] real nature...[and] must be articulate enough to explain the real difference between good actions and bad” (966b), they do not have *perfect* knowledge of virtue and statecraft otherwise they would not need “debate policy” or require “joint efforts” to “ensure the safety of the state.” If the guardians had perfect knowledge of virtue, then the correct way to proceed in every situation would be obvious to them and there would be no need for debate nor any fear for the safety of the state.

Plato’s political ideal is founded on the belief that for the virtuous city, and the educational system that stands at the foundation of the city, to become a reality, he must find individuals who can become inspirational leaders—the kinds who can persuade the people through their goodness and their reason that they can be trusted to lead others. Surprisingly, in spite of Plato’s pessimism regarding the current state of society, he claims that people would be capable of trusting a virtuous leader if only they could see one. Plato believes that the hope for widespread cultural reform lies in the development of virtuous individuals who can be future leaders for social change. If he can find such leaders he hopes that they may become inspirations to the masses, but the problem is that these future leaders do not exist; he must therefore attempt to discover more of them. Since the more of these leaders that exist, the more collective impact they will have, the question then becomes how to discover and cultivate these future leaders. This will not be an easy task.

The difficulty lies in the fact that Plato believes that for any individual to become virtuous he or she must be rigorously habituated through imitation and practice. Plato argues that except for those relatively rare individuals who were habituated in the virtues by their parents, most individuals have been given a bad upbringing and thus have been habituated away from virtue. And even those individuals who were given an excellent education, Socrates argues, will have become corrupted by the mob (496a-d) and therefore will no longer be virtuous. Thus, there is nobody who is virtuous, which is, unfortunately, the first condition of cultivating the leaders that Plato envisions. Obviously, since the educational plan that Plato laid out in the *Laws* cannot be implemented without leaders to create the proper education system, Plato must find an alternative method of providing the necessary habituation. The problem is that he knows that his adult interlocutors and readers will refuse to be habituated by force, and therefore he must find a way to persuade them to undergo the rehabilitation process. His hope is that if he convinces enough individuals to do so there may be a few who also have the innate intellectual gifts to become leaders who can then join Plato in his attempt to rehabilitate others.

### **The Relevance of Plato's Ideal for Contemporary Political Leadership.**

The question now becomes what, if any, relevance do Plato's ideas have for political leadership today. The most significant insight Plato can offer us today is the need for a particular kind of moral education. In Plato's mind, leaders must not only be fully virtuous individuals who lead others to create a virtuous state, but they must be, first and foremost, moral educators. Obviously, this vision is not realized in contemporary Western democracies. Indeed, the lessons citizens learn from our highest ranking public officials is sometimes the opposite of what is needed. This leaves us with a circularity problem. If we need our leaders to be moral educators

so that they can create moral citizens, then it will be impossible to create moral citizens because we do not currently have enough moral leaders. And we cannot make moral leaders, because to do so would necessitate having a system of moral education in place, which we cannot have until we have moral leaders who can create it. How are we to get out of this vicious cycle?

It will not be easy, but Plato offers us a conception of virtue development that has the potential to break the cycle. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato explains how moral transformations can be achieved through dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Plato claims that merely lecturing students or offering them treatises on proper moral behavior is fruitless and will not produce transformation. Nevertheless, he argues that certain kinds of dialogues can create flashes of insights in students regarding the virtues. These epiphanic flashes have the potential to temporarily create desires in students to live virtuous lives and can happen even in schools which are not providing a robust moral educational program. Teachers who are virtuous themselves, or who are seekers of virtue, can hold dialogues aimed at creating these epiphanies. Plato is clear that not all students will have the capacity to receive the epiphanies, but those that do may also be students with the natural giftedness to become political and moral leaders.

Plato depicts the way this process unfolds in his description of Dion's transformation in the *Seventh Letter*, claiming that through conversation with Dion, Dion had come to understand virtue and the desirability of living a virtuous life. Plato recounts that Dion "recalled our conversations together and how effectively they had aroused in him the desire for a life of

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<sup>2</sup> The authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* has never been established. While most commentators regard it as authentic, others do not. Those who claim its authenticity include: Post (1929, p. 5-24); Ritter (1910, p. 232-3); Kahn (1996, p. 388-92; 2015); Morrow (1929, p. 326-48; 1962, p. 44-81); Deane (1973, p. 113-7); Robinson (1967, p. 141-3); Hoerber (1966, p. 14-6); Gulley (1968, p. 88-9); Solmsen (1969, p. 29-34); Bluck (1949, p. 503-9); De Blois (1979, p. 268-83); Stenzel (1953, p. 383-97); Ledger (1989, p. 148-50); Brandwood (1969, 1-25). Of these, Morrow, Post, De Blois, Stenzel, and Brandwood offer the most rigorous attempts to prove authenticity. Those who claim its inauthenticity include: Edelstein (1966); Boas (1948; p. 439-57); Levison, Morton, & Winspear (1968, p. 309-25); Caskey (1974, p. 220-7); Schofield (2000, p. 298-302); Gulley (1972, p. 103-43) Annas (1991, p. 239). Of these, Edelstein, Boas, Levison, Morton & Winspear, and Gulley offer the most rigorous attempts to prove inauthenticity.

nobility and virtue” (327d). Plato confirms the radical change that occurred in Dion by stating that Dion “listened with a zeal and attentiveness I had never encountered in any young man, and he resolved to spend the rest of his life differently from most Italians and Sicilians, since he had come to love virtue more than pleasure and luxury” (327b-c). What is clear is that Dion had some sort of glimpse of what virtue was and revelation of why living a life of virtue was preferable to living a life of pleasure and luxury. But how did this knowledge and the love of it come about? According to many passages in the *Laws* and elsewhere, it could only have come about through a previous habituation in virtue; but it is clear that Dion had been raised in the way of the Syracusans, which included “men gorging themselves twice a day and never sleeping alone at night, and following all the other customs that go along with this way of living...and spending their all on excesses, and being easygoing about everything except the feasts and the drinking bouts and the pleasures of love that they pursue with professional zeal” (326b-d). In spite of his poor habituation, Dion’s desires had been transformed and he came to desire the virtues. How did this happen? It turns out it came through dialogue with Plato, where Plato and Dion discussed “what was best for men.” Through their discussion, Plato “urged [Dion] to put [the virtues] into practice” with the effect that Dion “resolved to spend the rest of his life differently from most Italians and Sicilians” (327a-b). The turnaround of Dion’s desires and goals is remarkable because in numerous places in Plato’s writings he claims that reforming individuals who were raised to prefer vice is next to impossible (*Republic* 492e; *Seventh Letter* 326c). And yet, Dion freely admitted that he had not conceived of the value of virtue until after his discussions with Plato (327b). The question then becomes: how did Plato manage to convince Dion of the desirability of virtue and the undesirability of vice?

Plato explains that for a person to come to a radically new understanding of the

desirability of virtue, one must not simply lecture them on the topic, like one might do if he were teaching straight information. “For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself” (SL, 341c). Plato goes on to explain that this type of knowledge cannot be put into “books and lectures,” even if he were the one to write them. This flashing forth of knowledge in the soul comes as a result of dialogue. It seems, then, that in a long-continued dialogue a person who was not already in possession of the knowledge of the virtues can attain a vision of virtue, a vision that can lead to a life-consuming desire to live virtuously. This vision represents a brief, powerful, although necessarily incomplete, glimpse of the highest level of virtue. We know that it is brief and incomplete because Plato later explains that one “will never fully attain knowledge of [virtue]” until they have been rigorously trained in virtue (342e). This rigorous training is gained through habituation and therefore a poorly-raised individual cannot “fully attain knowledge of [virtue]” through epiphanies alone. Thus, while the flashing epiphany Dion experienced did indeed “nourish itself”, it did not make him fully virtuous—to become fully virtuous he must be re-habituated which is why he “resolved to spend the rest of his life differently...since he had come to love virtue more than pleasure and luxury” (327b). Both Dion and Plato understood that his epiphany started him on the road to full virtue but that he would require years of habituation before he achieved it. Therefore, even though Dion was not habituated in the virtues in his youth, his epiphany regarding virtue led him to begin a re-habituation process that could lead to full virtue eventually and make him a political leader who could help morally educate citizens.

If Plato is right about the potential for dialogue to produce epiphanies of virtue in students—epiphanies that create a strong desire to live differently, then we have hope that even without virtuous role-models amongst our political leaders we can hope to encourage virtue in our students and that perhaps they will someday become political leaders who could inspire citizens to become virtuous themselves. Though the likelihood of completely reforming our society is slight, we must strive to reform the individuals in our sphere of influence so that they may go on to do the same. Thus, we may modestly hope to create a few virtuous individuals who may one day affect society beyond our own reach.



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