

PoliticalScience

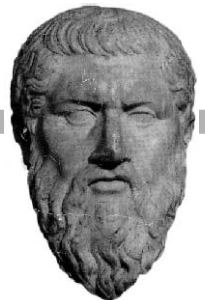
WesternPoliticalTheory

□ Essay III

□ The Return of Poetry  
to Socrates' Just City

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"How do the cave parable and the myth of Er signify a return of poetry to Socrates' just city?"

I call this assignment "Chapter 2" because it picks up right where the last assignment left off. After recognizing the role of the 'fine lie' in a just society, we now look to see how Socrates signifies a return of poetry to his society. In chapter 1 (my previous assignment), "The Importance of the 'Fine Lie' in a Just Society", I discuss how it is important that poetry is banished, because of its influential nature. "We want the Guardians to have a foundation of reason, and develop proper virtues, therefore the poets must be banished because they influence emotion, and not reason." (Bastien, p.1). Now, we focus on the Guardians who have now developed the proper virtues. Socrates describes how justice is developed in the state and in the soul, and how women are involved in developing this community that has Eros under control. The "Philosopher King", a special class of people with the proper training and reasoning to rule and also deal with such influences as poetry. The Cave parable is discussed after the explanation of the development of the Philosopher King and before Socrates discusses the education of the Philosopher. The second piece, the myth of Er, is the last piece that Socrates discusses in Plato's Republic, in the section "The Immortality of the Soul and the Rewards of Goodness", which leaves Glaucon's question of whether it pays to be just, to be open-ended.

The cave parable is a story which sets in place and motion the theory of the divided line (509d) and the simile of the sun (507a) that Socrates was discussing. Without going into detail the arguments that Socrates makes prior to introducing the Cave parable, it is interesting just how fitting the Cave parable is told not only to illustrate many of the arguments Socrates makes in the book prior to the story, but also how it sets up Socrates arguments that follow. Socrates' instructions for developing and integrating a Philosopher Ruler are difficult to imagine. However such a change in the soul, as someone being enlightened, attaining a way of seeing so difficult from everybody else, to tell the difference between the natural and the unnatural and distinguishing knowledge from information and so forth, such soul-crafting is real, and possible. The Cave parable helps us to understand, using concepts we are familiar with, how such changes in the understandings and perceptions can be realized, and why the events that bring on such changes are crucial. Even if we may not know how it is like to have abilities such as pure thought and perception based on reason and not opinion, we can still imagine the process by applying this "analogy" of the experiences of a slaved man ascending from and descending into a cave.

The cave parable is perhaps minimal in its influence to offer a convincing story. The cave parable is an evident explanatory piece that aims at setting a backdrop to imagining Socrates' abstract views on educating the Philosopher King. Although the cave parable may not be regarded as having the same influential power as Homer's works, the cave parable can provide insight into how to approach Homer's works. Before introducing the cave parable, Socrates discusses the education of the Philosopher and how their perception will be shaped. The sections on the qualities and character of the philosopher in the book provide valuable insight into how the mind will be developed among the Philosopher Kings to have the proper insight and perception to discern opinion and reasoning. "Knowledge is related to what is" and opinion related to what is or isn't. "Opinion is neither ignorance nor knowledge.....(but) in fact intermediate between them" (478b-d), and "those who have eyes for the eternal, unchanging...have knowledge and not opinion...set their hearts on the field of knowledge, while the other type set theirs on the field of opinion" (479d-480a) This essentially sets up the scene for the cave parable to be told. Sometimes people can be so caught up with opinion that reason and knowledge could be blurred from view. We see this situation all the time. Sometimes we are more willing to believe critics or journalists on TV because the sweeping summary and view on a situation makes so much sense, whether or not it is detached from the truth (or reality). An example on a more personal level, the rumors that spread around a schoolyard persist despite the truth, because of what children are willing to believe (opinion) instead of seeking to understand (knowledge). Sometimes people can be so caught up with opinion that it becomes self-propelling, becoming the (false) basis for other understanding. Although the person may have insight and a foundation for what they believe, their weakness in perception and knowledge based on reason has guided their beliefs in the wrong direction. Enter the cave parable. The ideas or notions that some people believe is truth are similar to the shadows on the walls of the cave. Seeing the source of the light can be blinding, and cause confusion or blindness when looking at what the individual may believe. This is likened to "enlightenment". Some students coming back home after being away for a semester in University can experience this "blindness", entering their home with a whole different perspective on their family and hometown. Like visiting a park you visited and enjoyed as a child. The experience is different, the blindness figurative but the realization true.

Socrates goes into describing the education of the philosophers, explaining the importance of developing a mind with reason. The philosopher should learn how to think critically, to think based on calculation, to understand abstract or literary concepts, to exercise the mind to understand the boundaries

of certain elements, and the how other elements have laws regarding how they relate (like applying different formulae for geometric calculations and for conversions). It is not uncommon for children to ask why they need to learn Geometry, or even use Pi ( $\pi = 3.1415926538$ ), or learn other mathematic or scientific concepts they may not ever apply later in life. It is not the particular concepts that are of prime importance, but the path to learning these concepts that develops the mind, and the mind being able to draw this path to understand other concepts. A person with knowledge based on reason can read the poems more critically, more immune to the decorated and sensationalized word and draw the meaning the concept of the piece. A speech such as Pericles' funeral oration can appeal to reason, arguing that it makes political and reasonable sense to fight when the means and resources are available, but he can also appeal to emotion, speaking to the wives, widows and children about the worth, to them, of fighting. A person motivated by opinion, with some beliefs brought by illusion and shadows, may be motivated by a poem appealing to their beliefs. Poetry has a place in the soul, but after philosophy. Socrates returns poetry, to those who can distinguish the meaning from the message. The poets were never banished, their audience was just a bit more exclusive.

Wasn't the Myth of the medals a "poem"? I think so. The element of Socratic Irony persists. Poetry has a place in the Republic when it is convenient, when it helps, when it is arguing for the development of the philosophical mind. When the concepts are difficult to describe or imagine, or if lingering doubt surrounds Socrates' speeches, we will animate them with a poem. After boldly banishing poetry from his city in speech, Socrates seeks to explain the stratification (people being suited for certain roles) with the Myth of the Medals. Although the Guardian class may not at first believe this, the second generation might. (Chapter 1, my previous assignment elaborates on these points). Enter the cave parable, and later the Myth of Er. Each poem serves a different argument. The myth of the medals could be argued as a tale to make Glaucon "shut up!" The cave parable is much more straight-forward in its demonstrative element to illustrate the philosopher's perspective. The myth of Er argues a different perspective, showing how a just life can pay, in life and the afterlife. Desmond Lee, the translator of my edition, summarizes and explain that the myth is "a fairy story like those the poets tell and have persuaded people to believe...[Socrates mentions that] it would need a lot of persuasion to get people to believe it" (414e) This may be the defining feature of the role of poetry in Socrates' city-in-speech: poetry is used for persuasion, to make believable (or imaginable) the abstract ideas and concepts he speaks of. Socrates realizes that poetry has the "terrible power to corrupt even the best characters" (573c). According to the translator of my edition, Desmond Lee writes, "Art and poetry appeal to, and

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<sup>1</sup>: H. Teixeira told me this

represent, the lower, less rational part of our nature” (602c)(Lee, p. 370), and Socrates follows arguing that poetry is very much detached from truth. We gain further insight into Socrates’ arguments for restricting the works of the poets because “he wakens and encourages and ...ruins better elements...[preventing people from] distinguish[ing] greater and less ...creating images far removed from the truth”. Socrates now introduces the myth of Er to explain how it pays to lead a just life. The story is about how the soul is immortal and everybody goes to purgatory to be judged and punished accordingly. A just man is guided through, whereas the unjust man pays ten times as much for each immoral deed. A different story from the Myth of the medals and the cave parable indeed.

In conclusion, certain confusing elements this assignment has worked with will be made clear. Although we refer to the Cave parable and the myth of Er as being the “return” of poetry from banishing the poets in Book II, the fact that the Myth of the Medals is a poem (or literary work related to art) in book II cannot be denied. In my previous assignment I clearly identify the Myth of the Medals as being a poem, indicating the Socratic Irony that underlies the idea to this assignment. This assignment seeks to understand the particular roles of the cave parable and the Myth of Er, and their significance in Plato’s book. With philosophy, and the tools to approach art and poetry with trained eyes and a moderate heart, one knows when to react with the head and when to react with the heart. Knowing how to read the poets does not mean trying to find a way to appreciate Shakespeare or decipher Jim Morrison, but rather distinguish the message from the form. To put in context the lessons, and separate the light from the dark. “When the elements of the mind are confused and displaced, is what constitutes injustice, indiscipline, cowardice, ignorance, and in short, wickedness of all kinds”

## References

“The Republic” Plato, Desmond Lee, ed., (1974, 2nd edition), Penguin Books, England

“The Importance of the ‘Fine Lie’ in a Just Society” Doug Bastien (2000, 1st Edition), Doug’s Printer corp.