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Platonic Idealism: Too High a Standard for Political Activity

As I have re-read Plato's *Republic*, and read for the first time Eric Voegelin's interpretation of Plato, I have realized a combination of growing fascination and unease. To be sure, the so-called politics of transcendence has an enticing appeal. Yet in Platonic idealism there lies a dangerous passivity that results from, in a sense, setting the bar too high. A lucky internet search produced an article by Claes Ryn in *Humanitas* entitled "The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism"[1] that I find mirrors my thoughts on the matter and helped to clarify them. Though I think it is possible that Ryn goes too far in ascribing to Plato the intention of rationalizing his aversion to the politics of his day, I do agree that Plato sets too high a moral standard for political activity (and perhaps other forms of activity as well). I will argue further that Plato sets too high a standard for what qualifies as knowledge, and that this at least partly explains why he sets too high a standard for political ethics as well as for philosophers and rulers. Plato is left with an irresolvable paradox: the good polis requires philosopher-kings to rule because the people are incapable of ruling themselves, yet the philosopher's moral scruples prevent him from entering politics.

The epistemological problem that Plato had to deal with was the issue of how dialectic can objectively discover knowledge about basic premises and ultimate ends. In other words, Plato had to defend, against the Sophists, the position that rationality is not only procedural but also substantive, i.e., that rationality can not only evaluate inferences

[1] Claes G. Ryn, "The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism," *Humanitas*, Volume XII, No. 2, 1999; http://www.nhinet.org/ryn12-2.htm.

from basic premises but the basic premises themselves (theoretical rationality) and not only the means to ultimate ends but the ultimate ends themselves (practical rationality). Dialectic takes as its starting point our initial, unreflective beliefs. As such they are not systematic and are consequently full of error. The dialectic process, through questioning and answering, traces the implications and resolves the conflicts between our beliefs. The problem that a defender of substantive rationality has to face is that whatever results from the dialectic process, it would still seem to rest upon the flimsy foundation of our initial, unreflective beliefs. Our conclusions can only be as reliable as our premises. Yet surely we do not want to admit the conclusion that reason is incapable of discovering true knowledge of basic premises and ultimate ends.

Plato's solution to this problem is to view our starting beliefs not as premises but as stepping stones or ladders that we use to climb to the height where we can somehow grasp the basic premises and ultimate ends, and then descend to ultimate conclusions based on them (511b). The dialectic method is the only one that can proceed in this manner, of acquiring true knowledge on the basis of what is not known (533c-d). How it does so is a mystery, however. Plato can but describe the process, through Socrates, by way of a metaphor. The dialectic process is akin to a turning around of the eyes from night that seemed day to true day. As the luminosity of the sun not only makes sight possible but also the "generation and growth and nurture" (509b) of life, so does the Form of the Good (Beautiful) allow the philosopher not only to 'see' truth and know true knowledge but it is itself what gives the objects of knowledge their truth (508b-509b). Epistemologically, the Form of the Good is the first principle of theoretical and practical reason, because metaphysically it is the first principle of being and value.

In rescuing substantive rationality, however, Plato consigns it to the realm of mysticism. At the highest level, when one grasps the Form of the Good, the process less resembles reason than simply 'seeing' by some sort of intuition. It cannot be taught. A teacher does not implant knowledge lacked by the student. The teacher can only adequately prepare the soul of his student, or lead it around, so that the soul focuses on the knowledge it had been overlooking (518b-d).[2]

It may help to briefly contrast Plato's epistemology with Aristotle's. Aristotle lowers the standard for what qualifies as knowledge to a more reasonable level by classifying commonly held yet reputable beliefs (or *endoxa*) as knowledge. From these, we dialectically ascend to first principles and then deductively back down to conclusions based on these first principles. The grasp of first principles and the conclusions derived from them, he calls scientific understanding. On this view, we are justified in holding our reputable beliefs, while not as precise or fully understood as scientific understanding, to be knowledge so long as our beliefs cohere with one another (i.e., do not conflict).

Plato's excessively high standard for what qualifies as knowledge can be seen to affect his political ethics in the following passage:

> At least, what appears to me is, that in the world of the known, last of all, is the idea of the good, and with what toil to be seen! And seen, this must be inferred to be the cause of all right and beautiful things for all…in the world of mind, herself the queen produces truth and reason; and she must be seen by one who is to act with reason publicly or privately. (517c)

If one is to act wisely in public or private life, then one must be able to see the Good and only the true philosophers have that level of understanding. Among the traits necessary to be a true philosopher are: being in love with learning (485a-b), to love the truth and be without falsehood (485c), temperance (485e), lacking too great an esteem for life and fear

[2] See also, Plato's *Seventh Letter*, 344b.

of death (486a-b), lacking a cowardly and mean nature (486b), just and gentle (486b), teachable (486c), not forgetful (486c-d), a naturally well-proportioned and graceful mind (486d). When such men have been perfected by education and the experience of age, they will be ready to rule as philosopher-kings and to them alone should rule be granted (487a), for the uneducated and those lacking "experience of truth could never properly supervise a city" (519c). However, outside of the good polis, those who could become true philosophers are easily corrupted (492a-b, 495a-c). Consequently, only a rare few will have the fortitude and insight to remain true, uncorrupted philosophers.

Once the philosopher has ascended to an understanding of the Good, he will not want to come back down and return to the Cave, so to speak, to aid his fellow men by entering politics (516d, 517c). Socrates himself admits to such an aversion:

> My own case is not worth mentioning, the spiritual sign, for I believe that such a thing has never or hardly ever happened to anyone before. Those who belong to this little band have tasted how sweet and delectable their treasure is, and they have seen sufficiently the madness of the multitude; they know that in public life hardly a single man does any act that has any health in it, and there is no ally who would stand by anyone going to the help of justice, and would save him from destruction. Such a champion would be like a man fallen among wild beasts; he would never consent to join in wickedness, but one alone he could not fight all the savages. So he would perish before he could do any good to the city or his friends, useless both to himself and to others. When the philosopher considers all this he keeps quiet and does his own business, like one who runs under a wall for shelter in a storm when dust and sleet is carried before the wind. He sees others being filled full of lawlessness, and he is content if somehow he can keep himself clean from injustice and impious doings, and so live his life on earth and in the end depart in peace and good will with beautiful hopes. (496c-e)

Clearly, Plato means this account to include not only Socrates but all true philosophers, yet this passage seems to contradict Socrates' own behavior unless one excludes Socrates' doings from the realm of politics.

In any case, if one restricts the definition of politics to governance, then Plato has no means of bringing about a good polis under the rule of philosopher-kings except by a historical fluke. Socrates notes that the philosopher will appear awkward and foolish to his fellow men (517d). It is not appropriate for true philosophers to seek out and woo those he would rule and build into a good polis; the people should come to them willingly as a patient does to a doctor (489b-c). However, neither option will bear fruit, for if the philosopher is morally restrained from entering politics, cannot solicit others to come under his rule, and appears useless if not dangerous to the public, then there is no reason to expect the public to seek him out as a ruler. Even the behavior that got Socrates executed would seem to be out of the question because it is too dangerous. And even the single remaining hope that Socrates holds out for the good polis, an existing ruler becoming a philosopher, is doomed to failure as it seems highly improbable that he will also possess subjects wise enough to accept his new policies. It is not impossible, as Socrates contends, but it is so close as to make the difference negligible.

Plato, then, has set his standard for political ethics too high for philosophers to enter politics. This is at least in part attributable to his excessively high standard for what qualifies as knowledge. Also, due to his conception of knowledge, he views the people as being incapable of ruling themselves wisely as they are incapable of wisdom. If only the true philosophers are suited to rule but can only rule in the good polis, then Plato is left with an irresolvable paradox. He must rely upon a well-nigh impossible chance that incredibly complex historical forces will come together just so, and even then he admits that the good polis will not last long beyond the moment of its inception (545d-547c). Humanity thus seems consigned to perpetual injustice and barbarism, and the philosopher

to passive contemplation of the Good. If the Republic is concerned with transcendence, then transcendence for Plato appears apolitical and ahistorical, except insofar as it is a reaction against both politics and history.