“Force as an Unintended Consequence in the Soul and the *Polis* of Plato’s *Republic*”

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PL 251
The ancient Greek maxim “Know thyself” has been the preoccupation of much of Western philosophy since the Pythagoreans labored over studying their own souls in order to better understand the world, or “kosmos,” which they believed paralleled the soul (Guthrie 36-38). Thus, since that time (and especially since the shift in Ancient Greece from physics toward ethics in philosophy, which saw the rise of the Sophists (Guthrie 63-66)), there have been offered myriad explanations regarding the essential nature of humanity, as well as what that nature should be. The first celebrated philosopher of the Western world to consider in depth the nature of the soul and its justice was Socrates, whose ideas were recorded by his de facto pupil (Socrates himself never actually claimed to be a teacher in a formal sense) Plato. For Socrates and Plato, the way in which humankind could come to know the human soul went hand-in-hand with the way humankind could come to know about the ways of governance. This notion of the interconnectedness of ethics and politics is exemplified in Plato’s work *The Republic*, in which he uses the character of Socrates to articulate his conception of justice and virtue in the city (i.e. the Greek city-state, or republic), and uses that conception as an analogue to his conception of justice and virtue in the soul (i.e. in our being at its most essential). In his conception of the city, Plato attempts to create a political scenario in which compulsive force does not play a part, but actually creates an arrangement in which political coercion seems implicit. In attempting to prove this point, this essay will give a brief overview of the parts of *The Republic* in which Plato constructs his theory of the *polis*, or city; it will then use Daryl H. Rice’s “Plato On Force: The Conflict Between His Psychology and Political Sociology and His Definition of Temperance in *The Republic*” to demonstrate how political force must necessarily play a part in Plato’s republic, with necessary repercussions for the soul.
Plato first uses the city as an analogue to the soul (this comparison premises the entire discussion of the city ([165])) in Book II of The Republic, when Socrates describes to his interlocutors the city’s two social classes. First, Socrates describes the productive class, or artisans, as the class which fulfill the nutritive and material needs of the city (Plato, 166-167); however, he also concedes that in a “luxurious city” (or one whose citizens are not content that the city meet the demands of basic existence) this class is responsive to the desires of the city (Plato, 168-170). Because of this luxury being the norm in practice, Plato admits that most cities will need a guardian, or warrior class to engage in the territorial aggrandizement, which Socrates thinks follows from luxury demanding more than what the city can produce on its own (169-171). While the productive class corresponds to the desire of the city, the guardian class corresponds to the spirit of the city, because the guardians must be endowed with a spirit that compels them fight for the city (Plato 171-172). This is a spirit which Socrates states must be cultivated in the guardians from childhood through strict censorship of Greek literary tradition, so that they may be the best warriors possible and thus keep the city intact as best as possible (Plato 172-182).

Plato furthers this notion of the city in Book IV of The Republic, when he sets out to define all the traditional major Greek virtues in the city besides justice, so that justice will be the only virtue left and thus more easily defined (Plato 226). Through Socrates, the philosopher states the virtues of the city as existing in these ways: wisdom is found in the city when wise people rule it (Plato 226); courage (synonymous with “spirit”) is found in the courage of the city’s guardian class; and moderation (or temperance) is found when there is natural harmony (i.e. the lack of civil discord) between the guardians, the ruling class, and the productive class (moderation must be harmony, he reasons, because the city, unlike a person, cannot be “stronger
than itself” in the mastering of its desires (Plato 229)). After the elimination of the possibilities of the other cardinal virtues, Plato concludes that justice must be each class doing that for which it is best suited: something which he sees as “necessary conduct in everything from beginning to end” (232). Justice is, in a way, the social lubricant that makes all activities in the republic work well (notice that in this conception of the city where justice is isolated from the other virtues, there are now three parts, instead of the original two, being that a distinct ruling class has been defined).

Plato sees justice as a sort of natural order (245) which will occur when reason rules in the soul (242), with spirit as its “ally and subject” ruling specifically over desire, “which is the largest part of the soul in each man, and by its nature can never have wealth enough” (242). In this just arrangement, Plato states, the parts of the soul must become one, coordinated through reason (244). He further underscores the rule of reason over desire when Socrates states in Book V who should rule in a republic: “‘The philosophers must become kings in our cities’ I said, ‘or those who are now called kings and potentates must learn to seek wisdom like true philosophers, and so political power and intellectual wisdom will be joined in one (273).’” While Plato’s conception of the just and harmonious republic seems in a way logical and merit-worthy, political philosopher Daryl H. Rice, in examining the above theory, finds the conception of the city and its virtues problematic with regard to the role of force in the republic.

In his article “Plato On Force: The Conflict Between His Psychology and Political Sociology and His Definition of Temperance in The Republic,” Daryl H. Rice highlights what he believes is an issue of fundamental contradiction in Plato’s conception of virtue in the city and in the soul. This is the discrepancy Rice sees between Plato’s construction of the city and Plato’s idea of the temperate polis, and following that, the corresponding discrepancy that there
necessarily is between Plato’s construction of the soul and Plato’s idea of the temperate soul (565). This disharmony, Rice asserts, is a manifestation of Plato’s inability to rid political power of its “compulsive element” by appending it to knowledge/wisdom; Rice upholds political scientist Sheldon Wolin’s affirmation that Plato had great disdain for political power, especially coercive political power, but could not eliminate it through his idea of the philosopher-king (565). What exactly, then, is this disharmony that Rice cites? Rice feels that in Plato’s polis, it would be contrary to the fundamental nature of the productive class to submit to an authority that would stifle that class’ aims, as occurs in the polis under temperance (567). The political scientist claims that desire, corresponding to the productive class, cannot be blind and insatiable (as Plato conceives of it), but at the same time deferential to the persuasion of reason (as it must be for temperance occur in the soul); in other words, a soul divided against itself, which seems to result from Plato’s characterization of the parts of the soul, seems highly incompatible with a soul capable of harmony (Rice, 567-568).

Rice proceeds from this point to give three alternative conceptions of the soul that one could apply in order to try to resolve the tension he sees between Plato’s idea of temperance and his characterization of the city and the soul. First, he proposes simply doing away with temperance/harmony, thus leaving the artisans to be kept in line by force, but he feels that this seems weak and too simplistic (Rice 568-569). Secondly, he proposes that the temperate polis as defined by Plato be taken as an ideal, which inherently suggests certain caveats in comparing it to reality; he states that this proposal is also imperfect, though, because he believes that the ideal of the temperate polis is in principle (not even just in practice) conflicted, containing components that together cannot themselves form an ideal (Rice 569-570).
The third alternative he offers is the one he finds most interesting. Echoing writer Julia Annas, Rice holds that, in Books VII and IX in *The Republic*, Plato ascribes to desire the capacity to reason insofar as it can calculate the best way to obtain its desires (571). In keeping with this idea, Rice continues, one could assume that this “instrumental reason” which desire possesses could lead it to consent to rule by the reasoning part (571). However, the political philosopher contends that the instrumental reason of desire has no real aims of its own (it is ultimately subjugated to desire), but knows only how to reach the objects of its own desire, while the “substantive reason” of the reasoning part of the soul has the truth and “the eternal and perfect form of the good” as its aims (Rice 572-573). Rice suggests that hypothetically, instrumental reason could bring desire to calculate that it would be in its best interests to be ruled by reason, but he appeals to political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in order to shed light on what he feels is a flaw in this argument (573-574). According to Rice, Hobbes believed that instrumental reason could make rational calculations that could point toward reason, but the frenzy of desires which characterizes the appetitive (desiring) component could not allow these rational calculations to amount to willfully assenting to rule by reason (573-574). Even the use of rhetoric, Rice argues, could not bring the parts of the soul or parts of the polis into a temperate arrangement, because the rational component in each cannot promise to actually give the desirous component what it wants when reason’s preoccupation (truth, the good) and desire’s (self-gratification) are so fundamentally different (574-575). Unable to deliver on the objects of desire’s desire, the philosopher concludes, reason must necessarily dupe desire into subordination, as Plato himself suggests when he advocates the use of “opportune falsehoods” in the polis; the article’s author finds that this defrauding the polis is no more in line with the harmony Plato’s temperance entails than force itself (Rice 575). Indeed, this is indicative of the
crux of his argument that Plato did not successfully eliminate political force (and thus, did not eliminate force in the soul either) through his rendering of the city and the soul in *The Republic*.

The thrust of Rice’s argument about elements of *The Republic* is that Plato seems to leave unaddressed the implications of his complex psychology and political sociology in his explanation of temperance. The resulting tension between the ideas of the city and the soul and their corresponding temperate states seems to be irrevocable in light of the different ways in which Rice attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to resolve it. In other words, Rice is unable to produce a scenario in the city and soul in which desire will willingly submit to reason (i.e. without compulsive force). The question that Rice seems to be getting at in his unfruitful search for true Platonic temperance in the city and in the soul is this: “Why should Platonic harmony follow from a societal arrangement involving factions with opposing interests?” Rice’s arguments seem to point to his having a position that there is nothing “natural” about the order of reason’s rule in just and temperate arrangements of the city and soul.

Such an assertion would appear to be substantiated by another product of the rule of reason which Socrates advocates in *The Republic*: the abolition of the private family in the polis. When Socrates calls for “community in pleasure and pain” in the republic he means by this the inability of anyone in the republic to differentiate between what is theirs and what is not, extending even to the emotions of others and familial ties, meaning that all feeling and affection is shared within the unity of the polis (Plato 260-262). Thus, Plato calls for the abolishment of the institution of the private family, because it would necessarily stand in the way of the unity of the “community of pleasure and pain” (262). In this arrangement, the rule of reason over desire is so complete that desire seems either to have disappeared altogether or has been assimilated into reason to the point that it is indistinguishable from reason. Here, the “rationality” of
allegiance to the city overcomes the very fundamental desire of humankind for family (not to mention effectively destroying the artisan class by negating all individual desire). It is fairly evident to those exercising common sense about humanity that there is nothing at all “natural” about this particular organization of society (humans have a tendency toward seeking a family, real or surrogate, for which no rational conception of unity, etc. can ever be a substitute).

Furthermore, it is not an arrangement to which anyone would assent willfully, and thus it necessitates coercion force for it to come to fruition. It seems, by the bankruptcy of Platonic temperance/harmony demonstrated from the beginning of the presentation of Rice’s article up to this point, that temperance is truly at odds with the Platonic polis and that this is somewhat of a reflection of the way in which the polis is fundamentally divided against itself. When the reasoning part of the soul or the city must effectively enslave the desirous part of the soul in order to bring the whole of the soul/city to reason, and thus toward the good, this necessarily precludes any harmony within the soul/city. It is unclear from this conclusion if there is something inherent in reason’s domination of the other parts of the city or soul, or in Plato’s tripartite construction of the soul which helps make harmony untenable in this case, but one thing that is clear is that harmony “imposed” on factions of any such organ is no harmony at all. Perhaps in this case Plato and Socrates’ ancient Greek worldview, which sought to find unity and order in the world (Guthrie 24), led them to feel the necessity of harmony in the soul and in society and neglect the role of force as the agent by which order is often created. That they tried to overcome this conflict with knowledge but were left with the necessity of force may say something about conflict, and not harmony being the essential human condition, and that our faculties of reason may be insufficient to deal with this adequately.
Works Cited:

