

Possibility and Utopia in Plato's *Republic*
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I. Two Questions

The Big Question: *What is the point of political philosophy, and how should it be connected to real world politics?*

The Specific Question: *Why is the role of political possibility in Plato's *Republic*, and is Plato right about its importance?*

II. Plato's Utopia

A. The three functions of the ideal 'city in thought':

1. As an analogy for justice in the individual soul (Books II-IV; VIII-IX)
2. Illustrating the educational and social conditions necessary for *producing* just souls (Books VII-IX)
3. As a matter of concern in its own right, as a political ideal (Books V-VII) ****Our focus****

B. The general features of Plato's *Kallipolis* (literally "Beautiful City" or "Fine City"):

1. Three main classes: Guardians (rulers), Auxiliaries (soldiers), and Producers (craftspeople, laborers, merchants)
2. Communal living among the Guardians and Auxiliaries, with no private homes or wealth

C. Three specific features, giving rise to the 'three waves' of objections:

1. First Wave: Equal education and employment for men and women (including co-ed naked physical training, and the eligibility of women to be Guardians and Auxiliaries)
2. Second Wave: Abolition of the traditional family (including communal raising of children and the replacement of marriage with eugenic breeding arranged by the Guardians)
3. Third Wave: The absolute rule of philosopher-kings

III. Possibility and Political Ideals

A. Three standard, competing views on the role of political ideals:

1. *Philosophical Truth*: A political ideal should represent important moral or (more generally) normative/evaluative truths, whether or not we expect anyone will ever actually put them into practice. Such an ideal can give philosophical insight without giving any practical guidance. (Cohen, Estlund)

2. *Immediate Practicality*: A political ideal should represent a realistic political alternative or course of action that can be put into action. The value in such an ideal is to show us the sort of thing we can do, here and now, to make the world a better place. (Marx, Mills, Sen, Young)

3. *Long-term Goal*: A political ideal should represent an ultimate endpoint for political change, even if it cannot be fully realized in the present. Such an ideal should be something we can reach, through a series of incremental steps, starting from where we are here and now. (Rawls, Simmons)

B. *The puzzle*: To answer the three waves of objection, Plato insists that each of his proposals must be shown to be both desirable and possible. But, as we will see, none of the standard views can explain Plato’s concern with political possibility.

IV. Political Possibility in the *Republic*: Waves 1 and 2

A. 1st Wave: Compatible with human nature, so possible

1. Arguments for possibility: analogy with well-bred dogs; analogy with baldness; weird argument from general superiority of men

2. Conclusion: “We agree that there is nothing unnatural (*para physin*) in giving those guardians who are women a musical education and a physical education. ... So it was not an impossibility, some sort of dream (*euxais homoia*), this lawgiving of ours. There was a natural justification (*kata physin*) for the law we passed. It is society today, apparently, which is out of step and unnatural (*para physin*).” (456b-c)

B. 2nd Wave: Possible only under the rule of philosopher-kings

1. The criterion: “The next step, apparently, is for us to try to discover, and point out what the failings are in cities nowadays, which stop them being run in this way, and what is the minimum change which could help a city arrive at political arrangements of this kind.” (473b)

2. The answer: “There is no end to suffering, Glaucon, for our cities, and none, I suspect, for the human race, unless either philosophers become kings in our cities, or the people who are now called kings and rulers become real, true philosophers.” (473c-d)

V. Political Possibility in the *Republic*: Wave 3

A. Philosophers-kings are extremely unlikely

1. True philosophers rarely emerge:

a. Argument: People in general are too easily corrupted by public opinion (492e); people born with philosophical aptitude are relatively rare to begin with (495b); and those with philosophical attitudes are even more likely to be corrupted by corrupt societies, because they are quick learners. (494b-495c)

b. Conclusion: “That leaves only a very small fraction...” who manage to avoid public corruption by being exiled, or being “a great mind born in a small city, who thinks the political affairs of his city beneath him,” or someone who starts out as a craftsman but then comes to philosophy. Specific examples include Theages, whose ill-health keeps him out of politics and Socrates, whose ‘divine sign’ guides him away from politics (496b-c).

2. When they do emerge, they are unlikely to rule:

a. They’ll want to avoid the corruption around them: “he will keep quiet, and mind his own business, like someone taking shelter behind a wall when he is caught by a storm of driving dust and rain. He sees everyone else brimful of lawlessness, and counts himself lucky if he himself can somehow live his life here pure, free from injustice and unholy actions, and depart with high hopes, in a spirit of kindness and goodwill, on his release from it.” (496d-e)

b. They won’t want to be piecemeal reformers: “All the same, you should be in no doubt that they would differ from any other draftsmen in refusing, right from the start, to have anything to do with any individual or city, or draft any new laws, until they were either given a clean slate or had cleaned it for themselves.” (501a)

c. Ultimately they would prefer doing philosophy to ruling anyway.

B. Although unlikely, they are still possible in the fullness of time:

1. Whether this has happened “in the boundless past,” or in the present “in some outlandish country, presumably, far removed from our view,” or sometime in the future, it’s not impossible. (499c-d)

2. It only takes one. “But is anyone going to contend that in the whole of time, out of all those who are born, not one is ever going to survive? ... But it only needs there to be one, surely, with a city which is obedient to him, to bring about all the things which are now regarded as impossible.” (502b)

VI. Conclusion: The Political and Philosophical Importance of Impractical (but Possible) Political Ideals

A. Identifying human standards: Political ideals that are possible in this way can serve as standards of comparison to tell us how good or how bad we’re doing at organizing our lives together, even if they don’t, by themselves, tell us what to do now.

B. Reconciliation to plurality: By seeing how the plurality of human natures can be integrated into a utopian social system, political ideals can show that this plurality is not, in itself, something to be lamented. Thus whatever else is wrong with our society now, this plurality is not it.

C. Reasonable hope: By showing that a political ideal is possible we can see that it is something worth hoping for. This hope can be of some personal comfort to individuals, but it can also serve to motivate attempts at political change when – as is often the case - we don’t yet know whether the ideal is practically achievable.

D. The persuasive power of utopia: Often, the main barrier to the possibility of a political ideal is getting people to go along with it. But part of getting people to go along with it is showing that it’s worth going along with. Thus it’s a mistake to restrict our theorizing to political ideals that already seem practically achievable.