

Stelios Ramfos

THE KALLIPOLIS SOUL

A Reading of Plato's Republic

Translated by
JOHN RAFFAN

Edited by
N. SAMOTHRAKI

Prologue

This work is the product of a series of thirty lectures at the Goulandris-Horn Foundation during the academic year 1997-1998 and a corresponding series at the Vasilis and Marina Theocharakis Foundation between January 2012 and January 2013, with a break over the summer. The latter series was not a mere repetition of the former. The first series of lectures set out the framework and the spirit of my approach, while in the second I attempted to present those insights that had gestated over the intervening fifteen years. I perceived from the beginning the seeds of those deeper insights and decided to wait.

The subject of my interpretative reading this time is Plato's Republic. I do not, of course, have in mind here some return to the past. Since, however, material progress is not necessarily also moral progress (the dictates of efficiency make no such requirement), a rebaptism in the sources of the beginnings and their diachronic force can constitute an effective measure to test the divergence between the material and the spiritual. We continually re-read the classics in order to evaluate more maturely the gains and losses of our choices within an historical perspective. Our appraisal is made through the prism of the logic governing the original foundations and of that governing the way in which we receive them at each moment. We read the texts to measure ourselves against their meanings and we introduce our time into their spiritual duration as a mode of questioning, so as to give form to this duration and to recognise the value elements inherent therein.

Analytical work with the information it brings helps up to a point the reflective working through of texts in the hermeneu-

tic enterprise. The texts of the past continue to speak to us today, primarily because we share their deeper concerns, and only secondarily because we are acquainted with the biography of their authors and history of their societies. A milestone of civilisation such as the Republic would not say much to us beyond the words on the page if we did not, mutatis mutandis, in a diachronic perspective, face common or similar problems with Plato. On the contrary, the antiquarian perspective, if I may so call it, obliges us to persist in archaeological excavations and the restorations of ruins, or in a scholastic measuring of monuments and to do so in a backward looking time, laden certainly with knowledge, but a time that does not activate or, much more, enable us. And how could it enable or satisfy when with the torrent of information, the world of the text becomes objective, closed to the infinite power of meaning? The spirit is activated rather by the liberated force of the text that leaps across time in a poetic manner as a starting point for a new beginning.

An interpretative reading does not isolate the partial elements of the text, but is concerned also about the implied meanings. It also opens itself beyond the historical origins of the text and its reception. Hence it does not seek in the text something entirely defined with the obsession of a positivist, nor for anything whatsoever, with the dexterity of the post-modern alchemist who sets in place of the text moments from the history of its readings and presents instead of it a collage of their dispersion through time. In this way he weaves his own narrative behind the masks of which both the author and the meaning of the text are obliterated. He proclaims that he is destroying the edifice of metaphysics, yet he does not omit to preserve for himself the right to configure and give meaning to his collage-like enterprise without explaining whether he is doing something different from the world which he is allegedly transcending, since his paper-clippings have both a subject and a meaning.

An interpreter inevitably reads a text from the locus of his own discourse and time. It is important nevertheless for him to

know the waters in which he is sailing. To work, for example, with an awareness that the meaning of the text is one thing and its words are another, just as the light of day is one thing and the things we see are another. The lack of this distinction confuses us since it abandons everything to the contingency of events and the automatism of their combination. At the same time, it abandons responsibility and the burden of responsibility to the subjective sense, leaving practice at a dead end. And yet this distinction lies at the core of Platonic thought, and is presented indeed with particular emphasis in the Republic. The philosopher underlines it in order to make us attentive to the constant danger of confusing what is visible with the light which makes it so, with the result that, instead of seeking the wisdom of the essence, we turn the search for wisdom into an historical matter. Light leads the perception and sense of things to a responsible attitude, and the city to a functional totality. Without this light everything remains on its own and meaningless. The light of the Ideas pervades in a formative manner the hypostasis of the city and guarantees its cohesion. It gives it a goal and limits outside of which practice does not even exist, but only automatic responses or spasmodic movements.

If what is materially advanced demands what is morally higher, if progress is ultimately moral, then a morality of responsibility takes clear priority. In the morality of responsibility which Plato first conceived and described as a morality of discourse and dialogue, spiritual reality enters historical space-time to imbue events with values in a beneficial way and to integrate the mechanical motility of predispositions into a field of renewed possibilities. The demand for power or for development henceforth assumes dimensions of activity in the perspective of a continual self-transcendence. This means that, while we are rooted in the finite world of nature, we do not rest on it, but stretch out towards the ideal infinite, the good beyond essence, and culture “produces” as its prime product not quantitative magnitudes, but more refined individuals.

The Platonic distinction between light and the objects that appear within it helps the interpreter to insist on a discourse beyond the words that underpin it, without, of course, by-passing them. Because, if the discourse were to represent the content of the words themselves, then objectively it would constitute a by-product of them, so that the day itself would necessarily be born from the events of daily life. Nonetheless, words are parts of the discourse with a different role in the phrase as nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions or prepositions, and for this reason they do not breathe or act in the lexica wherein they are recorded, but in sentences, that is, in the meaning as the locus of the truth of the discourse – they well up from its viscera and exist in order to incarnate it. Within the horizon of meaning, texts have things to tell us that help both in our hermeneutic access to them and in our own self-recognition, especially indeed when it is a matter of texts of fundamental significance for our civilisation, such as the Republic. For this reason, the reading of the Republic has no relation to a fixation on the past, since the reason which leads us to approach it is the deeper demands of our own need to “live well”.

The Republic is a book concerning political unity in truth and the philosopher as subject of universality, a book about a consciousness more expansive than our natural state and the dictates of partiality. Without the man of the Ideas, the polity of universality ends up as a concentration camp and the law conspicuously enshrines the rights of the stronger without recognizing any obligation on his part. Plato certainly had in mind the ancient city, but precisely for this reason his work acquires especial weight in the eyes of a present-day reader. He raises for the first time essential issues about the nature and hypostasis of the city, not so much as a social totality, but rather as a polity, an organization, that is, of state authority. He seems to understand that society aims at the quality of life of its members, while the state assures the observation of the rules of legality, which in this case define the rights and most especially the

obligations of the rulers. The transgression of these rules leads to a loss of values, the decline and change for the worse of a governmental regime. A state governed by the rule of law rests on a commonly accepted morality of justice; an anarchical society sacrifices values and checks and balances on the altar of power and to this end enlists everything base and dark that man has within him.

The ancient city was a totality, with the past as its predominant time and ideal, something that does not hold for the modern state. In the case of the modern state, the past is given and the future is open, and so it is not impossible in situations of crisis for some section of society to proclaim itself a totality and to identify its real or perceived interest with the universal interest. Inevitably then the partial interest extends to take in whatever is feasible for it, while the feasible reinforces the logic of the partial and it becomes more persuasive by continually distancing the means from the ends: Social peace cannot be combined with freedom and democracy nor justice with prosperity. Thus efficiency takes the place of politics and the phantasmagoria of a definitive exorcism of evil prohibits in a tyrannical way the syntheses of dialogue that functions as a harmonious bond between various viewpoints.

Discourse and dialogue as the quintessence of genuine political life forms the manner of Socratic philosophy, a means inseparable from the great aim of truth as a continuous spiritual evaluation and re-evaluation of the essence of things. Socrates was a thinker of morality and not of nature. The existence of beings did not preoccupy him but rather the possibility of co-existence of people in the city. In the Republic, Socrates, as an incarnate Platonic ideal type, constructs the best polity from the perspective of the cohesion of the one with the whole and with the other, the metaphysical unity that refigures the worldly order. In nature all things serve survival and reproduction; the city aims at the Good in such a way that the means are not made autonomous, and the universal element is harmonized with the

partial, thereby establishing the order of justice. The good as an active force makes Plato entrust man's relationship with the city to the agreement of the soul with truth, and his readiness to cultivate this agreement he assigns to the formative power of education (paideia).

Education is not an accumulation of knowledge and facts, which with their oppressive weight make a person passive; it is formation, a faculty for creative action and synthetic thought. When educated, man knows what to desire; when uneducated, he is left to greed, lust for power and aggressiveness. The aim of education is the increase of cultivation, it is not erratic self-confirmations; it is the development of the preconditions for "living well" (εὖ ζῆν) and not for securing animal survival. This "well" is of decisive significance for whoever pursues it consciously: His existence is enriched with a more expansive self, while the self literally becomes bankrupt in the person who pursues self-interest. The true search for what is excellent (τὸ ἄριστον) requires people who are excellent in order to attain the synthesis of things manifold and different with what is the best possible for all as the criterion.

How Plato makes this journey and how he narrates it with Socrates as protagonist and his alter ego is something I will follow step by step in the unfolding of the dialogue. I read the immortal text of the Republic following its stages, its twists and turns and its allusions as dramatic actions, weighing up the arguments and often grafting onto what is said my own parallel lines of thought, so as to communicate interactively with his world and time, without imposing on it my own representations and conceptions. I adjoin myself, as it were, indirectly to the Platonic group of interlocutors, but I do not forget that it is the author who moves the strings of the discussion, and so I take care not to act without him with pre-conceived answers. My interest is in opening myself with him to profounder depths. Thus, I begin each time with a strategic summary of the passage to be interpreted, I proceed to necessary distinctions, in order to

pass over finally to a spiritual approach to the issues that arise and their extrapolations. My insistence on the text itself with its dramatic actions leaves no room for extensive bibliographical detours and references. Only in an ancillary way do I have resort to the diachronic deposits of clarifications or expositions and, of course, with the greatest respect. I make my way as far as possible without intermediaries.

Penteli, June 2013

327a-336a

The Platonic dialogue the *Republic* bears the explanatory subtitle: *Or concerning justice; regarding the polis*. The subtitle is an addition of later, perhaps Alexandrian, editors of the work, but it has its significance, since it directs the reading to the issue of the just polity. And in point of fact it directed the reading of the work for centuries, with the support, of course, of elements in the text itself.

The *Republic* is a work without rival, the development of which extends over ten books. It combines in an uplifting manner depth of thought with a vitality of style, while the clarity of the ideas balances the inspiration, and the effortlessness of the expression tempers the flights of metaphor. It belongs among those works that many would choose to preserve if all books were to be destroyed and only one were to be saved. This was true even from Antiquity.

It was natural for a creation of such weight to provoke from the beginning the highest interest in all its facets, for both the ideas and the style to attract the attention of readers, and for it to become the object of exhaustive analysis over the course of the centuries so as to retain no secret. The variety of the style (style is the form that we give to the meaning and not to the matter of things) and the inductive progression of the development led many to question whether it was written as a unified work or whether it represents a later mosaic of separate dialogues, just as it made others formulate the theory of a first and second writing. Today the unity of the work is regarded as beyond doubt and its dating seems established with a high degree of precision: The older views have been abandoned, according to which Plato composed the *Republic* shortly after his fortieth year (about 388 or

shortly thereafter), and it has become accepted that the work must have been written about 375, that is, when Plato was about fifty, since the life of the philosopher covers the period 428-348. The *Republic* comes after the dialogues *Euthydemus*, *Cratylus*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and the *Symposium* and is contemporaneous with the *Phaedrus* and includes themes that come to maturity in late works such as *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, *Philebus* or *Timaeus*. In a word, it constitutes a high point in which the upward path towards the Ideas is completed and from which the downward path commences, through the communion with the Ideas to the phenomena. Without the *Republic* Plato's work remains in the air and with it philosophy itself. Moreover, all philosophy constitutes a continuous –indirect or direct– commentary on Plato in the first instance, and in the second instance on his disciple Aristotle. This is a view I share with others.

The interested reader can find everything imaginable about the life and work of the Athenian philosopher. The studies devoted to Plato comprise entire libraries, and in each of the major European languages there are an abundance of choices. For my part, I have read a great many and important works on Plato, but for the present reading of the *Republic* I will not be using them specifically. My debts are many, but here I am depositing the interest payments, and the interest payments are my own efforts. Since my theme is: *The human soul as a polity in Plato*, I take as points of reference three important studies of particular relevance: F. M. Cornford, "Psychology and social structure in the Republic", *Classical Quarterly* vi (1912) 246-265, Bernard Williams, "The analogy of city and soul in Plato's Republic" in: *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. E. N. Lee, A. P. Mourelatos and R. M. Rorty, 1973, and finally the recent and, in my view, authoritative work by Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 1995.

With my hermeneutic approach I wish to bring into relief as a major theoretical problem something which, I believe, has been

overshadowed by the various descriptions of the edifice of an “ideal” polity, namely, that for Plato the unity of the individual constitutes a fundamental precondition for the unity of the social whole and not a simple derivative thereof. The ensuing excavation will, I hope, reveal that the edifice of the “ideal” polity is not in this case Plato’s final aim. The goal of the philosopher is to underpin the establishment and functioning of the city in moral harmony, as it is secured with the graceful ordering of the individual soul living in truth, and not of some world soul. If these points are valid, then the *Republic* ceases to exist as a theory about the state as state, it ceases to be of interest primarily as a paradigm of a stable or closed society, and there appears a pre-eminently philosophical discourse about a political human essence over the long period of classical Greek antiquity.

I will follow the sequence of the ten books of the *Republic* without deviation so as to preserve the Platonic pace and rhythm of development. So that the reader may have in mind a kind of journey plan, I note in advance that the ten books are ordered in terms of their subject matter as follows: The First Book serves as an introduction to the work; the Second, Third and Fourth consider what justice consists in; the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh discuss the preconditions for the realisation of justice; the Eighth and Ninth examine how injustice arises in the city and in the individual, while the Tenth and last book sets out in an eschatological perspective the advantages and disadvantages of justice.

Socrates is describing to an anonymous audience the discussions that took place the previous day in the house of Polemarchus, the son of Cephalus. Those present were Cephalus, though only for a short time at the outset, his three sons, Polemarchus, Lysias and Euthydemus, Plato’s two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, the sophist Thrasymachus, the politician Cleitophon and Charmantides, someone whose identity is otherwise unknown to us. He had, he tells, gone down to Piraeus to follow the feast of Artemis, and after the ritual procession was over, he was mak-