

**Plato's *Republic*  
and the Great Hope  
for Education**

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## I. Observations

### A. Introduction

One of our long-standing traditions at St. John's College is that the first lecture of the year, usually given by the dean, addresses liberal education. An essential feature of liberal education, as we practice it here, is our willingness to share with one another our best efforts to formulate what we see in the books and to say what they mean to us. Tonight I would like to share with you some thoughts about Plato's *Republic* and to suggest some ways it might help us to understand our work at the college.

A few preliminary remarks about what we do when we read a book like *The Republic* may be in order. None of us picks up a book with a mind that is simply receptive and clear. We all bring with us the sum of our experiences in life and in language. While we may not have complete control over how we will respond to a book we are reading for the first time, I believe we have the power to learn to be receptive, to learn to hold seriously in front of us notions we may never before have entertained. It is particularly wonderful that we can learn even from a book that makes claims we find abrasive and contrary to what we hold true.

Being receptive to unfriendly books is one of the first requirements of liberal education. It is not something we do naturally, and it is not easy. I have noticed in the last few years that many of my students, and not just undergraduates, have increasing difficulty letting themselves engage seriously with a book that presents them with unfamiliar propositions.

I do not pretend to understand this phenomenon completely, but two tendencies seem to contribute to it noticeably: first, the categories, "better and worse," have fallen on hard times and are generally held in low esteem; second, people today tend to over-emphasize the importance of personal belief.

I will take them up in order, beginning with "better and worse." It is a commonly held view, currently, that one subject is as good as another. Colleges and universities generally believe they are serving their students as well with courses devoted to matters that once were considered as hobbies, as with liberal arts disciplines. "Better and worse" and mental activities that depend on this fundamental distinction, like judgment, have slipped so far that they are often spoken of even by teachers as undesirable. For someone to be called discriminating or judgmental is nearly always meant as an accusation. As a result, writers who suggest a hierarchy of entities or even of academic subjects, that is, writers who suggest that some subjects, like

mathematics, might be better than others, often have a hard time being heard at all. "Hierarchy" itself has become something of a dirty word. Yet we are constantly called on, minute by minute in our lives to make judgments, to decide that one course of action is better than an alternative. The prohibition against "better and worse" seems to extend only to the intellectual realm.

The second tendency, the place of honor given to "personal belief," as the freest of human acts, justifies students in turning away from books that seem to be saying things with which they cannot quickly agree. What is curious here is that with the categories "better and worse" suppressed, the basis on which one invests "personal belief" is unclear. We are left with how a notion strikes us just now. One's personal belief on this basis has no particular standing from moment to moment. From this standpoint, we might read through a list of books like the seminar reading list, in order to confirm what we already think. Those books with which we disagree can easily be ignored. Reading on this basis becomes painful only when we must endure too many books in a row that do not agree with us.

It is natural that our first reaction to a book is usually to agree or disagree with it enthusiastically. While we must relish this part of the adventure of reading, we must also acknowledge that this immediate, personal reaction is only the first blush of genuine engagement with an author. Much more remains to be done.

## **B. Euclid.**

### **1. Parallel Lines.**

To get a better sense of first impressions and what is possible beyond them, it may be helpful to consider how we read Euclid's *Elements*. Euclid begins Book I with definitions, postulates, and common notions. In order to read on, we must in some way take these three sets of statements into ourselves. Though modern-day mathematicians sometimes grumble that Euclid's axioms are sloppy and incomplete, they strike most of us as somehow familiar. We know which things Euclid means when he says line and plane, figure and circle. We nod in agreement when Euclid tells us: "A line is breadthless length."

It sounds like the things we call lines in the world. These definitions seem to be right. We can believe in them, or "buy into the system," as people are fond of saying these days.

The fifth postulate too, though it is cumbersome, appeals to common sense:

That, if a straight line falling on two straight lines make the interior angles on the same side less than two right angles, the two straight lines, if produced indefinitely, meet on that side on which are the angles less than the two right angles. (Euclid 2)

It is possible to take in the fifth postulate and go on, simply by embracing it with personal belief, even though there is no practical way to test it, to follow out lines that share a mutual perpendicular at more than one place. Euclid has been sensible so far and what he says in the fifth postulate sounds as though it too must be a matter of common sense.

It is possible to go quite far in geometry simply on the basis of this common-sense agreement with Euclid about the definitions, postulates and common notions. Usually it is not until reading Lobachevski that a student develops a genuine problem about how one takes in and holds the parallel postulate. In place of Euclid's fifth postulate Lobachevski mentions "uncertainty," and postulates that for a given line and a point not on it, more than one line may be drawn through the point that will be parallel to the given line (Lobachevski 13).

Lobachevski shows that by denying Euclid's fifth postulate and putting an alternative in its place, a decently consistent geometry follows. Lobachevski's geometry shares some propositions with Euclid's geometry, and engenders a new set of propositions all its own.

In the light of Lobachevski's geometry, it becomes problematic to say that Euclid was "right" about the fifth postulate. "Right" is the wrong thing to say about it. What can be said is that if you hold the fifth postulate as Euclid states it, then the rest of the propositions in Euclidean geometry follow. Of course, the same claim can be made for Lobachevski and his geometry.

Whatever it is we do when we hold Lobachevski's parallel postulate to ourselves and allow ourselves to make deductions from it, it is quite different from embracing it with belief, as we seem to have done with Euclid. Returning to Euclid after Lobachevski, we find that our relation to the Euclidean postulates is now of a different quality. It is this particular way of holding onto or entertaining a proposition like the fifth postulate, as distinct from believing it to be true, that allows a reader to appreciate the insights of both Euclid and Lobachevski without insisting that one of them must be wrong. The two geometries do not present themselves in such a way that we are free to choose or invest personal belief in whichever we like. The truth of the fifth postulate is not simply relative to our taste. Rather, it is the case that the two postulates lead to two perfectly legitimate branches of geometry. Geometry turns out to be bigger than we thought. Further insight depends on our ability to hold these alternatives side by side in our minds.

The openness that is required for this is not a letting go of logical rigor. Each branch of geometry requires the same logical rigor as the other. The openness or broad-mindedness required is more a matter of putting off the urge to say no to something unfamiliar. The result of doing this is surprisingly to escape the either-or dilemma and to find the plane of a larger truth.

## **2. Digression on Disbelief**

The English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, spoke of something like this when he said poetry requires the "willing suspension of disbelief."<sup>1</sup> Suspension of disbelief is not the same as pretending for a little while that something false is true, as we do with escape fiction; nor is it the same as becoming credulous. Suspending disbelief does not mean to take up a position of faith. It requires nothing like a leap. Rather, it is a matter of entertaining what an author holds out to us by exercising the active power of imagination and predisposing ourselves to the possibility that an author may be saying something important, though we may not yet see it.

## **3. Proposition I.4**

Euclid himself seems to have been well aware of the problem of how the foundations of his geometry are to be held. The problem emerges unmistakably in proposition I.4. In this proposition Euclid purports to prove that if two triangles have two sides and the contained angle equal respectively, the triangles will be equal (Euclid 4). Where modern geometry texts provide one of the congruence theorems as an axiom, in I.4 Euclid provides none; but instead attempts a proof, a proof that does not manage anything like the clarity of most of his other proofs. It exists somewhere in a middle ground between things that can be grasped directly by Mind, say the common notions, and ordinary propositions that are arrived at by logical argument. I.4 does not fit quite in either category. It is akin to the postulates. Postulates are necessary for the geometry to proceed, though the need is not particularly obvious to a new reader.

The proof of I.4 is unnerving. It requires the construction of two lines upon another pair of lines, and then draws a conclusion about the third line in a superposed triangle. It imports a little axiom it requires, that two lines cannot enclose a space, as though it were normal to invent axioms on the spot in the middle of a proposition. At times we can persuade ourselves that Euclid has really proved his point, but the sense of conviction tends not to stick. Each time we study I.4, it stares back in a new way. The uneasiness of I.4 would not matter so much if it were not the case that nearly everything else of any consequence in Book I depends on our being able to make peace with Proposition I.4., to hold it to ourselves, to fight the urge to deny it, to suspend

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*: Chp. XIV, first published 1817, (New York: Dutton, 1967) 169.

our disbelief in it. I can only think that Euclid wanted his readers to be troubled by it in just the way we are. It requires a stretching of our tolerance as readers. This ability to hold onto unwelcome propositions is just what one needs to confront books that attempt to deal more comprehensively with the larger questions of human existence.

If it is true that Plato had inscribed above the entrance to the Academy, "Let no one unskilled in geometry enter,"<sup>2</sup> perhaps this ability to hold onto unwelcome propositions was among the skills he had in mind.

## II. The Republic

### A. Education as a Topic:

In November the freshmen will spend six seminars discussing the ten books of Plato's *Republic*. *The Republic* is a perplexing book, but not one, I think, whose main objective is to engender perplexity. My hope this evening is not to make everything about *The Republic* clear. I will be pleased if I can show something about Plato's understanding of education and his commitment to it. *The Republic* treats education as a topic, but reading *The Republic* also constitutes an educational adventure for the reader. I will first discuss education as a topic in the dialogue, and afterward take up how reading *The Republic* might itself be a process of education, and how Plato works as a teacher.

#### 1. Education: the First View:

In Book II, Socrates and his interlocutors set themselves the task of devising what comes to be described later as a "city in words." Devising and considering this city "*en logotōs*" (592b)<sup>3</sup> is the main topic of conversation for much of the rest of the dialogue. Interest in constructing this city grows from the earlier search for justice. At this point in the dialogue, the conversation seems to have gone as far as it can in considering the justice of an individual man. Socrates notes that we speak of both the justice of one man and the justice of an entire city. Therefore, he argues, because the city is larger, it may be easier for us to see justice in it than in one man. He says:

Then, perhaps, there would be more justice in the larger object and more easy to apprehend. If it please you, then, let us first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less. (369a)

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this point see D.H. Fowler, *The Mathematics of Plato's Academy: A New Reconstruction*, (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1987) 199-202.

<sup>3</sup> References to *The Republic* are from the Shorey translation unless otherwise noted. Page numbers refer, following convention to the Stephanus text (1578 edition).

He proposes this procedure on the basis of an analogy:

The inquiry we are undertaking is no easy one but calls for keen vision, as it seems to me. So, since we are not clever persons, I think we should employ the method of search that we should use if we, with not very keen vision, were bidden to read small letters from a distance, and then someone had observed that these same letters exist elsewhere and on a larger surface. We should have accounted it a godsend, I fancy, to be allowed to read those letters first, and then examine the smaller, if they are the same.(368d)

Socrates proceeds to build up the city in words, beginning with a premise about the origin of cities:

The origin of the city...is to be found in the fact that we do not severally suffice for our own needs, but each of us lacks many things. (369b)

Socrates also provides a second premise about the city:

"Our several natures are not all alike but different. One man is naturally fitted for one task, and another for another." (370b)

From these premises Socrates constructs the city, beginning with the most immediate physical needs of men: food, clothing and shelter. After the city has become more "luxurious" (372e), a guardian class is needed to protect it. The requirement of education emerges at this point.

The guardians are naturally high spirited. They are described several times as having a nature close to that of well-bred hounds (375a). These guardians must be "gentle to their friends and harsh to their enemies" (375c).

Socrates argues further that, like watchdogs, the guardians must have the "love of wisdom" (375e) in their nature. Glaucon, mystified, wonders "how so?"

Socrates explains:

[The watch dog] distinguishes a friendly from a hostile aspect by nothing save his apprehension of the one and his failure to recognize the other. How...can the love of learning be denied to a creature whose criterion of the friendly and the alien is intelligence and ignorance? (376b)

From here it is an easy step, perhaps an overly easy step, for Socrates to get Glaucon to agree that "the love of learning and the love of wisdom are the same." With that in place, the conclusion follows: the watch dog, and by analogy the guardian, is "by nature a lover of wisdom and of learning" (376c).

Socrates now begins an explanation of the education that is proper for these guardians. He suggests "gymnastics for the body, and for the soul, music" (376e). Greek *mustike* is a more inclusive than our word, music. It includes stories, fables, and poetry as well as compositions for instruments and voice.

The "education of the soul" at this point is patterned after education for the body. Music imitates gymnastics. Socrates explains:

For the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory, but whatever opinions are taken into the mind at that age are wont to prove indelible and unalterable. (378e)

Censorship therefore is justified, even necessary. Socrates says:

Then our program of education must begin with censorship. The censors will approve the fables and stories they deem good and ban those they consider to be harmful. We shall persuade mothers and nurses to tell the children stories from the approved list, assuring them that the training of the soul is far more important than the training of the body. If we apply this criterion, most of the stories they tell now will have to be discarded. (377c, Sterling and Scott 73)

After a discussion of the defects of the tales presently told, with particularly sharp attention to Homer's treatment of the gods, Socrates lays down what must be conveyed about the divine in the new education for guardians:

God is altogether simple and true in deed and word, and neither changes himself nor deceives others by visions or words or the sending of signs in waking or in dreams. (381d)

Socrates moves from prescribing the permissible content for speeches and tales, to telling what rhetorical forms will be allowed: what pitch, rhythm and diction. Straightforward narration is encouraged, imitation or mimicry warned against. From here, Socrates proceeds to song, describing the tunes and rhythms that will be allowed: the Lydian and Ionian modes are to be done away with on the grounds that they promote "softness and sloth" (398e). Harmonies are encouraged that promote "rhythms of a life that is orderly and brave" (400a). Of education in music Socrates concludes:

And is it not for this reason, Glaucon, said I, that education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained...(401e)

As he concludes his account of education for the guardians, he makes a shift in emphasis. Gymnastics and music, physical education and artistic training, are no longer said to aim at body and soul, but at two principles within a man:

It seems then that a god has given men these two means, artistic and physical education, to deal with these two parts of themselves, not the body and the soul except incidentally but the spirited and the wisdom-loving parts, in order that these be in harmony with each other, each being stretched and relaxed to the proper point. (411e)[Grube, p. 80]

Socrates now turns to the question, who will rule the city, and tops off his account with a shocking notion, the noble lie. This is sometimes translated as some device, a necessary fiction, a noble untruth (Grube 82), but the Greek really is stronger than that, *pseudos* really means a lie.

The lie Socrates suggests, though it employs mythic terms, seems to describe something quite plausible. In this story, the souls of the earliest men fit to rule were made of gold, while those fit only to help the rulers were made of silver. The remaining souls were made of iron and brass. In the course of time, the metals of the souls became intermixed in the offspring. Nevertheless it is still possible to tell if a soul is predominantly gold or, say brass. The noble lie is meant "to persuade if possible the rulers themselves, but failing that the rest of the city" (414c).

This sketch will suffice for Plato's first account of education in *The Republic*. It may be good to stop here and consider its features. It is conceived as serving the state. But not just any state, this is a state based on three premises: that the virtue of a man is like the virtue of a state, that men come together to form states because of their individual insufficiency, and that what is most important about our individual natures is that they differ from one another. The purpose of this education is the governing of the polis, that is, it is an education to produce guardians and leaders of the city. It is not for everyone. Furthermore, this education is a matter of training and proceeds by habituation. Finally, the story that governs it is called by Socrates a lie.

## 2. Note On Reading Dialogues.

Plato's literary form complicates the problem of how we are to take the claims we find in *The Republic*. We are constantly up against the difficulty of knowing when we are actually addressing Plato's view, and not just the view of one of his characters, Socrates, for example.

The problem of irony in the works of Plato is a serious one. For many of the books we read at the college, it is clear that the writer means what he says, and tries to say what he means. When Aristotle tells us, "All men by nature desire to know," we wonder what this claim will lead to and whether it can bear the weight of what Aristotle will build on it.<sup>4</sup> We do not need to enquire which of his characters is telling us this, or what the narrative voice contributes to the significance of a claim. In reading Plato, however, these questions are always central.

If Plato does not mean for Socrates' words to be taken literally, then how are we to take them? It is tempting to push this question into a dichotomy: Either Plato means what Socrates says, or else it is mere jest. Neither category seems to fit the dialogues. As readers we must make judgments at every turn about whether something in the dialogue is to be taken literally as Plato speaking through a character, or to be laughed at as jest. In those most interesting places, where irony is at work, as readers we must determine that a passage is intended as ironic, and then figure out the purpose of the irony. We must not assume, when Socrates makes a person or a position look ridiculous, that we are meant simply to discard the view. Any discussions about these things require an effort to show what end the irony serves.

At the end of Book IV, I think the reader is meant to feel genuine dissatisfaction with the account. Glaucon and Adeimantus give in too easily on many points. The case Socrates makes for the love of wisdom based on the intelligence of watchdogs is a clear place where the reader is expected to have better vision than the interlocutors.

Where Glaucon and Adeimantus seem to take the arguments as simple and straightforward, the reader judges them to be intentionally exaggerated, and often playful. Their conclusions, though dubious as stated, are not meant to be rejected simply. If we can somehow hold onto these strange things, as we must do with Euclid's Proposition I.4, there is the promise of an interesting development to follow. While Glaucon and Adeimantus may be moved too easily, as readers we suspect that the character, Socrates, knows what he is doing, and Plato, standing behind the drama has some clear purpose in constructing the dialogue as he has done.

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.1, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941) 689.

At the beginning of Book V. Socrates wants to move the discussion into deeper matters. Polemarchus pleads with him to spell out the implications of the city for the lives of women and children. For those readers who were not feeling enough discomfort at the end of Book IV, Socrates indulges Polemarchus and works out the details of communal life for the guardians. By a turn of history, many of the notions, which must have seemed very strange at their time, such as the equality of the sexes, have become the rule in modern times. Nevertheless the complete absence of private property, with even children in common, "like hounds" (466d), as Socrates puts it, and the taking of children to war, must be intended as extreme, but, with some effort, thinkable.

How we receive what Plato has presented is no small matter. The consequences of getting it wrong are not trivial. Some of the claims in Book V, embraced simplistically, can be used to justify the destruction of the family, genetic engineering for society, and wholesale disregard for the lives of individuals. Crimes on a great scale are possible for people who think they are very clear about how the words of Socrates in *The Republic* are to be taken.

Nevertheless, after hearing these things, Glaucon and the others want Socrates to move ahead and show how this state is possible—they want to know how to set it up right away. They have embraced the city in words with their eager personal belief. We as readers, however, shudder at their impatience and are stopped by the many questionable features of the city in words. At the end of Book V, a careful reader is left feeling uncomfortable with the premises, with the slippery deductions, and with the conclusions that seem to go too far. The account is incomplete. To read on we must hold our discomfort in abeyance and hope that Plato will provide something more satisfying to fill out the story. What irony is at work here seems to be at the expense of the interlocutors and for the purpose of enhancing the perspective of the reader. We see more clearly than the interlocutors. We stand closer to Socrates. We are in on more than they are, but still we read on in hope rather than with understanding.

### **3. The Central Images.**

Socrates does not again take up the task of prescribing an educational curriculum until Book VII. The remaining problems of the "city in speech" too have been put off, at the end of Book V, as though it is not possible to go any further with these things until the most fundamental questions of philosophy have been addressed.

In Book VI we are shown a glimpse of the deepest mysteries of ontology and epistemology: How it is that the world and everything in it exist, and how knowledge may be possible. The access Socrates provides to these things, curiously, is not by way of argument, but rather, by way of image. The argumentative reasoning of Books I and II and even the drawing of

conclusions from hypotheses which characterized Books III-V have been replaced by analogical imaging.

Socrates presents three central images: the sun, the divided line and the cave. Much depends on our ability as readers to entertain these analogies sympathetically. If we are unable to allow ourselves to be carried by them, we go no further with this book. It is necessary at this point that we be far enough along in our ability to entertain uncomfortable notions to arrest temporarily our analytical impulse and to give free reign to the imagination. There is nothing more exhilarating than catching a glimpse of the vision of wholeness that underlies these three analogies. Emphasis on sight or vision is not accidental here. When Plato began his development of the city in words, he spoke of the large letters that are more accessible to dim vision. At this point in *The Republic*, he expects his readers to have inner vision that is improved to the extent that they will be able to see the wholeness of being and passing away that flows from something he calls *to kalon*. *To kalon* is usually translated as the good, but also includes the sense of the beautiful, the noble and the virtuous. It seems to be a single principle in which all these things converge.

It is as we confront the sun, the divided line and the cave that the suspension of disbelief is necessary most of all in *The Republic*. Where, with Euclid, we are called on to entertain a proposition and then, in rather quick succession, to test it for consistency with other propositions that have been established, here in *The Republic*, we are asked to entertain a rich flowing sequence of images, and to hold off, for some time, the analytic urge.

#### **4. Education Revisited**

When Plato returns to education in Book VII, it has a completely new emphasis. It is hard to overestimate the effect the image of the cave has had on educational thinking for the last two thousand years. Briefly, the story goes as follows: Men are chained in an underground place inaccessible to the light. They are held rigidly in place, and made to watch a show of shadows against a wall, illuminated by a fire. Their education consists in their turning from a preoccupation with the shadows, and moving up out of the cave where they confront real things in place of the shadows. The full significance of the cave cannot be grasped without help from the images of the sun and the divided line. Corresponding to the sun which both gives life to the things of earth and makes them visible to us, Socrates posits an intelligible realm in which the Good plays a part analogous to that of the sun in the visible realm. The good is the source of all things, and it also provides the means by which things can be known. While we can catch glimpses of the sun in the visible realm, we are not able to stare steadfastly at it. Something like this seems to be true of the good as well. The image suggests that we can improve our relationship to the good, but comprehending it simply, may be beyond us.

The divided line is an extended analogy that illustrates the relationship between ideas, often called forms, and physical things. It works primarily by playing on the relationship between physical objects and the shadows they cast as a metaphor for ideas which are singular, and the many physical representations of them. Socrates gives an example of this notion in Book X, where he speaks of the real couch which is the idea of the couch, and the many particular couches that are imitations of it (597a). The final gesture in the image of the divided line is a catapulting upward from inquiries that depend on hypotheses, like geometry, to the insight and knowledge of the very most profound truths that are somehow independent of hypothesis.

The images of the sun and the divided line provide meaning to what one finds outside the cave. It is the hope of these possibilities that drives the new kind of education described in Book VII. This second kind of education begins with the mathematical. It includes arithmetic, geometry, solid geometry, astronomy and music, but this time music is considered the mathematical science of harmony. Socrates grants that number is useful to the soldier, who must "learn to reckon troops" (522d), but argues that mathematics is to be studied with something quite beyond the practical as its end:

It is befitting then, Glaucon, that this branch of learning should be prescribed by our law and that we should induce those who are to share the highest functions of state to enter upon that study of calculation and take hold of it, not as amateurs, but to follow it up until they attain to the contemplation of the nature of number, by pure thought, not for the purposes of buying and selling, as if they were preparing to be merchants or huckster, but for the uses of war and for facilitating the conversion of the soul itself from the world of generation to essence and truth. (525e)

Mathematics, a worthwhile study in itself, prepares for the even more important process of dialectic. Socrates says:

This, then, at last, Glaucon, I said, is the very law which dialectic recites, the strain which it executes, of which, though it belongs to the intelligible, we may see an imitation in the progress of the faculty of vision, as we described its endeavor to look at living things themselves and the stars themselves and finally at the very sun. In like manner, when anyone by dialectic attempts through discourse of reason and apart from all perceptions of sense to find his way to the very essence of each thing and does not desist till he apprehends by thought itself the nature of the good in itself, he arrives at the limit of the intelligible, as the other in our parable came to the goal of the visible. (532a)

Glaucou then asks:

Tell me, then, what is the nature of this faculty of dialectic? Into what divisions does it fall? And what are its ways? For it is these, it seems, that would bring us to the place where we may, so to speak, rest on the road and then come to the end of our journeying.

Socrates responds:

You will not be able, dear Glaucou, to follow me further, though on my part there will be no lack of good will. And, if I could, I would show you, no longer an image and symbol of my meaning, but the very truth, as it appears to me...(533a)

Dialectic, *dialegesthai* in Greek, means to converse with, to argue with, to discuss. The root sense of the word is to pick out one from another. It is a cousin of *lego*, binding together, and *logos*, which means word, speech, and a long list of other intriguing things. This highest of educational activities has the same name as the common activity of conversation. Though discussion can disintegrate into chatter, where it is prepared by the right preliminary studies in mathematics, and when the parties are honestly seeking truth through their discussion, according to Socrates, and I think, according to Plato as well, some vision is possible of the highest and best things. The activity of dialectic is a group activity. We engage with one another in the search for truth through the medium of words. It is not something we do alone.

## **B. The Educational Adventure of the Reader**

### **1. Effect**

In *The Republic*, we are told about education, but also we are taken through an educational drama. We watch as Socrates, who has gone back into the cave, assists Glaucou, Adeimantus, Polemarchus, and even Thrasymachus. More importantly, Plato puts us in a privileged position. Through his use of irony primarily, but in other ways too, he makes room for the reader above the interlocutors and closer to Socrates. The reader is reinforced in the view that he stands behind the fiction of the metals. We know the truth, that it is a falsehood. We do not actually know the truth it masks, but we know, because we have been told, that it is a lie. Only those who are fit to be trained up to rule deserve such privileged information.

When education is revisited in Book VII, we look down as from the heights outside the cave and we see education as it comes from principle. It no longer serves the merely practical, but rather it promises to carry us to the highest heights of understanding.

## 2. Reflection

What do we make of our experience of reading *The Republic*? When reading about the sun, the cave and the divided line, it was important to put aside the critical faculty and give free reign to the imagination. Now it is time to enlist again the analytic faculty. At the very least we must conclude that something in us yearns for and responds to stories of the ideal. Plato gives us this taste of it in dialogue form for good reasons. First, it is important that we experience the ascent, the rising above the ordinary, by embracing the images of the sun, the line and the cave. As readers of *The Republic*, we are able actually to feel the power of the ideal. By putting aside our critical faculty or at least restricting it to only its constructive function, we catch a glimpse of the whole order of being and knowing. This is pure poetry, but poetry in the service of philosophy. The experience is exhilarating, breath taking, uplifting. It gives us the sense of having made our way out of the cave, of having looked, if only a glance, at the sun, at the Good. Yet all this is an illusion. That is, in the course of reading *The Republic*, we have not really become wise, we have not really made our way up through the grades of being to where we know how everything is connected from highest to lowest. But we have been given a taste of what that might be like.

The dialogue form does not require that Plato explain or justify this experience of an ideal world, or even that he endorse the theory of forms. Upon a cooler re-reading, we must question what it is that actually happens to us in this literary ascent. The places where it seems clear that Plato pushes things too far, such as in Book V, where we notice the interlocutors assenting too enthusiastically, make us more careful about giving full rein to our own enthusiasm at those points where the pull of idealism is most strong. We are left dazzled by the literary experience and wondering about its validity. I suspect this is exactly where Plato meant to leave us, between the competing claims of imagination, that faculty by which we all at once catch glimpses of wholes, on the one hand, and whatever else it is within us that demands proof, a strict account, on the other. In Plato, both of these faculties are required for the work of philosophy.

## III. Peroration

What does all of this mean about our education and the teaching and learning that we engage in here, at St. John's College? Liberal education, even if Plato did not use this phrase, owes a great deal to the image of the cave and all it depends on in *The Republic*. What we need to liberate ourselves from most is our own common sense, that is to say from the pre-formed notions we received in our youth, those opinions, as Plato would tell us, that are "wont to prove indelible and unalterable" (378e). At present, the list of such opinions is likely to include mistrust of the categories "better and worse," and an over-confidence in ourselves as the measure of all things.

A founding principle of the St. John's Program is the notion that fundamental things, things further up the divided line, can be learned, and that from these fundamental things, the lesser things can be either derived or learned by analogy. We present you with a selection of the best works we know of in philosophy, poetry, mathematics, science and music. But finally what these fundamental things really are, or even whether they actually exist, are matters we must all constantly seek to clarify.

We are left in one of two places: Either we hold open the possibility of the fundamental unity of knowledge or we deny such a possibility. In neither case are we speaking of things that can be proved. The choice is one of how we hold principles like Euclid's definitions, postulates and common notions. If we refuse to entertain the possibility Plato holds out to us, if we set aside those "glimpses" of fundamental unity as mere illusions, then we are left to piece together our experiences without recourse to principle, and, as well as we can, to make our way, alone.

By the other path, by listening to Plato, we explain such experiences as the feeling of ascent that accompanies a sympathetic reading of the divided line and the cave as, possibly, glimpses of that fundamental unity and the terms by which it exists.

This is the great hope for liberal education, that through it we will learn to break free from our habitual working hypotheses in an effort to see behind and beyond. If Plato is right, we may only get rare fleeting glimpses of the highest things, and they may turn out to be startlingly different from what we expected.

It is useful and not without basis to think of ourselves when we are reading as carrying on a conversation with the authors of the books. This notion of conversation helps us to be active, aggressive readers, questioning the books at every turn, imagining what their authors would respond. Plato particularly invites this sort of involvement. We must follow the words on the page as though engaged in a great adventure. We must be ready for anything, and prepared to confront, even to entertain, unfriendly notions. Finally, we must remain gentle and consider whatever we think we know, even if it is quite wonderful, as only a step along the way to genuine understanding.

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