Nakedness in Plato's *Republic*
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The Republic is a book of liberation. Its central teaching, that philosophy should rule city and soul, spurns readers to pull off the adornments of convention. As such, the experience of reading The Republic is an undressing. The Republic challenges us to disrobe the conventions that cover our nature by confronting the shame that prevents us from seeing it. In support of this central teaching, there are many images and allusions of nakedness. I will begin to explore nakedness and its significance in The Republic by focusing on a part of Glaucon's challenge in Book II and its relationship to the later elaboration of the ideal city in Book V. Drawing from these passages, I will discuss the role nakedness plays in the quest for truth, concluding with some reflections on The Republic's place in a liberal education.

The majority of dialogue of The Republic focuses on an elaboration of an ideal city meant to address the nuanced challenges of Glaucon and Adeimantus. Glaucon is not persuaded by Socrates' rhetorical refutation of Thrasymachus' argument that justice is the advantage of the strong men who rule. As a shepherd's concern for sheep amounts to fleece and flesh, a ruler's concern for the ruled is his private advantage, which Thrasymachus calls justice. Glaucon is all too familiar with these sorts of arguments, and although he finds them inadequate he is not able to dismiss them. "I've been talked deaf by Thrasymachus and countless others, while the argument on behalf of justice – that it is

better than injustice – I've yet to hear from anyone as I want it." [1] His inclination is not to agree with arguments like Thrasymachus', yet he cannot quite explain why. He believes justice is actually good but he wants more than to believe it; he wants to know. So, Glaucon asks Socrates to praise justice as something good in itself, and not something practiced for the fear of punishment or lack of resources.

In this spirit, Glaucon challenges Socrates with his tale of Gyges, the Lydian, who found a magical ring that made him invisible. Glaucon presents this as the ultimate image of liberation. Truly free to do what he wants without consequences, Gyges sacks the queen and kingdom. Glaucon asks Socrates to explain why someone with the impunity afforded by the power of invisibility would refrain from committing such acts. Afterall, the desire to get the better, "is what any nature naturally pursues as good, while it is law (*nomos*) which by force perverts it to honor equality."[2] Freed from *nomos*, people will do what they want, and they want other people's property, bodies and power. This is what most people think, according to Glaucon, who challenges Socrates to explain why it would be good for such a liberated Gyges not to travel the path he chose. But how liberated is Gyges? Does his situation present an account of a man truly liberated from the *nomos* that Glaucon claims perverts our nature?

We can learn more by comparing Glaucon's tale to its Herodotian counterpart. Readers of Herodotus recall that his Gyges had no ring, but hiding behind a curtain at the command of his king saw the queen naked, whose bruised shame sought vengeance upon

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[1] 358b-d All Republic citations and translations are from Bloom.

[2] 359c

her husband for inviting Gyges into her room.[3] Herodotus and also Socrates, in Book V, remark that most barbarians found public nudity to be extremely shameful; it was even a great shame for men among them to be seen naked by other men.[4] We must bear this convention in mind when we recall that Glaucon's Gyges found his ring on a naked corpse; "It had nothing on except a gold ring on its hand."[5] It must have felt quite liberating for Gyges' Lydian forerunner to be naked around others without being seen, and it is hard to imagine that Gyges or another Lydian with such power would not like to taste the forbidden fruit of invisible nakedness absent the shame of visible nakedness. But while the bearer of the ring believes he bears all, he remains clothed by the very power that enticed him to disrobe. Though Gyges may transgress Lydian mores with impunity, his ring does not free him from them, because, cloaked by invisibility, even this ring does not enable him to be visibly naked without shame. Thus, he has not truly escaped convention. He is, like his Herodotian counterpart, merely peering out from behind a curtain.

Perhaps by pointing to the superficiality of overcoming *nomoi* regarding nudity in this manner, Plato may suggest that Gyges' movement to tyranny is similarly reflective of a superficial overcoming of *nomos*. Gyges is free from imprisonment and execution for his crimes, but is he free from shame? Herodotus' Gyges also killed his king, but that was because the queen commanded him to do it or die himself; it was not a free choice on his

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[3] History I.8-12

[4] 452c and History I.10

[5] 359e

part. Could Glaucon's Gyges likewise be compelled to tyranny by forces beyond him and from which his ring's power does not free him? Glaucon explains that one who declined to use such power in the manner of Gyges, "would seem most wretched to those who were aware of it and most foolish too."[6] Perhaps conventional opinion compels Gyges to be ashamed not to seek tyranny where he has the power to achieve it?

Tyranny appears to be liberation, but it is only superficially so. Socrates describes the soul of a tyrant as the least free of all because he lives in perpetual fear of his neighbors for the wrongs committed against them.[7] Yet, this depiction of tyranny in Book IX is incomplete. One could imagine a tyrant of greater power and security and so more freedom to enjoy the pleasures of his office than Socrates' straw-tyrant who "alone of all the men in the city can't go anywhere abroad or see all the things the other free men desire to see; but, stuck in his house for the most part, he lives like a woman, envying any of the other citizens who travels abroad and see anything good."[8] This does not accurately characterize a tyrant with the power of Gyges. So, Socrates presents a second argument, which addresses the quality of the pleasures enjoyed by those with the freedom of tyrants. The upshot of this more authoritative argument is that the tyrant's pleasures are less enjoyable than those enjoyed by philosophers. The tyrant enjoys the finest pleasures

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[6] 360d

[7] 577a-580c

[8] 579b

painted on the cave walls, but he does not enjoy the finest pleasure, which "belongs to that part of the soul with which we learn."[9]

This pleasure is as enjoyable as rare, likewise are the talents and efforts required to enjoy it. The intellectual and character prerequisites for philosophers establish a foundation from which one could leap to success in many competitive and lucrative pursuits. Courage, orderliness, grace, magnificence, an exquisite memory and possession of a mind which easily grasps the "idea" of a thing; these are fine qualities indeed.[10] Philosophy demands that the best human material be developed as expertly as possible and directed towards a pursuit not simply misunderstood by the majority but held in contempt by them. The city regards men who pursue the path of philosophy as terribly strange, vicious or useless, as Adeimantus notes, echoing the criticism of Aristophanes.[11] A young man with the intellectual and character prerequisites described above must overcome considerable shame in the face of the city in not employing those gifts towards the attainment of the good things as defined by the city. In order for Glaucon to comprehend a man who does not use the ring like Gyges, he must understand a pleasure greater than those of men's liberated dreams but to do so must overcome first the shame that separates him from it.

Gyges' ring presents an image of the liberated body but chained soul. The city in speech will be the image of the liberated soul. It comes to be in part as a response to

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[9] 583a

[10] 485a-487a

[11] 487d

Glaucon's additional demand that Socrates demonstrate justice as desirable even when "stripped" of all benefits afforded to those with the reputation for justice.[12] He desires to see justice naked of rewards and punishments so that he can choose justice as a free man. He longs for a perspective outside of convention and for real liberation but can only envision tyranny with impunity as such liberation. The philosophic life is the answer to that challenge, but for Glaucon to see that life as the true liberation which he seeks, Socrates must get Glaucon to shed his own attachments to the conventions that make him unable to conceive of a life with the license of Gyges absent his licentiousness. It is Glaucon's own shame that prevents him from seeing it. If Glaucon is to see justice stripped he must approach it naked.

However, it seems that convention cannot simply be stripped away by Socrates and justice revealed in all her natural glory with one grand undressing. Socrates first responds to the challenges by constructing a city that is offensive to Glaucon. The people in this city wear clothing in the winter, but for the most part, they go naked in the summer time. In this city clothing is functional and not required by custom or law. Nothing prevents men and women from exercising and being naked together. In it there are no conventional families, yet there is sweet intercourse. Citizens are not concerned with incest, birth or beauty but only that not too many children are born. Therefore, the city of pigs, as Glaucon calls it, has two of the three challenging components addressed in Book V, which the ultimate city must posses: men and women being publicly naked together and the community of woman and children, with no very clear prohibition against incest.

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[12] He uses γυμνωτέος, related to γυμνόω – naked exercise.

Socrates has stripped this city, this allegorical man, of convention in response to Glaucon's desire to see justice naked.

However, this city is naked without liberation - a ringed Lydian - because it lacks the third component of the ultimate city, the rule of philosophers. In fact, this city of pigs lacks rulers of any kind, except perhaps its organizing principle that each citizen practices only one art, which is accepted by the citizens without question, reason, explanation or myth. They accept it as if by instinct and live almost entirely like animals. Philosophy is absent from this city because there are no real claims regarding the good and the beautiful to evaluate, no conflict between custom and nature to resolve, no *nomoi* and therefore no means by which to overcome them and to be free.

Glaucon's objection to this city supplies the tensions to it that ultimately point towards philosophy. His objection is not so much for the cities lack of relishes, which Socrates readily incorporates, but that its citizens do not live according to *nomos*.[13] With his objection he introduces *nomos* into the city, thereby clothing it, and yet by it also takes the first step towards uncovering the liberation of the philosophical life dedicated to examining the validity of *nomoi* and the conceptions of the good life presupposed by them. In Book V, Glaucon will ultimately accept a city of communal nakedness, family and the rule of philosophers. He will come a long way towards liberation from the conventional outlook that spurned his objection in Book II, and so we see that the beginning of liberation from *nomos* may be an impassioned defense of *nomos*.

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[13] 372d

If a liberal education is for liberation, The Republic should be a part of it. Its teaching that liberation from convention may begin with a dedication to and defense of convention may suggest a rather conservative approach on the part of educators, at least initially. Glaucon's love of justice pushes him away from the cynical arguments of Thrasymachus and drives him to adorn the object of his affection by the challenge he poses to Socrates. It is this very same love that spurns him to want to know the truth about justice; the quest for which is neither propelled by existential malaise nor nihilistic affirmation of all but by a singular, myopic conviction. Glaucon's desire to defend the goodness of justice encourages him to look critically at the naked nature of justice and this puts him on the path to philosophy. Perhaps a liberal education should initially be oriented towards kindling this kind of passion by making students more patriotic and more devout, and perhaps it should help them to care deeply enough about something important that they will want to know it fully. It is likely that serious interaction with the core texts that form the basis of the western tradition will foster these attachments and convictions.

Candaules, the king in Herodotus' tale, fell so in love with his wife that he wanted the private pleasure of her body to be recognized as the most blessed. He wanted another to relish in her unadorned beauty, but while he invited Gyges into her bedroom, he did not ask him to poke through the curtains. There is a limit on the quality and amount of love that can be shared between a given number of bodies, but the pleasures of philosophy offers many more opportunities for the gallant; liberal education should help produce suitable companions for this love affair. The Socratic life supplies for us the

image of what a liberal education is all about, real liberation. Reading The Republic can help our students consider whether the whole point of their education is not a career and a paycheck but the very activity in which they are presently engaged. The superiority of the philosophical life remains the most shocking and challenging teaching of The Republic, as the lives we lead, as parents, employees, students and faculty are largely un-philosophic. The life of Socrates sets a standard that only very few people have attained. Yet, the few and fleeting moments where our discipline and diligence allow us to approach that life justify the rest of it which falls short and spurns us to seek more opportunities for the transcendent pleasure of contemplation.