**Title:** Plato's Republic

**Prompt:**

**Grade:** B+

**Reflection:** Write the reflection.

In an attempt to refute the popular opinion of justice presented by Adeimantus and Glaucon and satisfy his own inquiry on the subject, Socrates proposes the idea to observe the creation of a theoretical city. In doing so, Socrates hopes to “see its justice coming to be, and its injustice as well” and “find what we are looking for more easily,” namely the justice of the human soul (*Republic* 369a). Through the natural construction of the city, division of labor comes into being along with the peculiar job of the Guardian. These Guardians, who represent the biggest change from the typical Greek *polis*, undergo an education and a way of life that together, along with their position of power, allows the city to be completely good. Once the city of complete good is established, justice and the other virtues emerge. With Socrates’ depiction of a just city laid out, we are then left to decide whether this city would actually be the best possible, given the presence of true philosopher-kings.

The charge led by Adeimantus and Glaucon against Socrates regards the apparent situation that “no one, whether in poetry or in private conversations, has adequately argued that injustice is the worst thing a soul can have in it and that justice is the greatest good” (*Republic* 366e). Instead, the defense of justice has relied on its positive consequences and not the importance of justice in and of itself. These accounts do not satisfy Socrates because they do not give a true definition of what justice is and instead only describe its effects or outcomes**.** Therefore, Socrates believes he has not truly come to define what justice is because he has not given a general account for all its forms. Socrates takes up the challenge to satisfy these complaints under the moral justification that it would be impious to not defend the sanctity of justice under such an attack. Socrates’ defense of justice begins with the construction of a city and its comparison with the soul.

In order to wholly understand Socrates’ account of the city coming into being, it is first necessary to recognize the foundations of the experiment. The reasoning behind creating the city comes from the idea that by observing justice on a large scale (the city) we will better understand it on a small scale (the soul). This “writ large” strategy relies on the critical assumption that the justice of a city will somehow be related to or provide insight on the justice of the human soul. While Socrates describes later that a “just man won’t differ at all from a just city in respect to the form of justice,” the legitimacy of the writ large strategy relies on the reader’s acceptance that the justice of the city and of man are indeed the same (*Republic* 435a). If we accept Socrates account of justice being the same for both situations, then the next step is to confront the actual production of the city.

The city originates, as Socrates claims all cities do, with the natural fact that we all require of and benefit from the assistance of and trade with neighbors. Socrates introduces the division of labor into the city under the assumption that each member will naturally be better suited for one profession over another and that each member will perform their trade best with more experience in that single field. It follows that a wide range of occupations and resources will be incorporated into the city, such as merchants and metals. Because the new city will eventually demand not just what is sufficient to sustain life but also luxury items, the special profession of the Guardian comes into being. The Guardians serve the role of the city’s soldiers as well as maintainers of law. Whereas before the introduction of luxuries the guardians were not necessary, after their implementation they became a requirement to protect the city from invaders, acquire neighboring lands, and ensure harmony within the city.

The Guardians are further divided into rulers and auxiliaries. The auxiliaries perform the traditional job of soldier and are responsible for war. The remaining Guardians are classified as the rulers of the city. Both the rulers and auxiliaries are said to require a specifically spirited and philosophical disposition as well as natural excellence in physical activities. Along with these traits, the Guardians are required to undergo a unique education. Socrates’ divides the education of the Guardians into two separate categories, namely: “physical training for bodies and music and poetry for the soul” (*Republic* 376e).

The physical training aspect of the education is the most easily explained. In order to succeed in war and in policing, the Guardians must have strength and speed. Without physical conditioning, the Guardians would altogether be unable to perform their job adequately for the city. The other component to their education is that of poetry and music. While Socrates stresses the importance of this type of education for the Guardians, he also strictly limits the type of poetry and music acceptable to teach. In the new city, the only stories allowed to be taught show the Gods solely in their good nature. This decree would in turn remove the majority of Homer and Hesiod’s works from the educational system. The justification for this extreme law comes from Socrates’ conclusion that such stories undermine the Gods and are “not pious, not advantageous to us, and not consistent with one another” (*Republic* 380c). Socrates further criticizes these stories with respect to teaching children:

The young can’t distinguish what is allegorical from what isn’t, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost care to insure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear. (*Republic* 378d)

This approach to fiction is understandable when educating young children but does not hold as they mature. In the same way that modern censorship is encouraged for children and but rejected for adults, it doesn’t follow that because a story is impious, unadvantageous, and inconsistent that it should not be allowed to the mature mind in which these allegories become entertaining and potentially enlightening. While with respect to the city allowing these stories might appear to be potentially harmful, they must be accepted as a reality of human behavior, just as we had to previously accept the inclusion of luxuries into our city. At the same time, by exposing only mature minds to the impious stories, the city as a whole would be ultimately unaffected due to the philosophical nature of its readers.

Along with the strict education that the Guardians receive, Socrates additionally proposes that they adopt a communal way of life. In other words, the Guardians must live without private property and among each other rather than the traditional parental household. By doing so, Socrates hopes to remove any potential negative influences on the Guardians from the remainder of society. Just as their education reflects a strict filtering of information, their way of life aims to remove any distractions from the life of good that the city requires of them. This type of life is justified by Socrates because it is necessary in order to preserve goodness and purity of the Guardians, and by communication, the justice of the city.

With the establishment of the Guardian and auxiliary classes, the city is said to be complete. More importantly, because of the effect that these classes impose, the city is said to be completely good. From this, Socrates derives the virtues wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. Socrates thus defines justice in the city as “the having and doing of one’s own” and the avoidance of “meddling and exchange” between classes (*Republic* 434a). In other words, the city develops its justice from each citizen’s willingness to not interfere with the work of others. According to Socrates account, these virtues owe their existence in the city to the ruling of the Guardians and philosopher-kings.

From here we can now evaluate the claim that “No human being could be a philosopher-king in Plato’s sense. But the philosopher-ruled city of the *Republic would* be the best city, if only people *could* be as its rulers are supposed to be.” The claim that no human being could be a philosopher-king in Plato’s sense is false. Plato himself seems to have thought that the philosopher-king could exist given his pragmatic description of their education and his assertion in the *Republic* that Socrates’ new city could indeed come into being. While becoming a true philosopher-king, that is, one who understands the form of the good and can apply it to political matters would indeed be very difficult, it does seem possible. On the other hand, one might point out the fact that no philosopher-king has yet to emerge throughout history. In this sense, one might conclude that while it might be *possible* for a philosopher-king to acquire leadership, their existence is so unlikely that in all practicality no human being could become a platonic philosopher-king. Regardless of which route we choose, the conclusion remains the same: no philosopher-king has existed in the past and their existence seems no more likely in the future.

This leads us to the next component of the claim: that the city created in the *Republic* would be the best possible city, if only its philosopher-kings could exist. This is also false. The way I see it, the absolute best city would be one in which every citizen could have whatever they desired without harming anyone else. While Socrates’ city may demonstrate virtue, it does not assure the happiness of all its citizens and therefore cannot be called the best possible city. While scarcity of resources and conflict of desires makes the absolute best city most likely impossible, it represents a better ideal than Plato’s city because it provides maximally for all its members. While the city brought about throughout the Republic is an improvement upon the political reality, it does not satisfy the requirements to be deemed the truly best city.