

# SPELUNKING WITH SOCRATES: A STUDY OF SOCRATIC PEDAGOGY IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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## I. Introduction

Though Plato never wrote a dialogue that explicitly asks "What is education?" few argue that he is uninterested in the subject; after all, Plato, like Socrates, was a teacher.<sup>1</sup> In his *magnum opus*, the *Republic*, Plato deals with education repeatedly. The education of the guardian class and the allegory of the cave present two landmark pedagogical passages. Yet to catch a glimpse of Socratic pedagogy, we must first sift through the intricacies of dialogue. In addition to the complexity inherent in dramatic context, it seems clear that Socrates' remarks are often steeped in irony.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we stumble upon a problem: how should we read these passages on education? Does Plato mean for us to read them genuinely or ironically?

I will argue that Plato uses the dramatic context of the *Republic* to suggest that Socrates presents the education of the guardians ironically, while reserving the allegory of the cave for a glimpse of Socrates' genuine pedagogy. The first portion of this paper will analyze various dramatic elements that indicate Socrates' ironic intent with respect to the education of the guardians. The second portion will focus on the allegory of the cave as Socrates' genuine conception of ideal *paideia* (or education).

## II. Dramatic Context and the Introduction of Irony

### A. Conventional Irony

Unfortunately, we cannot look at Plato's treatise on education to learn about his educational theory because he does not write analytical treatises. Instead, Plato employs written dialogues to inspire philosophical insight in his students. In

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light of Plato's dialogical style, the dramatic context introduces new complexities to the project of figuring out Socratic pedagogy.

While many may find Plato's drama a refreshing alternative to the dry argumentation of a treatise, it is likely that Plato's purposes are not limited to reading ease. In fact, in many ways the use of drama makes reading Plato a great deal more complex. Plato certainly makes use of arguments, yet frames them in real life contexts. Thus, the reader must consider not only the nuances of argumentation, but also the characters' abilities and motives behind presenting the argument in a particular way. So the argument should not necessarily be taken at face value; instead, such arguments must be read within the dramatic context.<sup>3</sup> The dramatic context furnishes readers with invaluable clues for interpreting the arguments presented and will provide the interpretative framework for this paper.

At the very least, the dramatic context of Plato's dialogues introduces the use of conventional irony. By conventional irony I simply mean that the implicit truth pronounced within the work is different than what is explicitly said; there is a separation between what is said and what is meant. Thus, the reader's approach in reading a dialogue differs significantly from the approach required by a treatise or an exposition. Rather than simply comprehending the words and stringing together the explicit argument put forth in a treatise, the reader of Plato's dialogues must move beyond the words and view the drama to ascertain Plato's genuine meaning. One way to determine whether something is ironic is to observe whether the events within the dialogue, that is, the drama, match up with what is said in the dialogue. If Socrates makes a comment about the way things are, do the events in the dialogue demonstrate the veracity of his proposition? In short, does the drama match the argument?

Drew Hyland proposes several valuable heuristics for identifying irony within a Platonic dialogue. First, Hyland recommends determining the plausibility of what is said. The less plausible the statement, the more likely it is ironic. Second, does the potentially ironic statement fit with other

statements in the dialogue? To the extent that the statement seems an anomaly or breaks the internal consistency of the dialogue, it is likely ironic. Third, is the statement consistent with the rest of Plato's dialogues. Is Socrates speaking in character? If Socrates says something that radically contradicts the body of his philosophy as presented in the Platonic corpus, there is good reason to believe he is speaking ironically (Hyland 331-3). While these clues are not foolproof, they do provide clues for effectively approaching Socratic irony.

### **B. Mimetic Irony**

Though conventional irony certainly plays a significant role in Socratic pedagogy, it is not the only type of irony Socrates employs. Among the most popular of the tools in Socrates' repertoire is mimetic irony. Mitchell Miller describes the process of mimetic irony in this way:

In each case the philosopher holds back from giving explicit, authoritative criticism and instead puts the interlocutor on stage before himself. This reticence and indirectness preserves for the latter the possibility of self-confrontation, of coming by his own action to recognize his ignorance and his need for philosophy. (Miller 4-5)

Rather than using his position of authority to correct the misguided notions of a student, the teacher who uses mimetic irony takes on the student's mistaken views in hopes that the student will see the mistakes in his own thinking when observing it in his teacher. Thus, the student confronts the error of his ways while the teacher just serves as a mime. But according to Miller, while Socrates' student is hopefully reaping the benefits of mimetic irony, Plato hopes that his students — the readers — will also use this opportunity for self-examination:

In each case, however, the tacit challenge to the audience is basically the same; the hearer is invited to recognize himself, actually or potentially, in the fig-

ure on stage. If the hearer can do so, then the elenctic action of the dialogue will have an internal significance for him; Socrates' examination of the interlocutor will be, for the hearer, an opportunity for self-examination. (Miller 5)

Whether the student resides inside or outside of the dialogue, mimetic irony hinges on the belief that if the student realizes his own error (as opposed to the teacher explicitly pointing it out to him), then the new philosophic notion presented thereafter will have greater "internal significance."

### III. Mimetic Irony in the Education of the Guardian Class

The education of the guardian class may very well be the most explicit account of education in the *Republic*. So it makes sense to examine this account with an eye to Socratic pedagogy. However, prudence dictates that we proceed cautiously; for as we have established, Plato's drama proves a indispensable tool when attempting to glean his genuine views.

The need for guardians arises in the fleshing out of the "feverish city" (*Republic* 372c). However, it is not altogether clear that the feverish city is what Socrates has in mind from the beginning. In fact, the entire construction of the feverish city arises out of an interruption from Glaucon: "You seem to make these men have their feast without relishes" (*Republic* 372c). It seems as though Glaucon approaches the philosophical question of developing the ideal city as a sort of fantasy. In this light, Socrates' construction seems to curiously leave out the pleasures and luxuries that are desirable in an fantastic city. Wait a minute, thinks Glaucon, if we are going to *fantasize* about an ideal city, why not include the luxuries? Socrates' response is interesting. He does not rebuke Glaucon for thinking so shallowly nor even gently redirect him toward the original conception of the ideal city. Instead, he asks, "Well, how should it be, Glaucon?" (*Republic* 372d). Perhaps, Socrates is interested in allowing Glaucon to reach his own conclusions rather than mindlessly swallowing the conclusions of his mentor. If this is indeed the

case, we can more clearly see the mimetic irony with which Socrates portrays the feverish city, or city of pigs; for it seems that mindless acceptance is just the sort of education that is encouraged in this paradigm. Socrates goes to great lengths to emphasize that censorship should be used generously to prohibit the possibility of dangerous conclusions by the guardians. Regardless, Socrates indulges Glaucon's whim — but not without first admitting that this city of pigs is not at all what he had in mind: "Now, the true city is in my opinion the one we just described — a healthy city, as it were. But, if you want to, let's look at a feverish city, too" (*Republic* 372e). But Socrates' ironic comments about the city of pigs<sup>4</sup> does not stop at its inception; the entire description of the city is rife with ironic and disparaging comments. Remarks like "[t]his healthy one (city) isn't adequate any more, but must be gorged with a bulky mass of things, which are not in cities because of necessity..." typify Socrates' attitude toward the new endeavor (*Republic* 373b). Furthermore, we can be more confident about reading the feverish city ironically in light of Socrates' ascetic attitude toward pleasures of the body. For example, in Book VI of the *Republic*, Socrates states that a philosopher "...would be concerned with the pleasure of the soul itself with respect to itself and would forsake those pleasures that come through the body — if he isn't a counterfeited but a true philosopher" (*Republic* 485d). In the *Symposium*, Socrates stands contemplatively for twenty-four hours disregarding the bodily desires for food or sleep (*Symposium* 220c-d). Again, in the *Symposium*, Socrates pertinaciously fends off the bodily desire to have sex with Alcibiades, who is among the most attractive in the land, despite Alcibiades attempts to seduce him (*Symposium* 217b-219a). Thus, it seems implausible that Socrates speaks genuinely here since the characteristics of the feverish city radically conflict with the asceticism portrayed in the rest of the Platonic corpus.

Thus, the education of the guardians in the feverish city must be read within its ironic framework. Surely teachers like Plato and Socrates desire to provoke philosophical insight in their students. Therefore, one fundamental question that

must be addressed is whether the guardians are philosophers or not. Before we pursue this issue, an important distinction must be made. Socrates' development of the guardian class changes in content and arguably in purpose. By Book V, the guardians have donned a new nature and become philosopher-kings. While this move is certainly interesting, I will not explore it fully. From this point on, any references to the guardian class will describe the pre-Book V variety. Though Socrates admits that the guardians will be "truly philosophic," there is good reason to believe that he speaks ironically (*Republic* 376a). After all, he repeatedly likens the guardians' philosophic nature to that of a dog (*Republic* 375a, e; 376a). Even his argument is steeped in irony. Socrates says of a dog,

"When it sees someone it doesn't know, it's angry, although it never had any bad experience with him. And when it sees someone it knows, it greets him warmly, even if it never had a good experience with him." (*Republic* 376a)

The guardians are similar to the dog "[i]n that it (the dog and analogously the guardians) distinguishes friendly from hostile looks by nothing other than by having learned the one and being ignorant of the other" (*Republic* 376b). Socrates' depiction of the guardians' philosophic nature describes those who embrace anything that they know and are hostile towards what they do not know. Surely, this description is of the fertile breeding-ground for just the sort of spoon-feeding and censorship that Socrates goes on to develop in the construction of the city of pigs. Socrates intentionally censors some information from the guardians and the rest of the city hoping that in their "philosophic nature," their ignorance will cultivate hostility. For example, Socrates censors corrupting instances of poetry from the guardians' ears because they are "...poetic and sweet for the many to hear, but the more poetic they are, the less should they be heard by boys and men who must be free and accustomed to fearing slavery more than death" (*Republic* 387b). Socrates fears that

the lilted words of the poets may hinder a noble conception of death — a vital characteristic for the guardian class. Thus, poetry must be “rigidly censored and controlled.”<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Socrates’ approach precludes presenting the guardian class with all the evidence, trusting them to arrive at true conclusions. Instead, Socrates wants to prohibit the possibility of undesirable<sup>6</sup> conclusions by censoring the evidence altogether. Thus, the nature of this “philosophic nature,” is not philosophic at all; the guardians are not to think but rather to mindlessly accept the education presented and resent everything unknown. However, Socrates is renowned for his *elenchus*, his knack for driving his interlocutors to *aporia* with the hope of newfound philosophical insight. If this elenctic process remains a genuine aspect of his pedagogy, it makes sense to label the education of the guardians an exercise in mimetic irony.

If indeed Socrates is employing mimetic irony as I have argued, then the education of the guardians does not assert educational ideals, but attempts to bring the interlocutor, in this case, Glaucon, to realize the mistakes of this paradigm. Once the paradigm has been refuted (i.e. the interlocutor has moved to *aporia*), then the ideal paradigm for *paideia* can be voiced to new ears.

#### IV. The Allegory of the Cave as a Genuine Representation of Ideal *Paideia*

##### A. Dramatic Context in the Allegory of the Cave

If mimetic irony is the basis for viewing the education of the guardians in an aporetic schema, what is the justification for regarding the cave as a genuine representation of ideal *paideia*? Adding to the burden of the project is the fact that the allegory of the cave is an allegory. At least the education of the guardians speaks explicitly about education. The cave, on the other hand, is an extended analogy; thus, one must argue for interpreting the subject matter of the cave to be education — or so it seems. Werner Jaeger makes an important observation that lends credence to interpreting the cave as Socrates’ genuine concept of *paideia*:

...few pay any attention to the first sentence of the seventh book, which leads into the image of the cave. There Plato actually states that it is an image of *paideia*: or, more exactly, that it represents the nature of man, and its relation to culture and "unculture," *paideia* and *apaideusia*. (Jaeger 294)

With this observation firmly in place, it is safe to say that Socrates presents this analogy as "an image of our nature in its education and want of education..." (*Republic* 514a). This explicit admission removes any doubt about the subject of the cave. However, let me be perfectly clear about what this overt admission proves. This explicit preface merely establishes that Socrates wants Glaucon (and probably the rest of us) to hear the cave as an analogy for education. That we know the subject matter of Socrates' analogy tells us nothing of whether Socrates means the allegory to be genuine or ironic. To untangle this perplexity, we must look for more clues as we move through the material of the cave.

Socrates begins the analogy by telling a story of human prisoners who are perpetually shackled in an underground cave. The large mouth of the cave moves upward toward the light so that the entire width of the cave is exposed to light. The prisoners are bound from childhood in such a manner that they cannot move their heads and are therefore forced to see only what is in front of them. With their backs to the mouth of the cave, they only see the shadows projected by the light onto the back wall.

Glaucon's response to the introduction of the analogy is important: "It's a strange image...and [strange] prisoners you're telling of" (*Republic* 515a). Note the contrast between Glaucon's response to the cave and his response to the education of the guardians. With respect to the cave, Glaucon is perplexed by the image from the very beginning. Thus, if Glaucon is going to ultimately embrace the allegory of the cave, he must first overcome his notion that the image seems so bizarre. In contrast, since Glaucon's request for luxury in the ideal state sparked the discussion of the education of the guardians, he naturally had an affinity for the idea. Remem-



ber, when Socrates uses mimetic irony, he hopes that the student will progress from a misguided affinity for a mistaken notion to *aporia*. Once reduced to *aporia*, the interlocutor can accept new philosophic insight. Though we see at least the initial stages of this progression in the education of the guardians, the allegory of the cave presents a different approach altogether. The fact that Glaucon does not readily see the analogy of the cave lends weight to the notion that Socrates means to be genuine here not only because the pattern does not follow that of mimetic irony, but also because the dramatic context portrays Glaucon as a real life example of the allegory. If the allegory of the cave is in fact meant to be read as a paradigm for ideal *paideia*, then Glaucon's response is particularly fitting. Reasoning by analogy, Socrates exposes Glaucon to the truth — the real world that is outside the cave and illumined by the sun. Just as the cave dweller who is compelled to see the real world finds it very strange at first and then gradually realizes the truth of the things he hears, so Glaucon finds Socrates' image very strange initially, then progressively begins to think the image is right.

### B. The Progressive Nature of Education

Socrates continues with the analogy supposing that these prisoners who spent their whole life in the cave would believe that the projected shadows of people walking outside the cave were not merely images of real things but the real things themselves: "...such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things" (*Republic* 515c). Since this existence is all they have known, the cave dwellers do not believe they are prisoners. But what if someone on the outside, a non-cave dweller, released a prisoner from his shackles and exposed him to the realities of life external?

"What do you suppose he'd say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what is and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass

by, were to compel the man to answer his questions about what they are? Don't you suppose he'd be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?" (*Republic* 515d)<sup>7</sup>

The initial response of the cave dweller to the real world is disbelief. The power of convention<sup>8</sup> still imprisons him as he moves outside of the cave. Even when his eyes are "'full of its (the light's) beam...[he will still] be unable to see even one of things now said to be true...at least not right away'" (*Republic* 515a). Here Socrates hits on a fundamental point of *paideia*. Light-bulbs do not flash as one realizes the good in a moment of sudden epiphany. The nature of education is that it is progressive. That is, it is a gradual process:

"Then I suppose he'd have to get accustomed, if he were going to see what's up above. At first he'd most easily make out the shadows, and after that the phantoms of the human beings and the other things in water; and, later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night — looking at the light of the stars and the moon — than by day — looking at the sun and sunlight." (*Republic* 516a-b).

If we follow the analogy, then we see that just as human eyes that have spent a lifetime in darkness must take steps to be able to see clearly in the sunlight, so too, the student who has lived a lifetime in an aphiosophical world of darkness must also take steps in order to see the good clearly.

It is also important to note the nature of the progression; the cave dweller first sees the shadows — an entity that he is accustomed to seeing. The next step of the progression is to see reflections of real things in water. The images in water are closer representations of the real thing than shadows since they have color and better-defined shape. Then the cave dweller moves to the things in the heaven and the heaven itself, a move to looking at real objects rather than mere representations of real objects. The passage also indicates that it will be easier for the cave dweller to see these real

objects at night probably because they are less complex (less hues and less intense light) than in the day when things are fully colored and defined in their perfect complexity. At this point, the cave dweller sees things as they really are.

In the same way the non-philosophical soul must also make the same sort of progression, moving from things that are less real (hazy representations of the good) to those things which are more real (sharper depictions of the good) to real things that are easiest to understand (the simple parts of the good) to things that are fully real (the good in all its splendor and glory). Thus, the ideal teacher does not begin by presenting his philosophically immature student to the good in all its majesty and complexity, but builds up to it in small steps. For example, an algebra student is taught concepts that perhaps oversimplify concepts taught in calculus. However, those simplistic concepts reflect a far more complex concept. To understand the concepts of calculus one must first understand simpler notions taught in algebra; a student who has not taken any algebra will have a very difficult time mastering calculus.

The cave poignantly illustrates that education is not only progressive in terms of the complexity and accuracy of the material studied (progressing from vague representations of the real to the real itself) but also progressive in terms of the student's attitude towards it. Recall that the cave dweller is "compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light..." (*Republic* 515c). Though free from his chains, someone must still "drag him away from there (the cave) by force" (*Republic* 515e). Initially, the student feels absolutely repulsed. He wants to remain entrenched in the comfort of ignorance, couched in convention. And surely the student is partially right; for in order to see the good, one must ascend the "rough, steep, upward way" (*Republic* 515e). Because the affinity for comfortable ignorance far outweighs the trek for costly knowledge, the teacher must "...drag him out into the light of the sun..." (*Republic* 515e). Furthermore, the student is "...distressed and annoyed at being so dragged" (*Republic* 515e-516a).<sup>9</sup> However, as the student progresses from vague representations of the good to

the good itself, he also progresses from repulsion to affinity: "What then? When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time, don't you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?" (*Republic* 516c). Thus, through the process of education, the student not only learns progressively but also loves learning progressively.

## V. Conclusion

In a very real sense, pedagogy is always an eminent issue in Plato's dialogues. Even when the subject of the dialogue is not explicitly about education, the drama which portrays Socrates' interactions with his students invariably deals with Socratic pedagogy. So it makes sense to conclude with the pedagogical progression we find in the drama of the *Republic*. I have argued that Socrates' first attempt to teach Glaucon about the nature of education employed mimetic irony. In many ways mimetic irony is the best approach; for as Miller notes, if the interlocutor can identify his misguided conceptions freely, on his own, then the epiphany will have greater "internal significance." However, what mimetic irony gains in ends, it loses in means; for mimetic irony often requires complete negation, wholesale abandonment of one's idea. If the student is unable to see the error of his ways, he will not reap the "internal significance" Socrates desires.

To Socrates' credit, when Glaucon fails to see the mimetic irony of the feverish city, he wisely changes his approach. Surely the task of interpreting an allegory is easier than the negation required by mimetic irony. Glaucon merely has to understand what the allegory symbolizes to reap the benefits of its meaning. Interestingly, the easier approach may not provide equally fruitful results. Recall that mimetic irony dictates that Socrates intentionally limit himself from an overt refutation so that the student arrives at his conclusions freely. In contrast, the cave presents a conception in which the student is compelled to see the good by force. If it is the freedom in mimetic irony that cultivates the internal significance that Miller describes, then it is safe to say that when the

student is forced to see the good, the internal significance may not be as profound.

However, all students are not created equal. While Glaucon may not reap the benefits of mimetic irony, Plato's students, the readers, may very well be changed. That is the beauty of drama, the reader is not relegated to passively receiving the arguments presented. Instead, the very act of reading the dialogue places the reader inside the dialogue. The reader is indeed an interlocutor himself. As Miller notes, "Socrates' examination of the interlocutor will be, for the hearer, an opportunity for self-examination" (Miller 5). Even if Socrates' students prove themselves dimwits, his efforts are not in vain; for through clever mode of drama, Socrates' tenure as a teacher will live as long as its readers.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Education is receiving a great deal more attention from the secondary literature. See, for example, Peter Hobson, "Is It Time for Another Look at Plato? A Contemporary Assessment of His Educational Theory," *Journal of Thought* (Fall-Winter 1993), 77-86. Also Egan Kieran, "Development of Education," *Journal of Philosophy and Education* (1984), 187-193; Richard Taft, "The Role of Compulsion in the Education of the Philosopher-King," *Auslegung* (Winter 1982), 311-332; Robert S. Brumbaugh, "Plato's Philosophy of Education: The Meno Experiment and the Republic Curriculum," *Educational Theory* (Summer 1970), 207-228.

<sup>2</sup> This is the argument of Drew Hyland, "Taking the longer road: The Irony of Plato's Republic," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (July-September 1988), 317-335.

<sup>3</sup> Some dramatic interpreters include Paul Friedlander, Charles Griswold, Drew Hyland, Jacob Klein, David Lachterman, Mitchell Miller, David Roochnik, Stanley Rosen, and Leo Strauss.

<sup>4</sup> Quite an ironic name for an ideal city — taken from 373c.

<sup>5</sup> See Alexander Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media," *Monist* (April 1988) 214-31.

<sup>6</sup> By undesirable, I mean that Socrates wants to prohibit the guardians from even considering something contrary to the ideal for fear that they may be corrupted.

<sup>7</sup> Again, this is just the sort of response we see in Gloucon when Socrates begins the analogy of the cave (515a).

<sup>8</sup> Both the convention of those in his environment and the convention that he himself has sensorily experienced to be true in his environment.

<sup>9</sup> In light of the predicament of the cave dwellers, it is clear that the teacher is absolutely necessary if philosophic insight is to occur. The cave dweller will never leave the prison on his own, only the teacher can forcibly free him from his shackles.