

MAN AND CITY IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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Although the complexity of Plato's Republic defies any brief description, I shall here attempt a sketch of a crucial link which it shows between Plato's political philosophy and his metaphysical theory. As part of this sketch, I shall try to explain the following features of the work: 1.) the fact that certain passages suggest that the city therein described is, or is like, a Platonic Form;¹ 2.) the occurrence of certain passages which emphasize that the city and its inhabitants are each to be thought of, in some important sense, as "one" or unitary; 3.) Plato's evident desire that the city be, in so far as possible, stable and unchanging; and 4.) the discussion in books II-III of the development of a city, and its place in the argument of the whole work.

It has often been thought that what Plato means to be describing in the Republic is a Form, the Form of City, on a par with the other Forms which his metaphysical theory requires.² This claim is not made quite explicitly by Plato, but it is certainly made plausible by Rep. 471c-473b and 592a-b, where it is said that what is being described might never be realized on earth, but is a paradeigma which could be approximated. This word "paradeigma" is one which Plato frequently applies to his Forms, since in general the Form of F is supposed to be a standard of which sensible Fs are copies or images.

There are, however, numerous difficulties which stand in Plato's way if he says that his city is a Form. One is that on his account, the philosopher-rulers are depicted as contemplating Forms and modelling their city after them (500d-e). But if the city is a Form, then this procedure of modelling would seem to be unnecessary. Another difficulty is that the city is depicted as needing to defend itself against other cities, and indeed as being in Greece (466d-471c). But surely there ought to be only one Form of City, and it should not be in Greece. Third, -and this is a difficulty which was observed by Aristotle in another connection - it is not clear that Plato's

theory should admit Forms of things like a city, in which there must be a good deal of activity, because it appears that Forms are supposed to be utterly changeless. Fourth, if the city is a Form, then who are its inhabitants? It seems plain that they cannot be ordinary earthly men; but it is also hard to see how they can be Forms, since once again there ought to be only one Form of Man, and it is not clear that the Form of man can be active in the way that an inhabitant of Plato's city must be; moreover Plato's theory offers no plausible third possibility.

It is conceivable that we should find a way for Plato to avoid these difficulties. It is also pertinent that the third and the fourth are problems not just with the Form of City, but also with many of the Forms which Plato seemingly wants to admit, and that one of them is noticed by Aristotle. We might say, then, that Plato simply did not notice them, at least when he wrote the Republic. But the first two difficulties cannot be disposed of so easily, and this, in conjunction with the fact that Plato neglects many chances to say unambiguously that he is describing the Form of City, makes me inclined to take a more cautious view. It is that Plato, while reluctant here to commit himself explicitly to talk of a Form of City or of a Form of Man, nevertheless thinks it legitimate to argue at certain crucial points as if he were dealing with the Form of City, and even as if each of its inhabitants were, in certain respects, properly treated as a Form of Man. I shall not, however, try to say just yet why he might think it legitimate to argue in this way, until I have set forth what I take his argument to be.

Suppose, then, that we may think of the subject of Plato's description as a Form. What can we conclude about it? First of all, Plato claims that each Form is in some important sense "one" and not "many." Just what this claim means is a difficult question, but it is clear that at least part of what he means is that the Form of F must be a single F. By contrast, a particular sensible F may in one way or another fail to be a single F. Part of what this means, in turn, must be that the Form of F must be a single F rather than being, in any way at all, many Fs. I think that this view must be con-

nected with a yet more basic claim of the theory of Forms, that the Form of F must be F without qualification, or purely F, and not in any way or respect the contrary of F. For I believe that Plato thinks that for the Form of F to be many Fs would be for it to be, in a way, non-F.⁶

Second, Plato's Forms are supposed to be unchanging. Now ignoring difficulties engendered if this means that Forms are supposed to change in no respect whatever, we may say that Plato at least means that the Form of F may not change in respect of being F, which is to say that it may not become non-F (or F in some lesser degree). It is again clear, of course, that this sort of unchangeability of a Form is directly connected with the notion that the Form of F is to be unqualifiedly F.⁷

Third, the Form of F is supposed by Plato to be the only thing which is properly so called. For example, the Form of Large is the only thing to which we can, in some sense, properly apply the word "large", while sensible large objects somehow merely borrow that term from the Form.⁸

Although what I have said needs amplification and defense, we now have the basic ideas which we need for examining Plato's view of the city. If the city is treated as a Form, then the requirement that the Forms be unitary and stable smoothly explains some central claims of the Republic, in particular Plato's emphasis on the cohesiveness and stability of his city. To take the latter first, it is one of Plato's preoccupations to ensure that his city not deviate from his plan for it. He recognizes that in the sensible world any replica of his ideal city would undergo thorough alterations, which are described schematically in Rep. VIII-IX, but the city in which he is interested is supposed to be immune to them. Secondly, what we have seen fits with the cohesiveness of his city, its tight organization. It is not to be a random scattering of people, but in some sense an organized whole. One may, of course, debate what counts as an organized whole and what does not, and whether the institutions which Plato sets up for the sake of organization would actually achieve it, but it is clear that organization and cohesiveness, along with the stability which is itself reinforced by cohesiveness,⁹ are what Plato is aiming

That Plato wants his city to be organized and stable is hardly news. What is to be noted, however, is how frequently and emphatically he makes this point by saying that the city which he is describing is to be "one city," and that it is really or genuinely a city, by contrast with communities which are not single cities and do not fully deserve the title "city". Some examples (in Shorey's translation, with minor changes):

422e-423b: "What happy innocence," said I, "to suppose that you can properly use the name 'city' of any other than the one we are constructing." "Why, what should we say?" he said. "A greater predication." said I, "must be applied to the others. For they are each one of them many cities, not a city . . . There are two at least at enmity with one another, the city of the rich and the city of the poor, and in each of these there are many For a city of this size that is really one you will not easily discover either among Greeks or barbarians -- but of those that seem so you will find many and many times the size of this.

462a-b: "Do we know any greater evil for a state than the thing that distracts [~~δυσκοι~~] it and makes it many instead of one, or a greater good than that which binds it together and makes it one?"

(On this basis Plato goes on to explain the "community of pleasures and pains" which is to characterize the group of rulers, and the consequent lack of private property for them; and he says that he wants his city to be like a human body, which all suffers together when a finger is injured.)

423b-c: "Would not this, then, be the best rule and measure for our governors of the proper size of the city . . . , that they should let it grow so long as in its growth it consents to remain a unity, but no further[?]" "Excellent," he said. "Then is not this still another injunction that we should lay upon our guardians, to keep guard in every way that the city shall not be too small, nor great only in seeming, but that it shall be a sufficient city and one?"

421b: ". . . If we are forming true guardians and keepers, . . . but the proponent of [a different sort of ideal city] is thinking of farmers and 'happy' feasters as it were in a festival and not in a city, then he would have something else in mind than a city."

Thus it is that Plato closely associates the attributes of being a genuine city and of being a single, unified city, and claims that these attributes will belong to his community alone. It seems hard to explain this idea, and the emphasis which he places on it, without supposing that he has in mind his notion that, in general, the Form of F is the only thing which is properly so called, and is also the only thing which is a single F.

Plato speaks of the inhabitants of his city in much the same way, betraying much the same preoccupations as in the case of city. Some notable examples:

443c-d: ". . . we said that if a degenerate offspring was born to the guardians he must be sent away to the other classes, and likewise if a superior to the others he must be enrolled among the guardians; and the purport of all this was that the other citizens too must be sent to the task for which their natures were fitted, one man to one work, in order that each of them fulfilling his own function may not be many men but one, and so the entire city may come to be not a multiplicity but a unity."

443c-e: "It really was . . . a sort of adumbration of justice, this principle that it was right for the cobbler by nature to cobble and occupy himself with nothing else, and the carpenter to practise carpentry, and similarly all others. But the truth of the matter was, as it seems, that justice is indeed something of this kind, yet not in regard to the doing of one's own business externally, but in regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns one's self, and the things of one's self -- it means that a man not suffer the principles in his soul to do each the work of some other and interfere and meddle with one another, but that he should dispose well of what in the true sense of the word is properly his own, and having first attained to self-mastery and beautiful order within himself, and having harmonized these three principles [i.e. the three parts of the soul]. . . , and having linked and bound all three together and made of himself a unit, one man instead of many, self-controlled and in unison, he should then and only then turn to practise . . ."

We see in these passages an explicit connection between the "unity" of a man and two other important themes of the Republic, the principle of division of labor, or of "one man, one task,"¹⁰ and the idea that for the soul to be in an optimal state is for its parts to be "harmonized" and working smoothly together as a whole. Standing in contrast with the man who performs just one task and whose soul is harmonious is the man who divides his time among different activities and is subject to psychological strife. Plato, on the other hand, stands for single-minded devotion to a single pursuit and for psychological integration, with the aim of producing men who are "one."

Now that the outline of his argument has been traced, let me return to the question of the status of these entities, the city and its inhabitants. Plato refrains, as we saw, from saying flatly that his city is a Form, and he does the same in the case of the men in it. It is conceivable that he thinks that he is dealing with Forms, but does not wish to say so until he can see how to avoid objections to that view. But even if they are not supposed to

be Forms, it is not clear that he knows how to mount his argument otherwise than as if they were. For consider: he wishes to encourage us to model our cities and ourselves on his city and its citizens. But he believes that in general the Form of F is what sensible Fs ought to be made to imitate, precisely because it is unqualifiedly and "purely" F. So even in a case in which there is no Form of F, he might well feel that sensible Fs ought to be made, as much as possible, to be like what the Form of F would be if there were one. That is, even where there is no Form of F, sensible Fs still ought to be as close as possible to being unqualifiedly F. Thus we can see how Plato might think himself justified in arguing as he does, even in the absence of certainty, or even belief, that his city and its inhabitants are Forms.

As the previous remarks indicate, Plato seems often to believe that the Form of F should be imitated, whatever "F" may represent, precisely because it is F without qualification and without admixture of the opposite of F.¹¹ On the other side, however, there are indications that he would admit such Forms as the Form of Injustice, which he presumably would not want us to emulate. I do not propose to enter into this problem here. I raise it merely to introduce the last point which I wish to make about the structure of the argument of the Republic.

Once we have seen this much of Plato's argument, we might naturally ask the following question: "Even if we grant that Plato has shown that his community is most properly called a city, what has he done to show that we should have cities at all?" For someone might well say, after reading the Republic, "If that is what a city is, then it would be preferable not to have one."¹²

Plato would claim, I think, that he has an answer to this objection. Moreover once the objection is raised, it becomes possible to understand what is otherwise obscure, namely the place in his overall argument of the sketch of the development of the city in Rep. II-III. The point of his sketch is to try to show that for human beings there is no alternative to living in a city, since

cities are in some sense the "natural" form of community for any human beings who are to be able to live well. Cities -- so he is arguing -- arise "naturally" and are the sort of grouping into which all men (or all but a very few), given their normal needs, must inevitably gather. But once he has argued that we must, in some sense, have cities, he feels entitled to go on (in books IVff.) to argue that his city, since it is in his view "genuinely" a city, is something for which we ought to strive.¹³

Putting aside exegetical piety, let me observe that Plato's argument will not do. One may object, as I have already said, to his standards of unity, both for a city and for a man, and on this ground to the recommendations which he makes. But aside from this objection there is another protest to make, not only to his argument but also to others of its type which have followed it. (I would count among these Aristotle's argument for his views about what is the best human life.¹⁴) It is not legitimate to argue that we need Fs, to observe that a thing may be more or less an F, and to conclude that we must therefore need the most F thing possible. What must be shown in addition, of course, is that the more one has of whatever it is that makes one thing more F than another, the better off one is. So even if we admit (as I would not), e.g., that the more cohesive a city is, the more it is a city, and also that we need cities, it would still not follow that we need the most cohesive city possible, unless we can also show independently that greater cohesiveness is always desirable. If Tokyo is less cohesive, say, than Plato's republic, that is not yet any reason to prefer the latter.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Form" here renders "eidos", while "city" is the usual makeshift for "polis".
2. This seems to be the view of, e.g., Paul Friedlaender, Plato, trans. H. Meyerhoff (Princeton, 1969), vol. III, pp. 127-128, 137, and of Constantin Ritter, The Essence of Plato's Philosophy, trans. A. Alles (London, 1933), pp. 332-333.
3. For Aristotle's remarks, see the treatment by G. E. L. Owen, "Dialectic and Eristic in the Treatment of the Forms," Owen, ed., Aristotle on Dialectic: The Topics (Oxford, 1968), pp. 116-118.

4. This is not to deny that elsewhere he seems to be committed to saying that there is a Form of Man and a Form of City (indeed, Rep. X, 596a is a case in point), but only that he does not make any explicit use of such a view in the present context.
5. There are of course difficulties with what Plato wants to say here, especially if he wants to go further and say that the Form of F may not be many of anything; and there are problems in any case if he wants to admit Forms corresponding to mass terms.
6. As we shall see, Rep. 422esqq. makes this connection pretty clear, but a full discussion of the issue is impossible here.
7. See G. E. L. Owen, "A Proof in the Peri Ideon," Journal of Hellenic Studies, LXXVII (1957), Pt. 1, 103-111, and in R. E. Allen, ed., Studies in Plato's Metaphysics (New York, 1965), pp. 293-312; of the latter see esp. pp. 306-308.
8. See esp. Phaedo 102b-c, 103b-c; by the time of the Cratylus, Plato has begun to have his doubts about this view.
9. Plato explicitly connects unity and stability at Phaedo 78c.
10. See Shorey's translation of the Republic, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1937), vol I, p. 328, n. d.
11. It is this fact which has led some to suspect that he confuses the notion of something's being good with the notion of something's being "good of its kind," or of fulfilling the specification of a kind to the highest degree. See, e.g., R. M. Hare, "Plato and the Mathematicians," R. Bambrough, ed., New Essays on Plato and Aristotle (New York, 1965), pp. 35-37.
12. If Plato believes that there are Forms only of desirable things, so to speak, then this is to question whether there is a Form of City; if he believes that there are Forms of both desirable and undesirable things, then it is to question the idea that the Form of City is of the former sort.
13. It should be remarked in passing that the Laws contains similar allusions to the need for unity in a city (e.g., at 715 and 832), though in a different sort of context.
14. For Aristotle's strategy is very roughly, to say what sort of thing is properly thought to be a man, and to suppose that it is these peculiarly human features which should be maximized. Since Aristotle did not believe in Forms (in Plato's sense), additional strength is given to the point made earlier, that Plato's strategy does not depend on the supposition that there is a Form of City.