

**THAT POLITICS IS NOBODY'S BUSINESS:  
A Note on the Problem of Education in Plato's *Republic***

The Banquet Address,  
delivered at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute  
July, 1979  
Western Region Summer School on "Education"  
by  
W. B. Allen

© W. B. Allen 1979

If circumstances lead me, I will find  
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed  
Within the center.  
*Hamlet*, II, ii, 155

The defect of education in Plato's *Republic* is not that it presents politics and philosophy as extreme opposites. It is inevitable that matters will appear in this way when one examines only the end of philosophy and the origins of politics. Just as surely will politics and philosophy or education seem hardly distinguished at all when one consults the origins of philosophy and the ends of politics. The defect of Plato's *Republic* is rather that it segregates the political things and the human things. It is the defect which claims that there is no guidance for the human things in politics, to paraphrase a noted critic.

These brief remarks will be scarce comprehensible for many of you, for which I apologize. I lack capacity to make them more apparent. To others of you it will seem that I speak knowing too little. To you I make the apology that I appreciate your attentive patience as undue esteem. And you will be the less surprised at my innocence, perhaps, as you reflect on my daring novelty in delivering an address on the subject of a Platonic dialogue. Your surprise is due on account of my own heretofore studied refusal to teach Plato. To that determination I have held myself until this moment. Would that I could claim wisdom as justification for this, my momentary departure. Nevertheless, it ought to be acceptable that I will speak of a subject about which I know next to nothing insofar as I make no further claim than to append a footnote to Plato's *Republic*. This procedure does not require to be justified by my conviction that, to many classical masterworks, there are perhaps only footnotes left to be written. It should suffice that this procedure is fit for us who dare not yet teach Plato.

The passage in Plato's *Republic* to which I would add a note reads as follows:

By chance Odysseus' soul came choosing, having drawn its lot last of all and, in mind of its former toils, having recovered from love of honor, it went about for a long time seeking a life of a private man who was no busybody ... It said when it saw this life that it would have done the same thing even if it had drawn the first lot; and it was delighted to choose it. [620c]

This passage is at the very end of Plato's *Republic*. It is a surprise that the departed soul which should seek to return to the realm of mortals as a private man belongs to that very Odysseus whom the shade of Achilles greeted as the "ingenious son of Laertes, Odysseus of the seal of Zeus, daring unhappy soul! Now will you find some madder adventure to cap this coming down alive to Hades among the silly dead, the worn-out mockeries of men."<sup>1</sup> Yes, even the lover of mad adventures and enormous glories chooses no longer to pine for distinction among men.

This revolution surprises the reader further because of its apparent recanting of the praise of justice in the very heart of the *Republic*. It was, after all, by means of the search for justice, finally defined as minding one's own business, that the reader was charmed by that politicalism, which is the foundation of justice. In the dialogue it became necessary to prescribe a complete education as a pre-condition of realizing justice. The education in this most famous of books on education, if Rousseau is to be believed, stemmed entirely from the necessity of rendering some human souls, the best, sufficiently capable of and interested in managing and protecting the public affairs of a just city—a city which could not come to be without such education.

Still more precisely, at the heart of Plato's *Republic* is an education whose apparent work is to prepare human souls for the work of politics. This explains the surprise of the final recanting in the form of Odysseus' rejection of the public life. His choice to mind his own business or not to be a busybody emphasizes the two forms of "minding one's own business." In the one case, one pursues a private life. In the other case, one pursues a public life. But which, if either, is the recommendation of Plato's *Republic*?

Abstracting from the Socratic question whether it is the work of education to form souls whose work [function] is politics, I focus only on the Platonic question of whether Odysseus' choice suggests radical doubt about the premise that politics is, indeed, somebody's work or business. In these terms, I must remind you that Odysseus' soul's being cured of its former political ambition and preferring a private life is not an isolated occurrence in the book. At the very start of the discussion of ruling or politics, proper [347c-d], Socrates himself maintains that no decent man would wish to rule apart from the necessity of avoiding mis-rule by the vicious. Thus, in a supposed city of good men, there would be a fight over not ruling. The question that goes unasked, and to which Odysseus' soul seems to respond, is, why should ruling and being ruled fall to the lot even of the entirely decent? To be precise, why should politics be anybody's business in the city of the decent?

Here is where my footnote begins. For, though we may not be able to explain why Socrates raises this question so frequently as he does, we can certainly inquire why Plato has him to do so in the very manner that he does. We must make reference to the many passages in which this thematic question is raised in Plato's *Republic*. Not only may the book well be sub-titled, "about justice," which means "about minding one's own business," but there is evidence that one must explain the Odysseus passage in light of its relationship to the changing senses of that phrase throughout the book. One should therefore make reference to the following passages, at a minimum:

At 369d10-370b Socrates introduces the necessity of a division of labor at the origin of cities or politics. This division of labor permits man, in common, to supply the deficiencies that

result from individuals not being self-sufficient [369b5]. For any one man will perform one of the tasks necessary to sustain human life far better than any man will perform all of them. Thus men associate with one another to provide all that they need, although it is properly the business of each to do all that he needs. [The main question in the end, of course, will be, can this division of labor ever get beyond the provision of material needs in any fundamental sense?] “Nature distinguishing [men] one from another in the business of work,” it is nothing strange [*atopon*] that it would be unreasonable for each “to do himself his own thing for himself.” This initial passage introduced both senses of what it means to mind one’s own, business, and it defends the notion that the business which is most any man’s business is providing for a life in common with others.<sup>2</sup>

From the definition of “minding one’s own business” comes the maxim, “one man, one job” [394e]. At 398a-b the maxim is applied as a criterion for judging decent, lawful poetry or music. The “universal imitator” is banned from the city and from the initial step in the education of the city’s most specialized citizens, the guardians. A poet whose great wisdom permits him to imitate all the human practices [*chremata*] is out of place in that city which is based on the wisdom of singular practices. This may seem harsh to those who take the statesman to be the perfect busybody: someone who can run everybody else’s business well. So it must be added that this busybody’s showing up in Plato’s *Republic* is due entirely to the fact that Socrates has to admit that the busybody may possess wisdom. Socrates would honor such a one, but Socrates’ city would be embarrassed by him.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of this theoretical city is justice. And our next reference, 433a, reveals that this justice is nothing other than our initial formulation of what it means to mind one’s own business [or at least some form of that formulation]. The universal imitator is banned for the sake of justice. But here the injunction, “don’t be a busybody,” quite distinctly means that one must practice no business other than that “for which his nature would be naturally most prepared.” No one must pursue another man’s craft, even for his own purposes, if justice were done. To be precise, in regard to the practices necessary to sustain human life, each man’s business is in the hands of others as well as his own. To interfere with those other persons is to be a busybody, Odysseus to the contrary for the moment notwithstanding. This situation comes about from the founding of a city, from the introduction of politics.<sup>4</sup> It remains to be seen whether politics, arranging everyone’s business, is itself anyone’s business. But we may digress long enough to contrast this perplexity with Plato’s confession of youthful confidence in his Seventh Letter. “I had thought,” said he, “if I should quickly become master of myself I would go straightway into the business of the city—the business of politics.”<sup>5</sup>

At 463e Socrates draws the necessary conclusion from the definition of justice:

... in this [best] city more than any other, when someone is doing well or badly, they [citizens] will utter in accord the phrase that we used just now, ‘my own’ business is doing well or badly.<sup>6</sup>

Thus alone is the business of each also the business of all [462-463]. But in addition to common affairs, there follows a “community of pleasures and pains,” [464a] which is usually remembered in the form of the “community of wives and children.” It was this, the demand that the differing

natures with which we began come to associate in a community of endeavor, that created the greatest tension in Plato's *Republic*. It was for the sake of alleviating this tension that the chief work of this city came to be what might be called higher education. In addition to music and gymnastic, there had to follow arithmetic, the several geometries, astronomy, and, ultimately, dialectics. *When the chief work of Socrates' city became higher education, the differences of nature with which citizens were born became much more manifest through cultivation.* At that point it begins to seem that this theoretical city has the work of making its best citizens uninterested in the business of its other citizens. We will see why shortly.

Our next reference is to 494b4-d, followed by references at 526d, 556e, and 586e. These passages are more closely related to one another than the prior passages. Every one has to do with the analogy between the individual soul and the city and the discovery that it is necessary to inquire into the work of the soul quite apart from the necessities of politics.<sup>7</sup> At 494b4-d Socrates discovers the best soul in the city, the philosophic soul, in the form of that much sought-after citizen who, from his youth even, is implored to take over the affairs of his "kinsman and fellow citizens."<sup>8</sup> That soul, if it is not to become "mindlessly full of pretensions and empty conceits," must be turned towards its own business. It is at 526d that the proper work of that soul [*qua* human soul, which is *qua* capable soul] is identified. Its work is to judge what *is*. Departing from the ambiguities of sense perception and opinion, it can first discover that something is and next discover the necessity to inquire into what is [524a-526]. That which is is the idea of the good. The philosophic soul requires an education which turns it in that direction. Its work becomes the pursuit of the idea of the good.<sup>9</sup>

At 556e the badly ordered soul is likened to a "sickly city." Just as the "sickly city" is one in which the several parts do not mind their own business, so too is the frame of a badly ordered soul a house divided against itself. As in the virtuous city it is the virtue of differing natures, which permits order to prevail, so too stands the soul. But in the city the orderly end envisioned is that arrangement of virtue which is the foundation of justice. Of the four virtues, wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice, the first three are present in the best city in different forms. In short, as each of the three virtues is in the souls of the guardians who prevail in and protect this city, so too is that virtue in the city. But *moderation* is also in the souls of the ruled—the bronze-souled as it were—insofar as they have the same right opinion about who should rule. *Moderation is that accord of the worse and better elements, which is affected by means of the wisdom and courage of the best.* Justice, as a result of this accord, is the consequent minding one's own business which pervades the city [427e-433].<sup>10</sup>

The individual soul when healthy will manifest this same orderliness, subordinating the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul to the calculative or rational part. Faction or discord, in either the city or the soul, arises when differing parts of the soul or different persons lay claim to the same thing at the same time but in different ways [or, when they are pained and joyed at the same time by the same thing].<sup>11</sup> As we know, the resolution of such conflicts of interest in a city brings peace and friendliness. What does it bring to the soul? It brings the rational and orderly pursuit of the truest pleasure.<sup>12</sup> The truest pleasures, however, are pleasures which are not connected with the ambiguous and changeable evidence of human sense perceptions; while the work of politics, as we recall, centered on providing those very things dependent on sense perceptions. The work of the healthy soul is a step beyond, away from, the work of politics. [This dialogue

seems to admit some difference between “managing, ruling, and deliberation,” on the one hand and “living,” on the other hand as the work of the soul. 353d-e]

The truest pleasure has to do with that care of the soul which is essential to being human as such—a participating in truth and being [585d]. While the lesser pleasures, corresponding with the lesser parts of the soul, have to do with the changeable things, matters of opinion, and are always mixed with pains, being mere phantoms or shadow pleasures for man *qua* man [586c]. Politics, insofar as it involves ruling the “lesser parts” of the city [which always means the greater part of the citizens] and the lesser parts of the soul, is not properly the work of a human being, except as the instrumentality by which the truer pleasures may be made possible. Seriously to rule and be ruled by the lesser concerns, what is one's own rather than what *is*, is in opposition to philosophy. Being busy about the lesser things is not the work of man *qua* man. Since only the few are capable of participating in what is, the vast many can only live in a human sense as busybodies [busying themselves about the lesser things, or, seeking the mastery of anything *but* themselves].<sup>13</sup>

Politics imposes limits to this busybodiness but cannot bring men *qua* men to mind their own business. This is what creates a conflict of interest for the best, who would seek true pleasure but cannot ignore the conditions of disease about them. The attention this sort would pay to disease is but so much of an obstacle to their own turning toward the good. Of man, “the most wretched is he who must govern others, not having governed himself” [579c]. Yet, they too seem at least pained if not wretched whose self-mastery is won only at the cost of having thence to rule others. That seems to be the meaning of Odysseus' choice. The two forms of minding one's own business, self-government or self-mastery, on the one hand, and mastery of others or politics on the other hand, while perhaps corollaries in nature, appear to be opposed in fact. Odysseus at least turned from the highest mastery of men [“No man of the Achaeans deserved so greatly or laboured so greatly as great Odysseus laboured and endured,” *Odyssey*, Bk. 11] to mastery of himself [“not being a busybody”], not apparently to satisfy Telemachus' prayer:

Would that I had been the child of some ordinary parent whom old age had overtaken in the quiet course of nature on his estate! [*Odyssey*, Bk. 1]

but rather as if the two were incompatible and the youthful Plato but a utopian dreamer to imagine that self-government would give rise to the ability to govern others. By these standards not only are they wretched who must rule others while not having mastered themselves. So too are they wretched whose self-governing requires governing others. They are driven by contradictory impulses, the ruler being wrung from the man:

. . .on his choice  
depends the safety and health of this whole state;  
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed  
Unto the voice and yielding of that body  
Whereof he is the head. [*Hamlet*, 1, iii, 20]

When most human beings are thought incapable of self-government in any natural or meaningful sense this presents a radically pessimistic view of human well-being. What cannot bring a man to

mind his own business is, itself, not a proper business for the best human beings. Hence, politics is nobody's business, in a human sense.

The next citation would be that Odysseus passage itself, if this were more than a footnote. We have now seen its meaning. Yet, the story is not complete. For not only do there remain other relevant passages, such as 340a, but one must note the peculiar significance of the passages already cited. These were the minimum necessary to cite not only on account of their direct reference to the theme of the book but also because of their happenstance numerical significance. That is, as chance or Plato would have it, each of the passages you heard me cite [370, 400, 433, 463, 494, 526, 556, 586, 620] lies removed from its nearest neighbor to either side by an average of thirty Stephanus pages. Besides providing ten natural divisions of the entire work, the regularity and orderliness of this parade of passages apparently wishes to point the reader to the very question we have considered, the theme of Plato's *Republic*. This regularly recurring theme recurs irregularly, directly and obliquely, throughout the dialogue. We may briefly consult some of those other passages in order to complete this footnote.

It may be said in beginning that nothing is so critical in considering the tensions around justice as the role of education. For if it were truly the work of education to make men just, to make them bearers of decency, and to make them politically competent, there could be no room for a conflict of interest between the best human beings and human beings in general. Just as it is "necessarily by means of a bad soul that [one] rules and manages badly; [and that] by means of a good soul all these things are done well" [353e5], one can eliminate all the tensions between politics and philosophy merely by discovering that the work of a good soul is ruling and managing. Surely the work of education is to preserve souls in goodness. But we needn't question whether justice, decency, and political skill require goodness of soul in order to see that they might not constitute the good of a soul. If they do not, the kind of association to which they give rise will be better called an association in goodness than an association of the good, reserving that last for what is truly best for human beings. In the Seventh Letter, again, Plato sees education as producing an association of the good, perhaps instead of an association in goodness [334c; cf. *Republic*, 351c-352d5]. The objective of politics, association in justice and decency, would thus be distinct from the objective of education.

According to Plutarch, the very most that Plato expected in the way of the ability of education to influence the capacities of men in general for self-government would appear in the form of a ruler, by chance touched by philosophy and becoming whole and thence bringing justice and decency to his subjects. But he, Plato, did not imagine that it was in any genuine sense his business to seek this end.

Plato, as he tells us himself, *out of shame* [of which, not even Achilles had a share!] more than any other feeling, lest it should seem that he was all mere theory, and that of his own good will he would never venture into action, hoping withal, that if he could work a cure upon one man, the head and guide of the rest, he might remedy the distempers of the whole island of Sicily, yielded to their requests. [*Life of Dion*]

These are sufficiently high aims for education. But the standards we may deduce lead in another direction. The ruler *qua* ruler or statesman has the work of minding the business of others. Yet, as a human being his work is no more the work of politics than politics is the work of the philosopher by whom the ruler may be touched.

In short, the definition of justice as minding one's own business directly effects the separation of the business of education from the business of politics. Yet, both education and politics claim to bring men to mind their own business. In Plato's *Republic*, the very problem is presented, and the tone of the dialogue reinforces this, through unprecedented examples of busy-bodiness. The dialogue opens with Socrates and Glaucon being compelled by others to abandon their own affairs and see to the affairs of their arresters. The dialogue which ensues is attended by the arresters becoming arrested by argument and failing to attend to their own affairs, as well as the affairs of others, in the form of a promised but undelivered banquet. And at key points of the dialogue the interlocutors are consistently interrupted by someone butting in to answer for someone else or to present a rival question before the conversation already underway can be suitably completed. In short, the dialogue takes place amidst egregious violations of justice, violations of the maxim that one should mind his own business, simply understood.

340a is the first application of the sense of the expression, "minding one's own business," in the form of a regard for one's proper interest. The argument followed the initial refutation of Thrasymachus' position that justice is the political advantage of the stronger. The likelihood of human error turned justice to the ruler's disadvantage when his political advantage was understood as obedience by the ruled. At that point Polemarchus interrupted to speak the concession which Thrasymachus grudgingly withheld. Polemarchus was not minding his own business, which he did do when earlier he interrupted his father's exchange with Socrates [331d]. In the latter case he only inherited his rightful portion in taking over from his father. But the fact is that his interruptions, once minding his business [saving his own things], again not minding his business [save as being charmed by truth], provide a complete characterization of the entire purpose of the dialogue, which is to provide a means of distinguishing these apparently identical but substantially different actions. [It is crucial to note that the motivation of the second interruption could also have been present at the first, while the reverse is not true.]

The simple political action is—from the very beginning—qualified by Socrates as insufficient. "...no one willingly chooses to rule and get mixed up in straightening out other peoples troubles" [346e]. Socrates' conclusion is more radical than the formulation in Ecclesiastes: "there is a time wherein one man ruleth another to his own hurt." The many forms by which Socrates describes political action in his speculative ascent toward the just city figuratively depict the difficulties human intellect confronts in trying to grasp the truth about politics. What one seizes in the form of a hairy lion becomes, under one's hands, a dragon or some leopard or mighty boar. And what one had imagined as some great strong beast,<sup>14</sup> transforms itself into a mere film of water. One pursues it even to the highest branches of knowledge. Even so does Socrates gain the authority to liken political rule to the rule of other arts. It is the search for the business of this most artful of arts which brings forth both the just city and the quest for the human business.

Thus, political action has more to do with the medicine of Asclepius than with protecting citizens one from another. To make rulers and ruled believe that the rulers guard over friends in the city to assure that they are unable to harm one another requires a noble lie [414b]. For what rulers properly seek is to promote health and banish sickness, expecting that “all men obedient to good laws,” all healthy men, live minding their own business [406c-e]. Dependence on the lie may obscure the fundamental color of political action, but it reveals the ruler's color. The lie is necessary in order to make his “business” his consistent preference of the city to his own [415b; cf. also 413c-d].

... the God commands the rulers first and foremost to be of nothing such good guardians and to keep over nothing so careful a watch as the children ... And if a child of *theirs* should be born with an admixture of bronze or iron [that is, inferiority], by no manner of means are they to take pity on it, but shall assign the proper value to its nature and thrust it out among the craftsmen or farmers.

The first, great wave of communism—taking away the private affairs of the guardians—followed this revelation [416d]. The conclusion was inescapable: they alone *can* mind the business of others by means of minding their own business who have no business of their own to mind!

A slight digression may clarify the problem. The awakening of the intellect to what is was based on the assumption that virtually any human being would respond to the perplexity of sensible middles with doubt. [If you extend and look upon the three last fingers of your hand you will immediately perceive in the middle finger the problem of sensible middles: at one and the same time the middle of these fingers is shorter and longer.] The same confusion of appearance is present to the intellect in arithmetic. The foundation of arithmetic is the one, the unit. Whatever is one is so by virtue of not being many. Any multiple is as such comprised of units. Now this just city in which each does the one thing fit for himself is said to become not many but one in virtue of its harmony. But even the meanest intellect can see that what is one, the just city, cannot be composed of elements which themselves are each one. If each citizen minds his own business, he can do so only to the extent that his business is everyone's business when the city is truly one [423dl-5].

To return: the laws prescribed by Socrates established the true city which is one entire. Thus, none of those laws ordinary mortals like ourselves would expect to find were at all necessary. Private contracts, market affairs, libels, insults, legal complaints, establishment of judges and taxes, commercial and harbor regulations—all such things the many citizens in the one city can find simply by minding their own business. Their fundamental laws, then, were laws of education. These are true gentlemen, not the sickly sort who “spend their lives continually setting down such rules and correcting them.” The sickly sort merely eke out life, rather than choosing either to be cured [thence useful] or to die. True gentlemen know how to comport themselves and handle their business without needing someone else to make their business his business. The latter is a defect, a form of licentiousness which is right for no one. Good doctors, the Asclepiads, “statesmanlike doctors,” would refuse treatment to such patients [425c5-426a; cf. 405a-410a, esp.407e]. The “true lawgiver” has no concern for that kind of business.<sup>15</sup> Thus, after he has founded a city, the one city, nothing remains [for “us”] but to listen as the gods establish the rites of worship. That is a thing to be entrusted to no human whatever, “if we are intelli-

gent" [427b]. This queer city, with no politics and only pure religion is the city to which we must turn to search for justice and injustice, according to Socrates.

We do not require to continue a pain-staking account of these superficial elements of Plato's *Republic*. Suffice to say, Socrates finds in the one city the object of his search, justice and injustice. Further, no one but he insists on drawing out the explicit discussion of whether to do justice is profitable. Glaucon protested this gratuitous questioning of the victory already achieved in speech. But Socrates, launching the radical questioning of the entire project, assures Glaucon that it is necessary to consider these matters explicitly now that we know how to judge. Polemarchus interrupts again via Adeimantus to point out that the "community of wives and children" is not a minor condition of the one city's harmony. This launched that new phase of the dialogue, discussion of the philosophic soul, which we have already considered [434e-444e].

Socrates finally discovered justice in the definition with which the conversation had begun. By looking off somewhere else, he and his interlocutors had made it difficult to see. By turning away from justice in the city to justice in the individual, Socrates again turned from what was in his hands to look far off somewhere else. He knew that he risked losing sight of justice, minding one's own business, once again. Fittingly, he appealed to the comic poets not to mind their own business but to try to be serious in going through this "rough part of the law" [452e5]. He realized that he was going to admit that his guardians were least of all men interested in minding other people's business [485-486]. He knew that the argument lay open to the charge of Adeimantus:

... how can it be good [as opposed to true] to say that the cities will have no rest from evils before the philosophers whom we agree to be useless to the cities, rule in them? [487e]

Starting from 496c5 and the idea of the "little band" of philosophic men who have tasted true pleasure and continuing through 592b, Socrates explains how this paradox can be good, as well as true.

In the first place, no one who minds the business of ordinary cities does anything healthy, while each one of this little band "keeps quiet and minds his own business..." [496c5]. Nevertheless, the little band could become interested in human affairs under certain conditions, if only their souls were not ceaselessly striving to be above [517d]. The great difficulty stems from the fact that the soul's labor is not "shared in common with the body" [535b]. So it takes a modicum of necessity, compulsion [like the body's own compulsion, which limits the soul's flights of fancy], to bring this little band to the work of "ordering city, private men, and themselves."

Even under this condition, however, each is so little able to come to terms that the great part of his time still must be spent in philosophizing, and only by brief turns does he "drudge in politics" [540b]. Still, this best of possible arrangements is likely to fail, since members of this little band have so little interest in the success of the scheme [549e-550a, as degenerated example].

The conclusion is inescapable: though we may learn of “patterns stored up in heaven” for political action, by slicing through politics’ protean ambiguities with persistent appeals to nature or the proper function of men, no man of this little band will “be willing to mind the political things” [591e-592b]. That would not disturb us, save that, if we arrive to this point thoughtfully, it becomes perfectly manifest that this business, politics, on these grounds seems to be left for no one. Pray as we may:

. . . give me that man  
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of hearts,  
As I do thee. *Hamlet*, III, ii, 70.

We would lack the principle by which to pursue such giants to any but private results. The choices that humans face too strongly resemble the choices of souls in Hades putting on a new mortality. These learn that “virtue is without a master; as one honors or dishonors her, he will have more or less of her” [617e]. Throughout the many passages I have indicated, insofar as I do not treat the dialogue seriously, I am writing rather of something Plato had done than something Socrates has concluded. It is not Plato’s teaching that a theoretical model can inform political practice. Rather is it that there is an impassable gulf dividing genuinely theoretical persons and the necessarily spurious practitioners of politics. The dialogue regularly rises toward and falls away from some one or other expression of what it means to mind one’s own business. That is Plato’s work. One might easily imagine how to outline this dialogue [in Greek] in terms of the great variety of questions which emerge from the differing senses and applications of minding one’s own business. My sole concern has been the question, what does it mean to make politics one’s business? This is the most superficial of the superficial considerations involved in Plato’s *Republic*. Politics is that realm of things which we, as human beings, must care for although no good come out of it. In spite of the persistence of the business of politics, we may know that our affairs lie elsewhere though we know not where. As Pindar said,

But somehow, either by intellect or by nature, we altogether approach the immortals, although not knowing what sort of course our fate has ordained that we run.  
VI *Nemean Ode*.

To speak-loosely, the old view is that politics is nobody’s business, because politics is the work of our ignorance.<sup>16</sup> This is some distance from, though not unrelated to, Lincoln’s view of politics as “the eternal struggle between right and wrong throughout the world.”

When the full weight of the foregoing reflections is allowed, it is conceivable that Odysseus’ recanting at the end of Plato’s *Republic* is a radical questioning of the supposition that politics either is or is instrumental to the true human end. This is truly a Platonic thought, that the return of Odysseus means that politics is nobody’s business. But it is a platonic thought which cannot escape the Socratic reflection that, after all, Odysseus’ departed soul does again choose to submit itself to the rule of necessity in the form of a human being in preference to all other forms. [Hence, it joins in the apparent choice of Achilles’ soul, but departs from the choices of Agamemnon and Telamonian Aias.]

If this were more than a footnote we would probably have to conclude with a section emphasizing that Socrates' apparent conclusion is probably wrong. It is doubtful whether any human being can be taught the end of philosophy [turned around from the shadows to the light but also led up all the way to the true light which imparts its lustre to objects below]. While almost any human being can be turned toward the good, the few who can thence ascend to the good itself apparently scale that summit by virtue of their own efforts, rather drawn by their love than led by any lover or teacher. The significance of this reflection lies rather in its meaning for politics than in its meaning for philosophy. By suggesting that education can bring men to no more than the beginning of philosophy it equally, simultaneously, suggests that the work of education is to disclose to men the end of politics.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *Odyssey*, Bk, XI. Might Plato too have found shocking this shock from the *kaloskagathos* who "had destroyed pity" and in whom there was not "any shame"? Cf. *Iliad*, XXIV, 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Republic*, 369d10-370b:

"The most necessitous city would be made of four or five men ... Now, what about this? Must each one of them put his work at the disposition of all in common—for example, must the farmer, one man, provide food for four and spend four times as much time and labor in the provision of food and then give it in common to the others; or must he neglect them and produce a fourth part of the food in a fourth part of the time and use the other three parts for the provision of a house, clothing, and shoes, not taking the trouble to share in common with others, but to do himself his own thing for himself." And Adeimantus said, "Perhaps, Socrates, the former is easier than the latter." "It wouldn't be strange, by Zeus," I said. "I myself also had the thought when you spoke that, in the first place, each of us certainly does not grow entirely like to each but nature distinguishes one from another in matter of work. Isn't that your opinion?" Here, as throughout this essay, I've consulted the Bloom translation (Basic Books, 1968) and the Grube translation (Hackett Publishing, 1974). The Bloom translation is the basis of all citations, subject to emendation based on the text of John Burnet (Oxford, 1902).

<sup>3</sup> *Republic*, 398a-b:

"Now, as it seems, if a man who is able by wisdom [craft] to become every sort of thing and to imitate all things should come to our city wishing to make a display of himself and his poems, we would fall on our knees before him as a man sacred, wonderful and pleasing; but we would say that there is no such man among us in the city, nor is it lawful for such a man to be born there. We would send him to another city, with his head soaked in myrrh and crowned with wool, while we ourselves would use a more austere and less pleasing poet and teller of tales for the sake of our benefit, one who would imitate the style of the decent man and would say what he says in those models we set down as laws at the beginning, when we undertook to educate the soldiers [guardians]."

<sup>4</sup> *Republic*, 433a:

"Listen whether after all I make any sense," I said. "That which it is necessary to do for the sake of the whole [as] we set it down from the beginning, when we were founding the city, this is justice, as it seems to me, or at least some form [*eidos*] of this. Surely we set down and often said, if you remember, that it would be necessary that each one practice in one of the functions related to the city, in that for which his nature would be naturally best prepared?" "Yes, we have." "And further, that justice is doing one's own things and not being a busybody, this we have both heard from many others and have often said ourselves... Well then, my friend .... this—the practice of minding one's own business—when it comes into being in a certain way, is probably justice..."

<sup>5</sup> Plato, "Seventh Letter" [R. G. Bury, tr.], Loeb Library edition (London: William Heinemann, 1966), 324c.

<sup>6</sup> *Republic*, 464a:

"... close on the conviction expressed in this phrase follows a community of pleasures and pains."

<sup>7</sup> There are some things, *Republic*, 524a-526, which compel the soul, as it were, to resolve doubts about matters of sense perception. The ambiguity of all sensible middles discloses the proper work of the soul in judging what is. The same work is the work required of the soul in arithmetic [what is the unit?] and in geometry. These are useful, first for war and, second for "making out the good," the business of the soul.

<sup>8</sup> *Republic*, 494b4--d:

"Will not such a one be first in every way among the children, right from the start, especially if his body were matched to his soul in nature?" "Of course he will," he said. "Then I suppose kinsman and fellow citizens will surely want to make use of him, when he is older, for their own business ... They will, therefore, lie at his feet begging and honoring him, taking possession of and flattering beforehand the power that is going to be his." "At least," he said, "that's what usually happens." "What do you suppose," I said, "such a young man will do in such circumstances, especially if he chances to be from a big city, is rich and noble in it, and is, further, good-looking and tall? Won't he be overflowing with irresistible hope, believing that he will be competent to mind the business of both Greeks and barbarians, and won't he, as a result, exalt himself to the heights, mindlessly full of pretension and empty conceit?"

<sup>9</sup> *Republic* 526d6:

"However," I said, "for such things [war] only some small portion both of geometry and of calculation would suffice. It is [now] necessary to consider whether any greater and more advanced portion which was neglected might aim at that, i.e., to make it easier to look toward the idea of the good. And everything, we say, aims at that place inasmuch as it compels a soul to turn towards that place in which the happiest part of being is, that which it is necessary that the soul see in every manner."

<sup>10</sup> *Republic*, 556e:

"Just as a sickly body needs only a slight push from outside to become ill, and sometimes even without any external influence becomes divided by factions within itself, so too doesn't a city that is in the same kind of condition as that body, on a small pretext—men brought in as allies from outside, from a city under an oligarchy, by the members of one party, from a city under a democracy by the members of the other—fall sick and do battle with itself, and sometimes even without any external influence become divided by faction?"

<sup>11</sup> *Republic*, 462c5:

"Is, then, that city in which most say 'my own' and 'not my own' about the same thing, and in the same way, the best governed city?" That is a city without factions and without disputes of ownership or priority to resolve. The "privacy" of important things lead citizens to feel both joy and pain for the same events befalling either the city or citizens.

<sup>12</sup> *Republic*, 517d:

"Come, then," I said, "and join me in supposing this, too, and don't be surprised that the men who get to that point [liberated prisoners who have seen the idea of the good] aren't willing to mind the business of human beings, but rather their souls are always eager to spend their time above."

<sup>13</sup> *Republic*, 586e:

"Therefore, when all the soul follows the philosophic part and is not factious, the result is that each part may, so far as other things are concerned, mind its own business and be just and, in particular, enjoy its own pleasures, the best and, to the greatest possible extent, the truest pleasures . . . And, therefore, when one of the other parts gets control, the result is that it can't discover its own pleasure and it compels the others to pursue an alien and untrue pleasure."

<sup>14</sup> Cf., *Republic*, 493a-494a.

The human who attempts to anticipate the passions of a "great, strong beast" or the people is "out of place as an educator." It is no wisdom to figure out the "anger and pleasures" of the "multifarious many who assemble." And, beast that it is, the multitude neither can be taught by a philosopher nor be philosophic. The philosopher's business is to abide by what is, not the opinable. The multitude can only deal in the many particular things. A multitude can be ruled, by opinion, but not taught. Philosophers can or will not deal in the opinable.

---

<sup>15</sup> Republic, 426e5-427a5:

“... for such men [would be statesmen in licentious cities] are surely the most charming of all, setting down laws like the ones we described a moment ago and correcting them, always thinking they'll find some limit to wrongdoing ... ignorant that they are really cutting off the heads of a Hydra ... I, for one,” I said, “therefore thought that the true lawgiver wouldn't have to bother with that class of things in the laws and the regime, either in a city with a bad or in one with a good regime—in the one case because it's useless and accomplishes nothing; in the other partly because anyone at all [everyone] could find some of these things, and partly because the rest follow of themselves from the practices already established.”

<sup>16</sup> Re-thinking some old conceptions is similar to the chore of trying to imagine what it would be like to go about with a heart loaded with thoughts. Long since have we discovered our thinking with our heads and localized our thought in that celestial sphere. It is now beyond our capacity to conceive how it might feel to feel our thoughts springing forth from our breasts.