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The Illegitimate Axioms of Plato's *Republic*

In Stephanus pages 423e to 427c of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates explains that education in music, poetry, and physique, rather than legislation which creates more problems than it solves, is necessary to produce citizens who share the just ideals that he espouses for Kallipolis. He argues that education should be strictly controlled and not allowed to change, for change would threaten the stability of the city, threatening to collapse it into injustice. The passage aims to persuade the reader that Socrates's proposed system of education is the only way to produce citizens useful to Kallipolis. It reveals that the structural soundness of Plato's polis relies on indoctrination into his own culturally influenced values rather than inherent, natural good.

In describing the purpose of education, Socrates employs several fallacies that rush the argument in an attempt to gloss over any potential for contradiction. The passage posits education as the central tenet of Kallipolis, with Socrates stating that "those in charge must cling to education" (424b) and Adeimantus warning that, without proper precautions, "[lawlessness] overthrows everything" (424e). The position invokes urgency in the other interlocutors and in the reader to hold onto education as precious, and to fear lawlessness for the sake of the project. Adeimantus creates a slippery slope from lawlessness to the destruction of Kallipolis, justifying the protection of education by measures that might otherwise be seen as extreme by the interlocutors: extreme censorship of education. Socrates dichotomizes lawlessness in childhood games and goodness in adulthood, stating that if children play in ways at all contrary to the ideals

of Kallipolis, "… isn't it *impossible* for them to grow up into good and law-abiding men?" (424e-25a; emphasis added). This binary opposition establishes Socrates's education system as the only option to create law-abiding citizens, but does not provide evidence to support the conclusion. It is a rhetorical ploy to skip the logic—if the children do not grow up exactly as Socrates says, then they unexplainably *must* grow up incorrectly. Even more egregious is Socrates's assumption that since Guardians will be educated in the way he describes, that they "will easily see [the necessity of censoring education] for themselves, as well as all the other things we are omitting" (423e). The diction of "easily" seeing tells the reader that each conclusion that Socrates and the interlocutors have covered thus far is the obvious result of its hypothesis, and that this applies also to "all the other things we are omitting" assumes indefinitely many such conclusions, essentially handing over the reader's critical thinking skills to Socrates. Later in the text, upon pressure from the interlocutors, Socrates actually admits to purposefully avoiding one argument here, about the equality of women, but this too is a farce to convince the reader of his credibility—the rest of the omitted conclusions remain unchallenged (450b). The lack of opportunity for dialectic constructed by Socrates sets the occasion for him to continue with the work as if the effects of his education system were axioms.

To further cement the inherent truth of his claims, Socrates appeals to the natural when really pushing values that stem from his cultural bias. When describing the intergenerational benefits of education, Socrates notes that an educated parent will naturally produce a child with the potential for even better education, in a perpetual adaptation "just like other animals" (424b). Here he likens improvement in human evolution to animal breeding, making the processes of Kallipolis, which are the basis for the later arguments of the work, seem natural, and signaling that the reader should not question the argument because it is an empirical natural concept. In

reality, many aspects of Kallipolis which are assumed to be natural best outcomes actually hail from contemporary Greek culture, such as strength dimorphism (451e), filial piety (425a-b), and xenophobia (470c). In fact, Socrates explicitly inserts filial piety as a good value into the conversation, stating that properly educated young people know to be silent in front of and respect their elders (425a-b). The assumption goes unnoticed and unchallenged by the interlocutors, who are ambiently conditioned to see this part of Greek culture as natural. Socrates relates the argument of education's goodness to a belief held by the interlocutors and by many of Plato's readers, which makes the audience more likely to agree with the goals of Kallipolis for young people because the audience are adults and more likely to value filial piety. This sneaking around the core assumptions of reason, like masking the bias in cultural upbringing that causes filial piety, allows Plato to assume that many parts of his culture's values are part of a universal good.

In complement, Socrates disguises the culturally indoctrinating intent of education by conflating social control with law alone. He explicitly calls most legislation beyond Kallipolis's initial constitution "foolish" (425b). The use of the word "foolish" argues that while legislation is ineffective for its attempt to control people's natures, Socrates's alternative system of education, which is essentially law, will succeed. This contradiction is reconciled only by a brief argument that education prevails by raising children right from the start of their lives (425a). However, this point fails to solve the issue—laws surround people perpetually in the same way, and have surrounded Socrates, the interlocutors, and Plato for all of their lives, too. Legislation and education are both forms of indoctrination; the difference is that Socrates's argument dismisses the effectiveness of pragmatic reform and empirical testing represented by legislation and implies that philosophy-driven education is not indoctrination but gentler guidance. In reality, he

simply transforms the lawmaker of the city: the education system will define goodness instead of individuals or courts, and Kallipolis will function much more similarly to any contemporary city than Socrates or Plato may like.

At the end of his argument, even if some interlocutor might have suspected his masking, Socrates dons an understanding and sympathetic nature to smooth away any suspicion over his arguments. When Adeimantus brings up the endless pragmatism of legislation, Socrates first constructs legislators as "sick" (425e) and then urges Adeimantus to "[not] be too hard on them" (426e). This mercy comforts the interlocutors, who are shown that Socrates is not judgmental or pretentious, but simply wants the best for people. It makes interlocutors more receptive to Socrates because they do not feel that he is calling them unsalvageable. Through Socrates, Plato makes the reader more likely to trust that the *Republic* wants to build an objectively just city instead of one that fits his own values.

A key internal inconsistency is revealed in this passage: throughout the *Republic,* the reader is taught that they should value reason, and Kallipolis is supposedly perfect by virtue of being built upon reason, but here Plato omits much of the ground justification for the merits of the reasonable polis, without which the reader may conclude that the systems Socrates prescribes for the city are arbitrary. Possibly this is one reason Kallipolis has never been implemented—in not challenging his fundamental assumptions, Plato fails to reach the truly ideal form of a city. This analysis of the *Republic* echoes the model of rhetorical analysis proposed by Stephen Toulmin, which prioritizes addressing the warrants underlying an argument to evaluate its soundness, and shows how assumptions can be smoothly integrated into a work such that a reader can only realize them by close reading. In order to fully understand the merits of an argument, especially works of philosophy like Plato's *Republic* which ascribe ways of life and

thinking, a reader must engage in recognition of the rhetorical strategies that hide the assumptions of the author.

Works Cited

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992.

Toulmin, Stephen E. *The Uses of Argument*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2003.