A sublimed experience of the rhetoric of Plato’s Republic

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**ABSTRACT**
This article argues that Plato’s Republic promotes a public memory characterized by a sublimed experience of reason. The standard understanding of the meaning and value of the Republic is a product of processes of sublimation rather than a necessary conclusion drawn from the text’s propositional content. Key moments of the text illustrate this pattern of sublimation. The particular strand of arguments from the Republic addressed in this article invite readers to justify the use of deception, to forget the ethical implications of achieving and maintaining justice through deceit, and to identify with the ruling and deceiving class. Critical attention to this line of arguments offers an understanding of the symbiotic, rather than antagonistic, relationship between philosophy and rhetoric while allowing us to recognize the danger inherent in our willingness to rationalize the unethical foundation of the kallipolis.

How are we to judge things if we want to judge them well? Isn’t it by experience, reason, and argument? Or could anyone have better criteria than these? How could he? — Plato (Republic, 1992, 582a)

Alfred North Whitehead (1979) famously observed that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (p. 39). The value of this observation is perhaps most evident with the Republic, Plato’s dramatic meditation on the nature of justice that inaugurated Western political philosophy.¹ The standard interpretation of the Republic presents the text as an archetypal philosophical search for justice that would liberate humankind from injustices perpetrated by rhetoricians. The cave allegory contained in the Republic endures as an archetypal representation of the philosophical universe, a universe in which the search for truth sets one free from the trappings of ignorance. In the preface to his translation of the Republic, Alan Bloom (1991b) contended that Republic’s cave “is the image of every serious student’s profoundest longing,” adding that the work of those who do not find inviolable justice in the Republic must be dismissed as philosophically untrue (pp. ix, viii).

Interestingly enough, scholars of rhetoric broach the ancient rhetoric/philosophy divide along similar lines in courses that introduce students to the discipline. Rather than presenting rhetoric in the context of an attempt to understand ways of being, knowing, or judging (Benson, 1989), rhetoric is presented in the context of the trenchant criticisms of rhetoric found in Plato’s Phaedrus and Gorgias, in which sophists are presented as petulant and arrogant purveyors of ignorance. In this context, rhetoric is thought to originate as a tool used by sycophantic proponents of a truthless world to hide their manipulations of logic as they deceive their way to fame and fortune. Philosophers become the rightful operators of rhetoric, which is then understood as a tool used to disseminate truths to a general, nonphilosophical population. Although those professing disciplinary knowledge may find richness, value, and even polysemy in works by both Plato and the sophists, students

¹Allan Bloom (1991b) made the case that Plato’s Republic is the foundation of Western political philosophy in the “Preface to the Second Edition” of his translation of The Republic of Plato (p. ix).

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introduced to rhetoric in this light would be right to judge rhetoric harshly, consequently inviting
them to remain unsympathetic to a discipline of knowledge and practice with deep philosophical and
historical roots.

In the following pages, I offer a reading of the Republic that focuses on an explicit argument
sustained in a series of key moments throughout the text that address the nature and uses of rhetoric.
Although it ought not to be startling news for scholars to find that Plato employed rhetoric to produce
the truths he sought to disseminate, the Republic’s explicit commentary regarding the function of
rhetoric for producing and maintaining the ideal society contrasts sharply with the attitudes toward
sophistic rhetoric and Platonic philosophy established in the Phaedrus and Gorgias. In recognizing, with
Kenneth Burke (1966), that every presentation of reality is both a selection and a deflection of reality
(p. 45), we may acknowledge that the reality of the rhetoric/philosophy antagonism is due, in large
measure, to the primary and secondary literature provided as evidence in service of that reality. As such,
I acknowledge that this essay offers one reading of the Republic, itself a polysemous text capable of
sustaining contradictory lines of argument. The focus here involves a line of argument in which rhetoric
is offered to leaders as a mechanism of deception useful for controlling the masses. Rather than simple
contrariness, the purpose of this approach is to offer a reading, rooted in propositional content found
explicitly in the Republic, that evinces a need to revise a simplistic dichotomy in which rhetoric is seen as
founded in vice and philosophy in virtue. The Republic invites such work insofar as its style of reported
speech draws attention to how the central claims regarding justice and truth are developed in the
time. I label the result of this elision as a “sublimed experience” to indicate how the truths of the
Republic are products of processes of rhetorical sublimation in which the text’s propositional content is
obscured by pervasive supplemental attitudes toward philosophy, justice, rhetoric, and reason. This
reading consequently offers an opening in which we may develop a more robust understanding of the
symbiotic, rather than antagonistic, relationship between rhetoric and philosophy.

As a point of clarification, this use of the “sublime” differs from that used by thinkers including
Immanuel Kant (1987/1790), Edmund Burke (1958/1757), and Longinus (1991), who present a
sublime experience as one that overwhelms its audience with awe or terror even though the
experience may forever remain ineffable. A sublime experience would thus have a recognizable
presence regardless of whether the experience is intelligible or communicable. Scholars have
explained how such a powerful affective experience plays out philosophically (O’Gorman, 2004),
as an experience that destabilizes subject positions (Gunn & Beard, 2000), and as a rhetorical style
(McDaniel, 2000; O’Gorman, 2008). This account of a sublimed experience contributes to this
literature by locating useful rhetorical dimensions of the “sublime” in discussions of the term
from the fields of chemistry and psychology. In chemistry, an element or compound sublimes
when it makes the transition from a solid into a gaseous state without becoming a liquid. In
rhetorical discourse, such a transition happens metaphorically as a discourse becomes increasingly
pervasive and the source of its pervasiveness is obscured. That is, a solid and identifiable rhetorical
discourse transforms into an ineffable effect of rhetoric. For instance, an argument may be said to
have sublimed when it is no longer seen as an argument but rather experienced as a truth that, in
Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1989) language, seems “solid, canonical, and binding to a nation” (p. 250). In
psychology, sublimation is an ego-defense mechanism involving the redirection of negative drives
into positive ones. According to the psychoanalytic perspectives presented in Sigmund Freud’s
Mechanisms of Defense, sublimation indicates the redirection of socially unacceptable drives into
socially acceptable ones. Those who control the meaning and value of social acceptability do so by
directing processes of sublimation.

This essay proceeds in three sections. The first section addresses how the issue of justice is framed
stylistically and rhetorically in the Republic, focusing on key moments including Thrasymachus’s
challenge and the noble lie. Taking a cue from Plato, this section begins, by necessity, with an
explanation of the philosophical grounding offered in support of Plato’s decision to render the text in
reported speech as an extended monologue from the character Socrates. The second section picks up where the noble lie leaves off, analyzing an implicit theory of rhetoric that presents people as effects of dispositions that were created and may be altered by rhetorical interventions. The third section extends this reading through the cave allegory, focusing on how it seeks to explain knowledge and education. By addressing how the Republic’s interlocutors employ rhetoric to create a sublimed experience of arguments that will have become truths when audiences eventually forget their argumentative origins, scholars of rhetoric may introduce students to rhetoric/philosophy as a symbiotic relationship rather than as a divide. This also opens the text up to an important lesson, namely, that we may do a great deal of harm to ourselves and others if we do not attend to our power to rationalize worldviews.

**Socrates’s monologue, Thrasymachus’ challenge, and rhetorical interventions**

Readers encountering Plato’s Republic meet a text written in a style that is substantially different from the most famous dialogues. Plato’s dialogues were written in direct speech, with the narrative attributed directly to the character speaking. In contrast, the Republic was written in reported speech from the point of view of the character “Socrates,” meaning that all utterances in the diegetic world originate in one character’s recollections and are authored by Plato. As such, the drama of the Republic plays out not as a dialogue but as a monologue issued as the reported speech of a narrator identified as Socrates.2

Despite the entirety of the text originating in the words of one character, the Republic’s style leads readers to reflect on its contents as if it were a dialogue. Even Bloom, lauded for the literalness of his translation, wrote about the text as if it were written in direct speech. This makes sense because a series of textually accurate descriptions of the text’s action would render an essay unreadable. For instance, one might accurately state that “Plato wrote that the character Socrates reported that Thrasymachus claimed justice to be the advantage of the stronger.” Perceptions of the Republic as a dialogue are fostered by some contemporary versions of the text that present it as if it were a monologue, including C. D. C. Reeve’s new translation (Plato, 2004). Reeve explained his choice to render the Republic in direct speech as a significant and “conscious derivation from strict accuracy” to promote “readability and intelligibility” (Plato, 2004, viii).

The Republic’s unique style performs one of the text’s foundational philosophical arguments. The philosophical reasoning behind Plato’s decision to render the text in the style of reported speech is explicitly presented in the Republic in passages where Socrates establishes grounds for dismissing large portions of odes and songs from Homer and others due to their content (Plato, 1992, 377d-392c) and style (especially Plato, 1992, 392c-399e). These sections, and the proscriptions therein, turn on the concept of imitation, arguing first that life imitates the arts. Socrates explains that leaders must censor stories concerning the gods insofar as they influence the behavior of ordinary people. For instance, Socrates argues that “we must put a stop to such stories” as those featuring “close descendants of the gods” doing bad things “lest they produce in the youth a strong inclination to do bad things” (Plato, 1992, 391e). Here we see that content is to be censored out of a belief that people will imitate undesirable actions.

The Republic’s investigation into issues of poetic and expressive style, which results in an additional call for censorship, addresses a different facet of imitation. Socrates explains that there are poets who “effect their narrative through imitation” (Plato, 1992, 393c) such as those who produce tragedies and comedies, those who employ “narrative without imitation” (Plato, 1992, 393d) described as reported speech, and a combination found in places including epic poetry (Plato, 1992, 394c). Socrates explains imitative style by observing how Homer imitates characters in the Iliad and

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2There are translations available that recast the Republic in direct speech akin to the dialogues including C. D. C. Reeve’s new translation (Plato, 2004). Of that translation, Reeve explained that he made a significant and “conscious derivation from strict accuracy” by presenting Socrates’s “report as an explicit dialogue in direct speech, with identified speakers” to increase “readability and intelligibility” (p. viii).
Odyssey so well that his authorship is obscured. For instance, the poet “speaks as if he were Chryses and tries as far as possible to make us think that the speaker isn’t Homer but the priest himself—an old man” (Plato, 1992, 393a-b). Readers, Socrates notes, are likely to attribute the imitated prose to the character that is being imitated rather than the actual poet doing the imitating, which would not be a problem if the poet were to only imitate the desirable speech of good people. The interlocutors decide that imitative narrative ought to be disallowed by all except for the rulers who

should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person and who would tell his stories in accordance with the patterns we laid down when we first undertook the education of our soldiers. (Plato, 1992, 398a-b)

The argument concerning style and imitation is thus animated by a second belief that the arts wield undue power when they imitate life and that such power ought to remain in the hands of those whose philosophical natures are considered appropriate for ruling. This lays the groundwork for subsequent arguments concerning noble uses of deception for controlling the masses.

With an understanding of the philosophical grounding for the Republic’s style, we can now turn to the narrative. The Republic is a dramatic account of a fictional meeting of a group of men attempting to understand and define the concept of justice. Plato’s story begins with the characters Socrates and Glaucous returning to Athens from a religious ceremony on the Piraeus. Polemarchus, who is walking with a group of men nearby, sends his slave to accost Socrates and Glaucous, demanding that the two stay to talk. Once Socrates concedes, the group moves on and is met by many others including the sophist Thrasymachus of Chalcedon. After discussing the relationship between age, wealth, and just actions, Socrates changes the subject to the meaning of justice, drawing the ire of Thrasymachus. Socrates reports that Thrasymachus grew angry and “coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces” (Plato, 1992, 336b). Thrasymachus charges Socrates for questioning others’ definitions rather than providing his own clear and precise account of justice. Socrates responds while “trembling a little,” saying that justice is such a valuable concept that those searching are unlikely to find it and should therefore be “pitted by you clever people” instead of “given rough treatment” (Plato, 1992, 336e). Thrasymachus is encouraged to give an account of justice himself, which he does only after proactively charging Socrates as being ironic (Plato, 1992, 337a). Gregory Vlastos (1987) explained that this use of “irony” requires closer inspection because the Greek word eirôneia denotes “the intention to deceive,” indicating that Thrasymachus is “charging that Socrates lies in saying he has no answer of his own to the question he is putting to others” (pp. 80–81). Despite this charge being passed over, Socrates lends it credence by calling for the use of deception throughout the Republic. With more encouragement, Thrasymachus offers his account—“justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger” (Plato, 1992, 338c). The dramatic tension of the remainder of the Republic is driven by Socrates reporting the proceedings of an attempt to counter Thrasymachus’s rhetorical account of justice with a philosophical account. For his efforts, Bloom labeled Socrates the “protector of justice against a rhetorician” (Plato, 1991, 358). In this account, rhetoric is treated disdainfully at the same time as the alternative account of justice is advanced with a series of rhetorical tasks and interventions.

The first rhetorical intervention in the text calls for the censorship of stories used to educate children. This intervention targets childhood education because, Socrates argues, “the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender” and hence it is “at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it” (Plato, 1992, 377a-b). In terms of Plato’s philosophy, this particular passage is striking for how it stands in opposition to Plato’s theory of knowledge as recollection. This statement suggests that children learn not by recollection but by the incorporation of external influence that is controlled by men rather than the Divine. Book 2 of the Republic shows how influencing the paideia, or the cradle to crypt education into a culture, is the most crucial step to creating the foundation for his philosophical version of justice in an ideal city. Thus, Plato has Socrates argue that to create the ideal city,
then we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We’ll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren’t. And we’ll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected, since they will shape their children’s souls with stories much more than they shape their bodies by handling them. Many stories they tell now, however, must be thrown out. (Plato, 1992, 377b-c)

At this point, the ones who judge which stories are to be told and which are to be silenced are entitled to do so by virtue of their agreement with Socrates. This task will be given to the philosopher-kings once their class is established.

The censors, those responsible for supervising the storytellers, are also secret-keepers. In the case that the enlightened come across stories that might be inconvenient or damning to the smooth operation of the state (Socrates cites Hesiod’s account of the patricidal origin myth of the Greek people), they are to pass over them in silence rather than share them with “foolish young people” (Plato, 1992, 378a). Stories that may damage the state are only to be known by elites whose sworn secrecy is to remain bounded by ritualistic sacrifice. This is to be the case even when the story is known to be true, and

if, for some reason, it has to be told, only a very few people—pledged to secrecy and after sacrificing not just a pig but something great and scarce—should hear it, so that their number is kept as small as possible. (Plato, 1992, 378a)

The act of secret-keeping extends to rhetorical education, which is presented as an avenue for the people to wrest power and destroy the city’s constitution. In Socrates’s estimation, human nature and desire is aligned such that the constitution of a city will inevitably gravitate toward tyranny. Democracy is cast as a poor constitution only one step above tyranny in which state power is concentrated in the people, made up of poor laborers without political aspirations (Plato, 1992, 565a). The founders must prevent the general population from accessing rhetorical education, as it would exacerbate society’s decline by diffusing power among the people.

If legislated, the proposal for strict control of permissible narratives and limited access to rhetorical education and practice would effectively put an end to a multiplicity of competing public memories, competing ethical positions, or competing worldviews. The masses would be left as spectators who bear witness to the stories and internalize their moralizing lessons. Read this way, the normative political implication of the Republic would involve the creation of a society where leaders rule over people who passively obey. This structure of governance and power would be held intact by controlling public memory.

As evidenced in the text, public memory is to be controlled, in large measure, through the use of narrative and falsehood that culminate in the noble lie,3 the “Myth of the Metals,” which is subsequently put into practice in a proposed ritual of public marriage. The myth is introduced as “one noble falsehood that would, in the best case, persuade even the rulers, but if that’s not possible, then the others in the city” (Plato, 1992, 414b-c). After demonstrating a reluctance for introducing a persuasive political discourse, Socrates explains that he will begin by persuading the “rulers and the soldiers and then the rest of the city that the upbringing and the education we gave them, and the experiences that went with them, were a sort of dream” (Plato, 1992, 414d). All that is real, including themselves, were crafted by a deity within the earth and they should “think of the other citizens as their earthborn brothers” (Plato, 1992, 414d-e). Socrates continues the myth:

The god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are most valuable. He put silver in those who are auxiliaries and iron and bronze in the farmers and other craftsmen. For the most part you will produce children like yourselves, but, because you are all related, a silver child will occasionally be born from a golden parent, and vice versa, and all the others from each other. So the first and most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of the next generation. (Plato, 1992, 415a-b)

3The terms “useful falsehood” and “noble falsehood” are consistent with Reeve and Grube’s translation of Plato’s (1992) Republic. Bloom translated the terms as “lies” and “noble lies” (Plato, 1991).
In the proposed application of this myth we see a troubling side of the Republic’s rhetoric. Rhetoric is understood as the art of deception that uses words (rather than physical coercion) to control human desire in the kallipolis, in which ideal justice requires a rigidly divided caste system. This conceptualization of rhetoric is consistent with Popper’s (1966) critique that the Republic uses rhetoric to disseminate a self-conscious “propaganda lie” to promote a totalitarian morality and a “myth of racialism” while reducing religion and faith to the level of “an opportunistic lie” (pp. 149–150). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986) offered a powerful counter reading to this and other passages from the Republic, arguing that the text’s utopian demands are absurd and deliberately designed to provoke and ought not be taken as serious reflections of Plato’s intentions. This contrasts with Friedrich Nietzsche’s assessment that “whether Plato truly believed his own doctrines or not, his followers did” (Zuckert, 1996, p. 25). The goal of this article is not to attribute intention to Plato but to offer a reading of a line of argument carried throughout the text.

In the textual world of the Republic, philosophy is presented as a way of being in the world that seeks to order society by directing and controlling the resources of public memory to forge an incipient memory “that social order reflects a natural order” (Zuckert, 1996, p. 18). The way that the noble lie is presented suggests that it was not designed to produce demonstrable effects on its immediate audience or to serve as a prescription for identifying the intrinsic value of individual souls. Rather, its work would happen memorially as it is written into the experience of future generations in the space of tradition—as tradition transforms, so too would the belief structures of those born into it. He has Glaucon state that “I can’t see any way to make them [the rulers, soldiers, and rest of the people] believe it [the myth of the metals] themselves, but perhaps there is one [way] in the case of their sons and later generations and all the other people who come after them” (Plato, 1992, 415d). Socrates responds affirmatively with “let’s leave this matter wherever tradition takes it” (Plato, 1992, 415d). The combined logic of Glaucon’s observation and Socrates’s advice suggests that the myth of the metals would become a foundational belief as it sublimes to become part of the tradition. This belief does not present the myth as a diagnostic test. Rather, the myth is offered as a type of narrative that would be useful for justifying and maintaining consolidated power formations.

The myth in action: Nemesis and mnemonocide

Although the myth anticipated limited, if any, immediate effects of its audience, the way in which the myth is activated in the Republic illustrates both the text’s perspective of rhetoric and the centrality of rhetoric to the text. On this point, a particularly illuminating exchange happens just prior to Socrates’s call for leaders to use deception as a drug to control the people. Socrates is found pleading with his interlocutors so that they will not hold him accountable for missing the mark in his explanation of justice. Whether lost to omission or consumed by Plato’s provocations, the passage warrants a closer look for the insight it offers into the theory of rhetoric embedded in Plato’s Republic. Further, the passage is significant insofar as it indicates that Plato was uneasy in presenting an idea that he knew “was opposed to the democratic and humanitarian tendencies of his time” (Popper, 1966, p. 150).

The passage begins as Glaucon coaxes Socrates into speaking about the nature of justice, assuring him that he is free to err because his audience is friendly. Socrates replies,

So I bow to Adrasteia for what I’m going to say, for I suspect that it’s a lesser crime to kill someone involuntarily than to mislead people about fine, good, and just institutions. Since it’s better to run this risk among enemies than among friends, you’ve well and truly encouraged me! (Plato, 1992, 451a-b).5

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5The myth is projected more boldly in Aristotle’s (1998) Politics, where Plato’s student espouses a doctrine of natural slavery that plainly observes innate differences in the bodies of slaves and rulers (p. 9).

6It is striking that a sense of disquiet accompanies a lengthy speech encouraging a form of gender equity when no such sentiments were displayed in conjunction with the promotion of racialism in the myth of the metals.
The risk Socrates refers to concerns the possibility that a lack of certainty may lead him into creating a false image of justice—a rhetorical action understood to be worse than involuntarily killing someone. By implication, the crime that Socrates might commit is murder, and his fear is not committing it but being held responsible for it. To be sure, Socrates will not be engaging in the physical destruction of anyone. Rather, he recognizes quite rightly that what he is about to say is aimed at the foundational dispositions of his interlocutors, including but not limited to their beliefs in justice. If his speech effectively persuades them, their foundational dispositions will be altered or replaced. Consequently, each will cease to exist as the same person that they were prior to Socrates’s speech. It is not fratricide or coercive force that Socrates fears being held responsible for, but rather mnemonicocide through the rhetorical action of his arguments. That is, the act of creating arguments designed to produce memories of the fine, good, and just requires the simultaneous destruction (or displacement) of other memories, including existing memories of the fine, good, and just.

Despite the gravity of the claim, Socrates must have winked as he bowed to Adrastaia. Because Adrasteia “was a kind of Nemesis, a punisher of pride and proud words,” Socrates’s bow “is therefore a kind of apology for the kind of act or statement that might otherwise spur her to take action” (Plato, 1992, 124, n4). This gesture may be easily missed given its foreignness and that it provides the foil for Plato’s famous defense of gender equity, polygamy, and the communal rearing of children. The key to this passage lies in the tactical use of laughter and seriousness following Socrates’s bow. This rhetorical tactic is explained by Gorgias in Aristotle’s Rhetoric. There, Aristotle reports that “Gorgias [correctly] said that ‘the opposition’s seriousness is to be demolished by laughter, and laughter by seriousness’” (as cited in Sprague, 2001, p. 63). In response to the gesture, Socrates reports that

Glaucion laughed and said: Well Socrates, if we suffer from any false note you strike in the argument, we’ll release you and absolve you of any guilt as in a homicide case: your hands are clean, and you have not deceived us. So take courage and speak. (Plato, 1992, 451b)

Although Glaucion’s laughter may have been used as a tactic to soften the force of Socrates’s seriousness, Socrates emerges to control the direction and meaning of the Republic by repeating his jest in earnest: “I will [take courage and speak], for the law says that someone who kills involuntarily is free of guilt when he’s absolved by the injured party. So it’s surely reasonable to think the same is true in my case as well” (Plato, 1992, 451b). A substantive acknowledgment of the power of rhetoric accompanies the shifts between Socrates’s gesture, Glaucion’s laughter, and Socrates’s seriousness. In acknowledging the potential to fundamentally alter those on the receiving end of his work of “truth telling,” Socrates is bowing to an understanding of rhetoric premised on the belief that people are an effect of their foundational dispositions, which are produced and destroyed through rhetorical interventions.

Plato operationalizes the myth of the metals in a proposed ritual of public marriage. Socrates explains that promotion of the kallipolis requires,

first, that the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women, and, second, that if our herd is to be of the highest possible quality, the former’s offspring must be reared but not the latter’s. (Plato, 1991, 459d–459e)

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6Charles E. Morris III (2004) used this term to describe the rhetorical efforts of destroying memory (p. 99).
7The defense of gender equity occurs in Book 5 (451d–469b). Natalie Harris Bluestone’s (1987) Women and the Ideal Society: Plato’s Republic and Modern Myths of Gender provides an exemplary reading of the section along such terms of equality. Bloom similarly argued that the Republic is “gripping because of its very radical, more than up-to-date treatment of the ‘gender question’” (1991b, viii–ix), while the “whole Republic represents the triumph of the just speech” (1991a, 337). Although Plato’s (1992) ideas do, in fact, affirm a type of equality in value across the sexes, such equality is to be understood as happening within the strict class-based limitations drawn by the myth of the metals (459d).
8The text is excerpted from Aristotle’s (1991) Rhetoric section 1419b. George Kennedy translates this to read, “As for humor, since it seems to have some use in debate and Gorgias rightly said that one should spoil the opponents’ seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness” (p. 280).
In stating that the offspring of “inferior” people must not be reared, Reeve and Grube noted that “Plato is recommending infanticide by exposure for these babies, a practice which was quite common in ancient Greece as a method of birth control” (Plato, 1992, 134, n12). Plato then offers a ritual of public marriage involving a public lottery in which names would “randomly” be drawn and those selected would be free to reproduce. The leaders would be the only people to know that the ritual is rigged “so that our herd of guardians remains as free from dissention as possible” (Plato, 1991, 459e). When not selected, “the inferior people we mentioned will blame luck rather than the rulers” (Plato, 1991, 460a). In sum, the myth warrants rigging a public marriage ritual such that only those believed to be born of gold are permitted to reproduce. Those men and women deemed best, and hence selected in the rigged lottery, are to accept reproduction as their duty and privilege. In losing the rigged lottery, those deemed unworthy are to curse fate and wait until next time. If they succumb to temptation, their offspring will be left to die by the heat of the same sun that discloses truth. They are, by design, not to question or try to alter the system. Doing so would inaugurate the fall into democracy and, inevitably, tyranny.

Whether one follows Popper’s reading and takes this application as an affront to open society or follows Gadamer and reads this as a simplistic provocation, it still stands that the section offers insight into the understanding of rhetoric presented in the Republic. Plato has Socrates both increase and clarify the stakes of this rhetorical task when he states simply that to found the kallipolis “it looks as though our rulers will have to make considerable use of falsehood and deception for the benefit of those they rule. And we said that all such falsehoods are useful as a form of drug” (Plato, 1992, 459c-d). This utilitarian-psychopharmaceutical analogy highlights three ways that the Republic deals with rhetoric. First, it reaffirms the earlier conceptualization of rhetoric that recognizes people as an effect of their rhetorically constructed foundational dispositions. Second, it proposes rhetoric as a tool to be used by leaders to influence knowledge and memory through the use of strategic deception. Both claims affirm the centrality of rhetoric to the creation and maintenance of senses of being in the world while highlighting how the kallipolis is best to be thought of as an effect of the rhetoric of public memory. Third, the analogy proposes limiting access to an education in rhetoric. Ordinary people are restricted from access to the use of rhetoric, which is relegated to its prescribing doctor. On this point, Socrates observes that “falsehood, though of no use to the gods, is useful to people as a form of drug, clearly we must allow only doctors to use it, not private citizens” (Plato, 1992, 389b).

This account of Plato’s Republic thus far has shown how justice was constituted with the help of rhetoric, which is presented as the art of deception in which narrative and lies are used like drugs for controlling the masses while creating and preserving a space for the philosophical life. On this point, Catherine Zuckert (1996) explained Nietzsche’s observation that “Plato taught what was necessary to maintain philosophy as a way of life” (p. 21). This meets its most poignant expression in Plato’s noble lie, the myth of the metals, which is subsequently activated in the dramatic exchanges involving Nemesis and gender parity. These sections of the Republic give a sense of how the text works as a rhetorical document, with the character of Socrates seen as a powerful rhetorical trope for producing a particular persuasive response, namely, remembering the rhetorical accomplishments of the text as evidence of a triumph of philosophy over rhetoric.

Knowledge, education, and a sublimed experience of reason

The rhetorical interventions including prescriptions concerning the content of childhood education, control of permissible cultural narratives, and noble deception were designed to produce a particular sort of people by altering their foundational dispositions. This work is expressed in the “Allegory of the Cave.” Socrates introduces the allegory as a comparison of “the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature” (Plato, 1992, 513e-514a). Bloom (1991b) gives voice to a common interpretation of the allegory’s enduring importance by claiming that
for students the story of man bound up in the cave and breaking the bonds, moving out and up into the light of the sun, is the most memorable from their encounter with the Republic. This is the image of every serious student’s profoundest longing, the longing for liberation from convention in order to live according to nature, and one of the book’s evidently permanent aspects. (p. ix)

Although Bloom’s statement is meant to merely buttress the importance of the work, it additionally acknowledges that, by virtue of learning how to learn and what to learn about, the act of education shapes the student’s basic desires for knowledge. Such a view coincides with Plato’s framing of the allegory as an attempt to explain how education and the lack thereof function to shape desire.

The narrative continues with Socrates asking readers to imagine a deep cave occupied by humans with bindings around their legs and necks so they must remain still and only see that which is placed before their eyes. Behind the troglodytes is a fire providing light and puppeteers plying their craft by carrying around artifacts to project shadows upon the opposite wall. Because the people in the cave cannot turn their heads, they see the shadows but remain unaware of how the shadows are produced. In this condition, when puppeteers project shadows of artifacts, the people imprisoned in the cave “would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts” (Plato, 1992, 515c).

With the scene drawn as such, Plato introduces an act designed to retrospectively justify the use of deceit and lies to control the masses. Socrates asks Glaucon to consider what would naturally happen in the case of one being released from bondage and cured of ignorance. The chosen one is freed and then “suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before” (Plato, 1992, 515c). The freedman would then become disoriented and his eyes would hurt as he realized that what he thought was real was only a puppet show. Because, the Republic argues, people gravitate toward ignorance when given the opportunity, and the freedman is no different. Socrates asks,

What do you think he’d say, if we told him that what he’d seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly? (Plato, 1992, 515d)

Upon hearing that the new worldview is increasingly more accurate, the freedman turns away from the new and unfamiliar sights and flees back to his familiar world of shadows. This one’s freedom is coerced as he is then dragged “away from there by force, up the rough, steep path” and not let go until he is in the sunlight (Plato, 1992, 515e). The freedman then experiences a period of optical adjustment, here surrogate for the four conditions of the soul described in Plato’s “line analogy” as imagining (eikasia), belief (pistis), thought (dianoia), and understanding (noësis). Once able to see the sun, not its reflection, he infers and concludes the lessons of the earlier “sun analogy” that “the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see” (Plato, 1992, 516b-c).

The former slave, now a person of knowledge, returns to the cave and is treated to a bleak scene. Readers are asked to imagine contests that give prizes to slaves who correctly identify the shadows on the wall. As the enlightened one plays the game and gives answers that evidence understanding rather than imagining (e.g., he says that what he sees is a shadow of a chair rather than a chair), he is ridiculed. The other prisoners observe that he “returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn’t worthwhile even to try” leaving the cave (Plato, 1992, 517a). They up the stakes by declaring that they would kill anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward. This

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9The four conditions of the soul are posited in Plato’s “line analogy,” which immediately precedes the cave allegory. In the line analogy, Plato has Socrates argue that each of the conditions of the soul is to be understood as a ratio relating degrees of clarity to shares of truth, with the condition of understanding (noësis) as closest to and the condition of imagining (eikasia) as furthest from truth (Plato, 1992, 509d–511e).

10Plato’s “sun analogy” attempts to explain the good’s composition. Grube and Reeve argued that the sun and line analogy “dramatically portray Plato’s views on knowledge and reality, which, together with his earlier description of the state of philosophy in the actual world, are expressed in some of the most brilliant and passionate writing in all of philosophy” (Plato, 1992, 157).
threat of death is to be taken as a twofold reminder for the “gold” rulers that their lesser subjects both pose a constant threat and would freely choose ignorance if it were given as an option.

The cave allegory presents a conceptualization of knowledge as limited to the individual’s consciousness—presented metaphorically as eyesight or perspective. In this model, knowledge is guided by education, which signifies the process by which one learns to recognize, remember, and understand particular experiences that then serve as the substratum for the consciousness that influences what an individual may continue to think and know. Education influences consciousness by altering the learner’s direction of attention, which henceforth will alter the ethos of his students. Socrates explains that “the final outcome of education, I suppose we’d say, is a single newly finished person, who is either good or the opposite” (Plato, 1992, 425c). Because Plato’s model of education does not allow for knowledge to be put into ignorant souls, an individual’s capacity to learn would then be limited to the biological differences explained by the myth of the metals that correspond to conditions of the soul explained in the line analogy.11 Bronze individuals would be limited to condition of the soul expressed by knowledge of images (eikasia or recognizing shadows on the wall), whereas gold individuals would be capable of understanding (noêsis or comprehending light).

Because noêsis is a virtue available to the few fit to be philosopher-kings, the cave allegory is less encomium of education than it is an analogue to the noble lie that would restrict education based on one’s social status. The masses are, as with the troglodytes in the cave allegory, given to a world of shadows structured by noble lies. The proper redirection of their attention involves reinforcing their presumed separation from politics (Plato, 1992, 565a). The select leaders are to be educated differently. The founders (including the characters Socrates, Glaucnon, and Adeimantus) assume the task of compelling those with the “best natures” to ascend from the cave, see the good, and “share with each other the benefits that each class can confer on the community” to “bind the city together” (Plato, 1992, 519e–520a). That is, those deemed elite will receive the best education and then be compelled to manage the good city by putting everyone else into their proper place. Such teaching, Socrates instructs, will make use of falsehood and deception as a useful drug for keeping the people in line. Those who criticize this system from democratic or other starting points are deemed unfit for argument due to improper rhetorical education based upon practices such as the dissoi logoi and eristics (Plato, 1992, 538d–539c). These types of education are to be seen as teaching argument for sporting purposes rather than for seeking truth or the good.

Plato offers imagined interlocution as a model for doing philosophy, saying that by imitating “someone who is willing to engage in discussion in order to look for the truth,” one would “bring honor rather than discredit the philosophical way of life” (Plato, 1992, 539c-d). Thus, one would seek truth by imitating interlocutors, acting as “both jury and advocates at once” and debating with them privately in the confines of one’s own mind rather than engaging publicly with other “real” people (Plato, 1992, 348b). The products of such interlocution are the good and the truth to be “shared” with the community in the style of simple narrative without imitation.12 Consequently, there is no dialogue in this kallipolis just as there is no dialogue in the Republic. There is but one agent—the philosopher as ruler. The ruler’s craft is to be plied through narrative, with the Republic explicitly acknowledging how ideal justice is to be produced by employing deception to impose a philosophy of justice and truth on the people. This justice promotes rigid class distinctions in which some are taught to be bronze and are condemned to a life of slaving, and others are raised as if they were gold, given to the task of philosophy and to replicating structures of control for the presumed benefit of society.

In this reading of the Republic, the promised discourse on justice is subordinated to an example of how persuasion could be made to consolidate power and maintain social control. Rhetoric is

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11A concise statement on Plato’s model of education is at 518b-c, the “myth of the metals” is at 413b–415d, and the line analogy is at 509d–511e.
12In addition to the earlier discussion of Books 2 and 3, see Russell Winslow’s (2012) sustained analysis of Book 3 of the Republic, where he discusses the importance of style as it bears on conceptual responsibility.
conceptualized as a tool useful for producing a specific public memory, a sublimed experience of reason, through a carefully crafted narrative designed to dispose its readers negatively toward Thrasymachus (rhetoric) and favorably toward Socrates (philosophy). To refute Thrasymachus’s definition of justice, that justice is the will of the stronger, Socrates narrates the foundation of an ideal city, the kallipolis, founded with strict limitations on the stories told, the music heard, the instruments played, the food eaten, and the education offered therein. In this narrative of an ideal city, order is maintained by the use of deception and a rigidly enforced caste society. The line of argument calling for this type of social control is laid out transparently for every reader to see. It is striking that this text has been experienced writ large as a testament to truth and justice rather than as support for a descriptive account of might making right. In the Republic, social control is achieved by naked force and readers are invited to celebrate it as the triumph of reason. This triumph has become so normalized that Bloom could say, with a good conscience, that the goal of the Republic is every serious student’s most profound longing (Bloom, 1991b, p. ix).

Contrasting with presentations of the Republic as an unproblematic text, this reading focuses on how the Republic operationalizes an unethical species of deceptive rhetoric to set the stage for the triumph of reason. The product of the deceit called for in the Republic is “justice,” the mode of production is now going to be passed off as education. Justice, as rendered in the Republic, would be formed by rewriting the stories of the gods, controlling the stories told to children, calling for the rulers to deceive the people, infanticide, marriage of the “best” through a rigged lottery, and the strict upkeep of rigid class distinctions in a caste society. Readers are invited to identify with the ruling class and, despite the explicitness of the text’s harrowing prescriptions, accept the use of deception as philosophically virtuous and pragmatically necessary. However baldly such tenets are advanced, whether they are absurd provocations or sincere prescriptions, the movement of the text invites its readers to experience such actions as justified and then forget the ethical implications of achieving and maintaining justice through deceit. According to the logic of Plato’s discourse, this work represents the triumph of reason—a sublimed experience in how it strikes readers with awe by suspending a search for the ideal in experience beyond judgment, directs processes of sublimation by indicating which drives are socially acceptable, and remains as a pervasive yet ineffable lens through which the world is to be experienced.

Perhaps an ironic lesson emerges from this darker line of argument contained in the Republic, stemming from the dissonance that readers might experience over the entanglements of the opposing forces of reason and deception, freedom and control, appearance and truth, rhetoric and philosophy. We desire reason, freedom, and truth and hope that they reside in our world of action untainted by their conceptual opposites. The protagonist Socrates insists that the ideal city must be built on a foundation of deception, strict censorship, and a rigid caste society. He advances these pursuits rhetorically and justifies them philosophically. Our willingness to accept this worldview as ideal and to subsequently rationalize the disturbing foundation upon which it rests offers a sobering reminder of how we may become victims of our own powers of rhetorical and philosophical rationalization. And this may well be the Republic’s gift to posterity—that we must subject our power to rationalize worldviews to unstinting criticism lest we lead ourselves willingly into a state of tyranny.

References


