

Teaching Wisdom to Interest: Book Five of Plato's *Republic*

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ABSTRACT We suggest that Book Five of the *Republic*, where Plato discusses the status of women in the guardian class, is a superb source of Platonic insight. For it is precisely the discussion of women that is most vulnerable to co-optation by the modern vernacular of interest, a vernacular to which the *Republic* is vehemently opposed. If students come to appreciate an alternative perspective regarding this most sensitive of modern issues, the full impact of the Socratic approach is available to them.

We live in a cave. Our intellects are chained to limited conceptual parameters. But we have recourse to liberating wisdom and its illumination by the overwhelming brilliance of the idea of the good. The chains are not imperious and the cave exit, although distant, is accessible to the adventurous. These are the provocative depictions we invariably evoke in our classrooms as we undertake the scholarly spelunking of Plato's *Republic*. The discussions challenge our pragmatic and relativistic students to reconsider the solidity of their perceptions, transporting them to an arena where stargazers and nerds are not automatically ridiculed.

However, we trip up a bit upon arrival at Book Five and its controversial discussion of women in the ideal republic. Rather than maintaining the caution and ambiguity due the dimness of our present habitat, we encounter more comfortable judgments regarding the sincerity and relevance of Plato's pronouncements on women. It is difficult, for instance, to resist transposing the clear sexism of the Death Scene in the *Phaedo*, where women and children are sent away so as to retain the appropriate gravity, to the stipulation in Book Five where women, not men, are to be held in common. We are quick to judge Plato's pronouncements in familiar contexts and valuations. But there is a nagging suspicion that such interpretations involve a false sense of daylight, and that we gravitate to available resolutions to avoid the difficulty and discomfort of a more careful investigation.

In this essay, we argue that the *Republic* is best taught by retaining the exotic even, nay especially, in Book Five, and that instead of a weakness in need of indignant dismissal or patronizing appreciation, Book Five is a rich source of Platonic profundity in the

contemporary classroom. For it is precisely the discussion of women that is most vulnerable to co-optation by the modern vernacular of interest, a vernacular to which the *Republic* is vehemently and elegantly opposed. So if students come to appreciate an alternative vernacular regarding this most sensitive of modern issues, the full impact of the Socratic approach is available to them. If Plato's message is truly to resonate with our students it must survive, if not prevail, over its seeming vulnerability to interest. Otherwise, smugness will cushion Socratic impact. We will show that Plato's insistence on a tension between interest and wisdom is as rewarding today as ever. And after a brief review of popular approaches to Book Five, we suggest an alternative teaching, one that simultaneously maintains a healthy Platonic disorientation and a rewarding insight into the theme of the *Republic*.

I. PREVAILING VIEWS

The literature regarding Book Five reveals four interpretations of Plato's consideration of women (and a very unscientific survey of our local colleagues confirms this). The first approach is to minimize or even ignore them. Wolin's *Politics and Vision*, considered by many to be the gold standard of survey texts, does not discuss Plato's treatment of women in the *Republic*, despite an emphasis on his concept of community and the "meticulous legal regulations" (2004, 58) intended to establish unity. McClelland, in a chapter titled "The Guardians of the State and Justice," mentions that the "auxiliary class has a kind of group solidarity" (1996, 39), with nary a sentence about women. Wolff discusses the prohibition against private property amongst the guardians (2006, 69), but fails to mention women (see also Redhead 1988; Simmons 2008; Arnhart 1987). Sabine briefly mentions female guardians, but does not discuss the controversy regarding their status (1973, 68; see also McDonald 1968, 20). And when the *Republic* is excerpted at length in survey anthologies, Plato's discussion of women is excluded (Cahn 2002; Smith and Blocker 1994).

The second approach is to subordinate the issue of women to the interests of the whole community. Mitchell and Lucas, for instance, after boldly labeling Plato the "first feminist," quickly qualify their claim with the caution that women's rights are not

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really at issue. They explain that female guardians contribute to a communal good that “overrides all other considerations” (2003, 131; see also Okin 1991; Strauss 1987, 51). Similarly, Bloom justifies Plato’s inclusion of female guardians with the concern that if women are not reared and educated as men they would “not share the men’s tastes” and thus undermine Plato’s entire project (1991, 383). Bluestone (1987, 49) adds that the indispensability of women to the procreative process means that their interests must be addressed for the greater good of nurturing worthy guardians.

The third approach to Book Five is to recognize peccadilloes in Plato’s treatment of women, but to forgive them due to the historical context in which he writes. Levin, for instance, excuses Plato’s sexism, explaining that if “one evaluates Plato’s derogatory comments with the distinction between current (or less than optimal) and ideal circumstances in mind, those remarks need not, and in fact cannot, count as evidence against the view that he seriously intends the proposal concerning women’s equality” (1996, 24). Levinson refers to “cultural optics” and the precautions that one must take to judge Plato’s opinion of women according to the standards of fifth century Athens instead of those of today (1953, 81). These scholars explain that while Plato may not embrace a true and full equality between the sexes, he is certainly ahead of his time (Levinson 1953, 106).

The fourth and final approach we encounter concerning Plato’s treatment of women is condemnation for an undeniable disingenuousness and incorrigible sexism. Elshtain argues that the *Republic* is irretrievably tainted from the start, that the parameters of a decent political community could not issue from a discussion that includes only men (1981, 29). Thus, the same shortcomings which provide forgiveness for one interpretation become grounds for disqualification under this interpretation. Annas (1996) argues that women’s needs and interests are different from men’s, and that Plato ignores the distinction when designing his ideal republic. For Plato, “Nothing at all is said about whether women’s present roles frustrate them or whether they will lead more satisfying lives as guardians than as household drudges” (7). And, finally, there is suspicion from this perspective that Plato is lying, and that “it is unlikely, given his remarks about the nature of their souls elsewhere, that Plato believed many would attain such a status” (Coole 1988, 34).

II. PROBLEMATICS

The first approach, that of ignoring or glossing over the issue of women in the *Republic*, is disappointing and deficient for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that a simple content analysis reveals that Plato discusses women in the *polis* at greater length than he discusses his famous cave or his divided line. This alone is bound to elicit curiosity in students of the “conspicuous by its absence” variety. More profoundly, however, to bypass the discussion of women is to imply that Plato’s position is outmoded, or worse, inappropriate. In short, if Plato is ever to become a respected source of wisdom to our students, we cannot discuss his positions selectively. By ignoring or glossing over his discussion of women, we encourage students to delegitimize his entire teaching.

The other approaches are equally problematic, for, despite their differences, they all address the way in which Plato understands and depicts the *interests* of women. Either those interests are unusually appreciated given their ancient historical context, are begrudgingly attended for the sake of even more important inter-

ests, or are just plain trampled. Placing the discussion in the context of interest puts the students at ease, returning them to the comfort of the liberal paradigm.

Thus, we prefer a new approach to teaching Plato’s treatment of women in the *Republic*, suggesting to our students that Plato does not consider the interests of women, or men for that matter, in the community he discusses. This approach supersedes the issue of Plato’s sexism, and places the discussion on a more exotic plane: the consideration of a political theory not based on interest, a theory quite strange in a universe where liberalism, and its concentration on self-preservation, prevails. We find that the distracting resort to apologetics or condemnation evaporates when we characterize Book Five as the more profound rejection of Thrasymachus’s argument that justice is the interest, or advantage, of the stronger—an argument that resonates with liberal self-promotion.

III. AN ALTERNATIVE TO INTEREST

It is not difficult to garner sympathy among students for the argument that interest is primary in modern politics and human behavior. Many hold that it is an irresistible ontological component. Students are keenly aware of the suspicions that accrue to any advocacy that is not immediately connected to the morphology of the advocates themselves. We expect, and even celebrate, the activism of cancer survivors in efforts to discover a cure. And the university itself reinforces the connection of legitimacy to interest, as we congratulate history teachers’ fight for Western Civilization in the core curriculum, and respect language teachers’ press for expansion of the language requirement (see Lukes 2007). Who better to trust than those who have intimate experience in the field?

Plato, however, is suspicious of the simple correlation of wisdom and experience. Youth and wisdom, for instance, are incompatible because the experiences of youth are innocent and simple. But Cephalus, the old man, remains disgustingly simple despite his age. For Cephalus, philosophy is no more than a new interest, proxy for his diminishing libido. Cephalus is a formidable obstacle to education since his experience, and the respect it elicits from youth, legitimizes his unsophisticated interests. And that is why Socrates summarily dispatches him from the conversation.

Ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender are experienced early in life, so it is not surprising that these identities become targets not only of repugnant discrimination, but of youthful interest. The pedagogical problem, identified in one of Plato’s most eloquent passages (493a-d), occurs when elders exploit their quantitative advantage in popular experiences and turn to teaching. It is, for Plato, a species of pandering, and it represents one of the most dangerous liabilities of democracy (563a). Of course, what is lost in this pedagogy are those rare and undiscovered components of identity, access to which is possible only by escaping the interests accrued through childhood experience and conditioning.

Education for Plato is not intended to make students comfortable through a patronizing legitimation and celebration of their experiences. And we are continually surprised, and pleased, that our students respond to the insecurity of Plato’s identity disruption with a modesty and curiosity not unlike Socrates’ youthful interlocutors. Students understand that although the precocious Glaucon offers an experimental surrogate to suffer the pain (362a), he is no doubt contemplating his own capacities for resisting self-aggrandizement for the sake of something more precious. And teaching Book Five, as an alternative rather than an instance of

interest epistemology can be a valuable component of Glaucon's experiment.

We can now appreciate the famous blush of Thrasymachus, connecting it to the challenges regarding interest that we encourage our students to confront. Thrasymachus is a hardnosed realist, but he is also a *teacher* of hardnosed realism. And as a teacher he realizes that interest is a complex concept, and that his students do not come to him with a full perception of their interests. This is why he so strenuously resists Cleitophon's depiction of his argument as what "seems to be" the advantage of the stronger. This is the beginning of his blush, because he sees that it will not take Socrates long to point out that his success as a teacher actually depends upon a generosity that students and teachers share to suspend their apparent interests in the search for alternatives that surpass merely seeming. Students may sense that they are destined to live in the midst of values that are unexamined and thus only seem to be worthwhile. But they also deserve, and in our experience appreciate, an opportunity to test their suspicions regarding the intellectual vulnerability of those values.

IV. PEDAGOGY

Discussing Book Five within the paradigm of popular interests, we argue, is a disservice to Plato, and misses a lesson of great cogency in the modern university. So here is how we do it. First, we ask the students about the feminism of Plato, its scope and its sincerity. And not surprisingly, the students replicate the approaches we have mentioned (thus providing a subsidiary lesson in Socratic irony). Furthermore, in almost all instances the bulk of opinion gravitates toward Plato's disingenuousness. Many students report that Plato is lying, that he recognizes women only for the sake of raising untainted guardian men, implicitly demanding a Socratic exoneration lest he be condemned to marginalization.

Then, continuing to provoke an atmosphere of hubris, we ask why anyone would want to be a feminist anyway. The common responses are a concern for equal wages, for fair treatment, and for shared childrearing. These, we are often informed, are the unsullied and preferable reasons for promoting a feminist perspective. But it is here, however, where we can point out that the most popular contemporary justifications of feminism are grounded in the liberal concern for self-preservation, and that we may legitimately suspect that feminism may not be such a popular cause if it did not promote a rearrangement of "advantage." What might seem like a generous sympathy to a universal cause appears influenced by an instrumentality, and the purity of modern feminism may be tainted with pragmatism.

By this time, students begin to sense the irony of critiquing Plato for his disingenuousness. So, we can ask, what is the better instrumentality? Promoting women out of self-interest, or promoting women to inspire a perspective that goes beyond interest altogether? The answers are inevitably interesting, but incomplete, since it is not fully clear yet what the alternative to interest is. First we need to revisit Thrasymachus and the blush. Thrasymachus blushes because his preoccupation with common interests is unwise, and he knows that the key to education and edification is the human capacity to consider ideas that have no obvious connection to self-aggrandizement. If Book Five is not considered for this second perspective, the tension experienced

earlier by Thrasymachus is missed, and students are allowed to return to the comfort of the interest epistemology.

This can lead to a fascinating discussion of Plato's supposed idealism. Interspersed with the self-interested connections to feminism there are inevitably some vague references to enhanced humanity, references that tap into the nebulous discomfort mentioned earlier regarding the interest paradigm. When Book Five is assessed from this perspective it becomes possible to ask if in fact it is the pragmatism of interest that may be the most idealistic. How can feminism really succeed if it cannot escape self? Has not feminism, at least the popular versions, really only accrued more "strength," and nothing more noble or rare? It is not difficult to suggest to students that the deepest interests of women are no more considered today than in the age of Aristophanes, that it may be the case that a more vigorous feminism demands a suspension of interest in order to accomplish a more ambitious goal. And, of course, Book Five can be seen as precisely that attempt at suspension.

We need not hide Plato's sexism. The Death Scene is irrefutable evidence. But Book Five is evidence that Plato is willing to consider the rewards of suspending his sexism. In fact, one of the most profound lessons of the *Republic*, severely diluted under improper readings of Book Five, is that interest must be suspended in the acquisition of wisdom. This allows us to see that Book Five is at least as interesting in the context of offending the male agenda as it is of offending the female agenda. Socrates is addressing young men, telling them that the republic demands a surrender of their morphological interests. They cannot learn about a good community without suspending the priorities of the tainted community.

CONCLUSION

We continue to believe that Plato's *Republic* is the most profound and important text in the study of political philosophy. But we are also convinced that contemporary strategies to maintain its status are seriously flawed. Plato does not seek the endorsement or forgiveness of contemporary perspectives on women's concerns. By contextualizing Book Five in the vernacular of interest, scholars and teachers neutralize the very ingredient that distinguishes the book. Plato's complex and controversial discussion of women in his republic, if discussed fully and thoughtfully, can elicit a profound appraisal, if not indictment, of identity politics. There may be no present alternative to identity outside the academy, but the humility that accompanies the scholarly discovery of identity's deficiencies can be very rewarding to a thoughtful student of political philosophy. Book Five of the *Republic* merits serious engagement in the university classroom. ■

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