18

IMAGERY, UTOPIA AND PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

Rachel Barney

For MM McCabe

1.

Even by comparison to Plato's other dialogues, the *Republic* is a remarkably vivid and visual work. It is loaded with memorable images, of many different kinds and vastly differing in scale. At its centre stand the three monumental allegories of the Sun, Line and Cave; as its culmination, the colossal and cosmic myth of Er. Linking them and the whole are a kind of frieze or bas-relief of very diverse smaller figures and scenes: the shepherd finding the tomb and the ring; the two statues of the just and unjust man; the little letters spelling 'justice' and the bigger ones; the rustic idyll of the primordial city; the myth of the autochthonous people and their metallic souls; the sickly carpenter waving off his doctor; Leontius clutching his eyes; the stargazer on the ship, the beast with its keepers, and the philosopher huddled by his little wall; the oligarch's *epithumetikon* enthroned, forcing submission on his reason and his *thumos*; the democratic man amusing himself differently every day, as animals talk back to him; the tyrant with his drones and his bodyguard; the slave-owner marooned with his slaves in a deserted place; the multi-formed Chimera that reveals the inner structure of the human soul; the sea-god Glaucus, his features obscured by barnacles. And that's just a quick inventory of favourites, off the top of my head.

To call all of these picturesque moments 'images' is inadequate and perhaps misleading. They belong to a range of forms, some literal and some figurative: these include allegory, simile, myth, parable and thought experiment. They also differ in complexity, scale, the degree to which they incorporate narrative and their relation to the surrounding argument. It would be a worthwhile if heroic undertaking to develop a proper typology for them, and perhaps – as per the method of collection and division in the *Philebus* – to demarcate the bond which unites them all, if any,

and distinguishes them from their discursive surroundings. Rather than undertake anything so ambitious here, I want to consider the question of why the *Republic* seems to be so rich in such things.

I begin with a puzzle. Consider a quick pre-theoretical version of the question above: is there anything that all of the images I listed have in common? The answer is 'in a way, yes' – but it is something negative, and rather surprising. None of them is an image of the just city, or at any rate not a literal one.[1] If the just city of which the *Republic* gives such a rich account in Books 3–7 is evoked visually at all, it is figuratively – most memorably, by the analogy with the statue with the painted eyes at the start of Book 4 (420c–d). But it is harder than we would expect to think even of such figurative passages. The Cave allegory, for instance, has for its topic human nature and education in a general way (7.514a), even if it is eventually applied to the Guardians in particular (7.519c–21a). Socrates repeatedly speaks of the activity of city-founding and legislation using the analogy of a painter or sculptor (4.420c, 5.472c–e, 6.500c–501c, 7.540c), but this is, so to speak, at the meta level: images of the activity of *city-creation*, and not of the city created. And there is even less imagery, if any at all, of a non-figurative sort.

The *Republic* thus leaves open a very basic question: what does the just city look like? Or rather its answer is that there *is* no answer – no particular way the just city looks. It has no determinate locale, topography or weather; no physical layout, city planning or architectural style; no rivers, no temples, no parks, no statuary, no native dress, no particular cuisine. Of course any realised just city would have to have all those things, but in the *Republic* Plato does not tell us about them: the city founded by Socrates is simply not the subject of memorable *ekphrasis*, descriptive prose, in any respect.[2] I don't mean to claim that there is

1 I use the phrase 'just city' to pick out the political order delineated in Books 3–7 of the *Republic*, in recent scholarship commonly referred to as the Kallipolis: see further in this section for my reservations about that term. I take it that justice is – for Plato as for us – the constitutive virtue of a normative political order, at any level of organisation or scale, so that it is fair to speak of Plato's theory as also one of the just society or just state. (If as I argue in Section 4 Plato is to be taken seriously about the unlocatedness of his just city – if he really means the argument to be open to the possibility of an Egyptian or Scythian instantiation of his political norms – then having the form of a Greek polis cannot be meant as a fixed requirement for a just society.)

2 On *ekphrasis* see Zeitlin 2013. As Zeitlin notes, the properties associated with ancient *ekphrasis* include (2013: 17): '*enargeia* (vividness), *sapheneia* (clarity), and *phantasia* (mental image), which, taken together, aim to turn listeners (or readers) into viewers and to evoke an emotional response through an appeal to the immediacy of an imagined presence'. And, citing Theon (2013: 17–18): '"*Ekphrasis* is a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes." Its final aim is persuasion, as it is meant to arouse the emotions, stimulate recollection (where appropriate), and generally charm an audience with a style appropriate to the subject.' Thus *ekphrasis* need not be limited to descriptions of works of art in particular, in the favoured modern usage; and

absolutely nothing in his account of the just city which could be counted as descriptive – for instance, there is some talk of food, albeit rather negative and unspecific, at 403e–404d – or as visually vivid, such as the reference to naked women doing gymnastics at 457b. But there is extraordinarily little along these lines, and sometimes the contrast with the rest of the work is very marked. Compare for instance the First City of the *Republic*, the 'city of pigs', in Book 2. Here Socrates goes into great detail about the diet of the first inhabitants: we are told of the kneading of loaves of barley and wheat, rushes strewn with yew and myrtle, relishes of acorns and the like; they are depicted enjoying a feast with wine, stretched out before the fire, wearing wreaths and singing (372a–373a). None of this has any counterpart in his account of the Guardians. Here his remarks are brief, abstract and programmatic; almost the only references to specific foodstuffs are to ones they are forbidden (boiled meat, sweets, Attic cakes and so on, 404b–c). At no point are we invited to do with the Guardians what we do with the inhabitants of the First City: namely, to imagine them enjoying a meal.[3] For another contrast, we might think of the *Critias*, which I will briefly discuss in Section 3. Here the detailed and vivid topographical accounts of ancient Athens and Atlantis (110c–121c) have no counterpart in the *Republic*'s – otherwise, of course, far more comprehensive – presentation of the just city. If we imagine Plato as continually adjusting a stylistic dial, choosing either to bring into focus his topic with vivid and evocative language or to present it in schematic and abstract terms, then in the *Republic* this dial is apparently set by default in two very different places, depending on whether or not the topic is the just city.

Neither does narrative seem to be a mode applicable to the just city. There are no named Guardians, no stories about its heroic founders and their genealogy, no wars or historical turning points to be marked.[4] At least for the bulk of Plato's discussion, the just city does not even have a name: it is simply the city, as the rulers are simply the rulers and the work itself is simply *The Constitution* – not the *Constitution of* this

it may or may not incorporate narrative. That *ekphrasis* is used to charm and persuade is important for the association with Utopia which I discuss in Section 2.

3 Even when presented in the future tense, like his envisioned banquet in the city of pigs, Plato's comments on the Guardians' way of life look more like this: 'And all of them will be together, since they have common houses and mess, with no one privately possessing anything of the kind' (458c) – a mere summary which picks out the politically necessary condition, with no details.

4 Until, inevitably, it degenerates into something else; and even then, with the 'nuptial number', Plato's mode is that of natural-scientific prediction rather than history or storytelling. The Muses are invoked, but their tale remains a long way from traditional myth with its physical details and naming of names (545d–7c).

people or that, as would be normal for the genre, but the thing *an sich*.[5] In recent decades, interpreters have taken to calling Socrates' city by the name Kallipolis, but that is a dangerously misleading convenience.[6] In the *Republic* itself the term *Kallipolis* occurs only once (527c), which is not how names work. We can perhaps imagine a locution serving to name some object though occurring only once in a very long discussion devoted to it – a *hapax onomazomenon*, if you like – if that name were presented as an esoteric revelation, or produced as the result of an elaborate baptism ceremony or etymological construction. But the fleeting appearance of *Kallipolis* has none of this quality of revelation. It comes *after* the business of city-construction has been done, in an *en passant* comment about the teaching of geometry: '"Then to the greatest extent possible," I said, "the men in your beautiful city must be enjoined in no way to abstain from geometry. For even its by-products aren't slight"' (7.527c1–3).[7] Since Kallipolis was the name for a number of real Greek communities in Plato's day, all of them insignificant,[8] we are probably meant to see its occurrence here as a deprecating little joke, reinforced by the mock disavowal implicit in Socrates' '*your*'. It is as if Socrates were to refer to his own monumental philosophical creation, in a throwaway line, as 'that Anytown of yours', or 'Springfield'. (If as seems likely Kallipolis was a dismally trite name specifically for an *apoikia*, a colony or planned community, perhaps even 'PleasantView Acres' or 'Glengarry Glen Ross'.)[9] If the joke has a function beyond a moment of ironic self-deprecation, it can only be to draw our attention to the fact that Socrates has *not* equipped his city with a name: we are being prompted to wonder why that is.

2.

So we are faced with a paradox. In the crowded imaginative landscape of the *Republic*, the large central zone taken up by the just city has been left an austere blank. What explains this oddity? What does it tell us about

5 On this genre, and with a convincing argument that the *Republic* should be seen as belonging to it, see Menn 2006.

6 I am not sure of the origin of the practice, but it is unknown to Grote 1888, who speaks of 'the Platonic Commonwealth', and Jowett 1888, who speaks of the 'ideal State' – either of which seems to me less likely to mislead.

7 Citations from the *Republic* are from the translation of Bloom 1991, sometimes with revisions.

8 For *Kallipoleis* and *Kallipolitai* see Pape and Benseler 1884: 603.

9 Thus I am sceptical about Adam's comment that 'The word … is full of tenderness and affection' (1902, vol. 2: 119 note *ad loc.*). Presumably most real *Kallipoleis* were so dubbed by self-serving founders and promoters, and alternative origin stories are not necessarily pretty: 'Mount Pleasant' in London began as the sarcastic name for a slum surrounding a garbage dump.

Plato's purposes? We might be tempted by a quick and obvious answer: the just city is not the kind of thing to be envisioned because it is the Just City, a Platonic Form, and so belongs to the intelligible rather than the visible realm. But that answer seems to me to overshoot. As Myles Burnyeat has argued, there can be no such Form; the Forms relevant to the undertaking of the *Republic* are simply those of the virtues.[10]

What the absence of imagery does tell us, it seems to me, is something negative, specific and rather striking. It tells us that Plato's just city is not a Utopia – not at any rate if we use the term properly and in a strict sense. By Utopia in the strict sense I mean the modern literary genre inaugurated by More, though understood timelessly and so as in principle able to include earlier texts such as the *Republic* (and non-Western ones as well).[11] The terms 'Utopia' and 'Utopian' are in fact ambiguous in English in a number of ways, some harmless and some not. Most basically, 'Utopia' refers to both *Utopia-the-genre* and *Utopia-the-place*. *Utopia-the-genre* is a vision, a depiction, a portrait – it is almost impossible to think of an apt term which is not visual – of a perfect society: that is, *Utopia-the-place*. As such, *Utopia-the-genre* is a species of literary rhetoric. It aims to persuade us first that the society depicted, *Utopia-the-place*, is a best or perfect social order; and second, just as importantly, that it is a possible one. Or at least a Utopian work *presents* itself as doing so: the author may complicate matters in all sorts of self-undermining ways, as More himself seems to do with his jokey nomenclature and other distancing devices.[12]

There is also of course a much broader sense: political philosophers use 'Utopian' for any project in political philosophy which proposes as best a radically 'other', unlikely or impracticable political order, as a political paradigm and standpoint for critique.[13] It is in this broad sense, for the most part, that scholars have long discussed whether Plato's *Republic* qualifies as a Utopia.[14] For what it is worth, in light of the outline I just

10 See Burnyeat 1992 [repr. 1999]. I disagree, however, with Burnyeat's conclusion, offered as if it were the only alternative, that 'Kallipolis is a perfect but imaginary particular exemplification of justice' (1999: 298). The just city of the *Republic* is not a Form, but it is not a particular exemplification either; and we are not encouraged, or even enabled, to imagine it.

11 I will not here attempt even an overview of the concept and history of Utopia: see Carey 1999 for excerpts from an impressively various range of texts, and Manuel and Manuel 1979 for an overview of the Utopian tradition in the West. See also Section 3 below on the ancient proto-Utopian tradition.

12 On the very complicated and ambivalent intertextual relations between More's *Utopia* in particular and the *Republic* as its acknowledged forerunner, see Logan 1983 and Corrigan 1990.

13 For a defence of the legitimacy of Utopian political thought in this broad sense see Estlund 2011 and 2014.

14 Recent contributions along these lines include Bobonich 2002, Brisson 2020, Burnyeat 1992 [repr. 1999], El Murr 2021, Ferrari 2013, Laks 1991 and 2022: ch. 2, Lisi 2013,

gave of the broader sense, it seems to me that the answer to that question must be yes. But I am doubtful that the debate is worth having, given how much of it goes on at cross purposes. Interpreters come to it with utterly opposed assumptions about what the term imports: for some authors, it is only a genuinely possible Utopia which deserves the name; for others, Utopia excludes possibility. Thus Popper holds that the *Republic* is *both* Utopian (chapter 9) and a 'topical political manifesto', meant to be actionable (1962 [1945]: 153); whereas Brisson takes 'utopian' to imply the absence of a practical political programme, and so argues that 'Plato was not a utopian, but an impotent revolutionary, who nevertheless served as a model for those who were called "utopians" after him' (2020: 419). There may be a deep philosophical disagreement here, but it is only masked and confused by conflicting assumptions about the basic meaning of the word. More generally it is hard to see what this floating signifier, always more *explanandum* than *explanans*, has anything to offer interpreters which the phrase 'radical political critique' (or 'radical political theory', or 'ideal theory') could not.[15]

Worse, it seems to me that this broad concept of the Utopian represents a trap. For it lumps together very different kinds of philosophical project, as the case of Plato can show. The difference can be seen if you pick up any classic of the Utopian genre *sensu stricto*, be it by More, Fourier, Voltaire, Morris, Bellamy or James Hilton. What you will find in any one of them is *ekphrasis* run riot.[16] Any Utopia properly so called has everything Plato's city lacks, and more, described with vivid precision and often at mind-numbing length: a physical location and topography; buildings, city planning and transportation; a style of dress, furniture and material culture; a complex history; and a population of individuals, many of them named and almost always including a guide happy to discourse endlessly

Morrison 2007, Schofield 2006: ch. 5, Vegetti 2000 and 2009: ch. 9, and Zuolo 2013. (And this is far from a complete list.) But insofar as such readings help us to get clear about the *Republic*, I would suggest, it is no thanks to the concept Utopia itself – except in the somewhat perverse respect that noting the traps built into the term, and disentangling Plato from them, can be elucidating. (Thus, for instance, Morrison 2007 finds it necessary to distinguish between 'utopia' and 'mere utopia', where the latter picks out the presumed-to-be-impossible species; Ferrari speaks of a 'realistic kind of utopianism', 2013: 131.) See also nn. 15 and 17 below.

15 In addition to having directly conflicting intuitions about the relation of Utopia to possibility, interpreters to varying degrees blur this together with the question whether Plato's just city is 'practicable' and the like (for instance, Burnyeat 1992 [repr. 1999]). This alone would be enough to render the debate interminable, since the distinction between possibility and practicability or likelihood is one on which Plato insists (see Section 4).

16 For More, see *Utopia*; for Edward Bellamy, the futuristic-socialist *Looking Forward*; for William Morris, the futuristic-artisanal *News from Nowhere*; for Voltaire, the Eldorado of *Candide* chh. 17–18; and for James Hilton, the Shangri-La of *Lost Horizon*. For Fourier I draw on the selections in Carey 1999.

on local ways while taking the visitor shopping.[17] The original edition of More's *Utopia* had a woodcut *Utopiae insulae figurae* on the recto of the title page and, facing it, a made-up alphabet – just like Tolkien. (Try to imagine that for the *Republic* and you will see the difference I am getting at.) The same physical specificity and sensory vividness marks the most famous Chinese Utopia, the *Peach Blossom Spring* by Tao Yuanming.[18] My own favourite exercise in the genre, the children's book *The Twenty-One Balloons* by William Pène du Bois, tells the story of a desert island society of perfect leisure and affluence hidden away on pre-explosion Krakatoa. The handpicked group of families making up Krakatoan society 'have an unusual Constitution … sort of a Restaurant Government', as the helpful guide Mr F. explains: they devote themselves, completely happily, to entertaining each other in turn in pavilions dedicated to various national cuisines.[19]

The *Republic*'s avoidance of *ekphrasis* is not just a superficial departure from this modern form. For it is not merely contingent or traditional that Utopias are marked by *ekphrasis* – that, indeed, they are most often travelogues, with an inquisitive visitor standing in for the reader and having the scene explained to him. *Ekphrasis* is designed to charm and persuade, and the vividness and sheer quantity of Utopian *ekphrasis* are like the elaborate details of a clever lie in Homer or archaic Greek poetry. They work on our imagination so as to generate a vivid, pseudo- or quasi-sensible experience of what is being recounted; thereby they induce suspension of disbelief, persuading us that Utopia the place is both possible and perfect. *Ekphrasis* is, we might say, what a Utopia has in place of argument. (I will turn in Section 4 to look at the radically different means by which Plato argues for the possibility of the just city.)

This ekphrastic orientation to persuasion, perfection and possibility explains a number of *Utopia-the-genre*'s more problematic features. Utopian works are for the most part boring and something of a challenge to read – not necessarily because a perfect society *would* be boring, as is sometimes inferred (a mistake with serious consequences for political philosophy), but because the sheer quantity of descriptive prose required

17 The insightful Zuolo 2013 makes it a constitutive feature of Utopia that it present the perfect society 'in its most specific and concrete details, as if it were an existing entity' and that this representation be comprehensive, including 'all aspects of social and individual life' (2013: 141). And he correctly notes that by this criterion, the *Republic* fails to be a Utopia (2013: 144), giving instead 'a very abstract blueprint' in the manner of ideal theory. However, Zuolo also holds that another one of the criteria for Utopian status is impossibility – a good example of the over-simple assumptions which make the whole discussion unhelpful.

18 This fascinating, *echt*-Utopian Chinese text of the fourth to fifth century CE is discussed by Engels 2021 in Destrée et al. 2021.

19 Pène du Bois 1947.

to persuade us of perfection and possibility precludes much else, and eventually outruns the reader's patience. (By contrast, popular and unsystematic Utopias like Shangri-La or Restaurant Constitution Krakatoa can be highly attractive, since here the detail is not comprehensive, but subordinated to the telling of a good story.) Moreover, Utopian works in the end almost always have a complex, problematic relation to the claim of possibility on which they so emphatically insist. It is not just that particular aspects of any proposed perfect society will strike the reader as impossible or very difficult to realise (or, again, as not so perfect in the first place). A less contingent difficulty is that the strenuous, insistent rhetorical effort of Utopia-building draws attention to itself, and so leads the reader to question it. Moreover, the stipulation of perfection in some state of affairs or system does make it imaginatively difficult to work in spontaneity, change and surprise, and with them most kinds of narrative. This tendency to exclude narrative is in turn the – or anyway one – reason that *Utopia-the-place* seems to attempt to stifle human nature, so that Utopias almost always seem to be haunted by the spectre of Dystopia. Of course more needs to be said about all this, and every exercise in the genre has its unique relation to these structural difficulties. My point is merely a general cautionary one. The most immediately unattractive features of Utopia – the objections which lead freshman students to for the most part reject the Utopian project on their final exams – are inherited from *Utopia-the-genre*. They are problems of literary form and imagination, not of political theory.

If this is right, then it is question-begging to use *Utopia* and *Utopian* in a broad, ostensibly genre-neutral sense, for all projects of ideal theory or radical critique.[20] In practice, this broad use of 'Utopia' operates to unfairly insinuate against all radical political thought lines of criticism which are valid only against a very particular kind of imaginative and

20 I thank my colleagues William Paris and Owen Ware for spirited argument on this point, in connection with their seminar on Utopian political thought in Spring 2023. Their opposing view is that 'Utopian' has a legitimate broad use for the project of political theory which adopts the standpoint of a deeply 'other' perspective for a radical critique of existing arrangements. This conception of Utopia as above all a defamiliarising critique is certainly an important aspect of the modern Utopian tradition, with an *echt*-Morean lineage. (It is also found in some strands of ancient proto-Utopian thought, for instance in the figure of Anacharsis.) But I would maintain that insofar as this critique is grounded on the contrastive vision of a remote but somehow magically embodied perfection – insofar as it really is Utopian – it inevitably gives hostages to its enemies. To put it bluntly, the deformations of *Utopia-the-genre* seem to me insoluble, and *Utopia-the-place* cannot be wholly extricated from that literary impulse; better, surely, to engage in radical, defamiliarising political critique simply as such and to call it by that name. I am also in sympathy with the argument of Kwesi Thomas (ms) that self-aware, real-world ethnography can do better than Utopia much of the work which Utopia is supposed to do.

literary exercise. The librarians are wiser here than the political theorists: the Library of Congress system locates Utopia deep in the wild woods of H, with its own call number HX, far away from theories of justice in JC. That seems to me to be a correct estimate of the distance between Plato's *Republic* and genuinely Utopian thought, since (to return now to Plato and the main point at hand) *Utopia-the-genre* is a genre to which Plato's *Republic* markedly does not belong. Plato's rigorous avoidance of the most striking and deeply motivated feature of the genre, *ekphrasis*, shows that he is up to something fundamentally different: a radical project of political critique and normative theory in a *non*-Utopian mode.

3.

So far I have considered two anachronistic questions: whether Plato's work belongs to the genre for which More's *Utopia* provides the index case (no), and whether the broader sense of the concept 'Utopian' used in contemporary political philosophy can be applied to it (better not). Adjacent to these is a third, more contextualised question: whether the *Republic* belongs to a distinctive *ancient* mode of writing which could reasonably be called 'Utopian' in an extended sense.[21] If it is wrong to say that Plato is writing a Utopia in the strict sense, and unhelpful to wonder whether he is doing so in some highly contested broader sense, might it still be true that his project is *proto-Utopian* – that he is doing the closest thing available to him at the time? Was the concept or genre of anything like a Utopian project available to Plato himself, and if so does the *Republic* instantiate it?

In truth nothing *very* much like the works of More, Morris or Bellamy has come down to us from the ancient Greek world; the ancient works which scholars have come to class as Utopian cover a much wider range, displaying very diverse stirrings in the direction of the modern genre. We find such proto-Utopian impulses, as we might call them, scattered across works of widely different genres; by Plato's day these already include histories, travel narratives, comedies, ethnographies and eschatologies, as well as works of political *Constitutions*.

I cannot here survey the pre-Platonic evidence; but it seems to me sufficiently rich that it is not at all difficult to imagine a writer of Plato's creative power pulling together the strands and resources of diverse

21 On the question of ancient Utopias I again cannot offer even a survey of the evidence: see Dawson 1992, Schofield 1999, Destrée et al. 2021 and the still valuable and endlessly diverting Boas and Lovejoy 1935. I do not here address the question of whether the reception of the *Republic* generated something like a Utopian genre in the ancient world; on the successor texts to the *Republic* by such figures as Diogenes the Cynic and Zeno of Citium, see Dawson 1992 and Schofield 1999: ch. 3.

precursors to invent something close to the modern genre. That is, Plato could indeed have chosen to write a Utopia in the strict sense: that is, to describe his conception of the just city in rich ekphrastic detail, so as to persuade us imaginatively of its perfection and possibility. And it is in fact quite easy to imagine what that alternative *Republic* would have looked like. A Platonic Utopia *Republic* would have been – just like the modern ones – a travelogue, retailing the wise and just laws and ancient practices of some picturesque virtuous Other people: Scythians or Hyperboreans or Persians or Egyptians. As a pretext for surveying the institutions of this exemplary society, we would likely have followed in detail the early life, education and rise to power of a model citizen-ruler: an Anacharsis or Zalmoxis, with an etymologically significant name, a portentous genealogy and a tedious array of every possible virtue and grace, surrounded by a representative array of mentors and supporters. In short, a genuinely Utopian – *sensu stricto* – *Republic* was indeed a possibility open to Plato. It would have been remarkably like Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, and utterly unlike the *Republic* we have.[22]

We can get a better grip on this contrast if we ask: are there moments in Plato's own work where we *do* glimpse the proto-Utopian imagination at work? Two texts immediately come to mind. One is in the *Republic* itself, and I have already noted it in Section 1 as a sample of Platonic *ekphrasis*: the Book 2 depiction of the First City, or (as per Glaucon's scathing dismissal) the city of pigs.[23] This primordial rustic Arcadia is lightly sketched; but that makes it all the more striking that it includes exactly what the account of the just city does not, and vice versa. So far as we are told, the city of pigs has no educational institutions, political norms or class system: none of the features which are constitutive of the just city later on. It does on the other hand have a material culture and a cuisine, described in some detail. This is not only a significant marker of the Utopian genre in the modern era, with its Restaurant Constitutions: a prominent ancient vehicle for proto-Utopian thought was the comic realm later known as Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, a peasant paradise in which wine flows like a river and sausages grow on trees, branches bending as

22 For an illuminating comparison of the projects of the *Cyropaedia* and *Republic*, see Grote 1888: 421–42.

23 In Barney 2001, I argue that the City is a *suggestio falsi*, presupposing a radical departure from human nature. Since in the absence of a political order the appetites of its inhabitants would have to be magically self-regulating, it is not possible; and since it offers no appropriate work for philosophical natures, though every inhabitant is to work full-time at a craft devoted to supplying some necessity of life, it would be unjust if it did. If this reading is right, then strictly speaking the First City belongs to a subgenre of counter-Utopias ('dystopia' would perhaps be going too far) in which the reader is to detect that what is ostensibly presented as an ideal in fact *fails* to meet the condition of possibility, or that of perfection, or, as in this case, both.

they serve themselves to the passerby. (The austerity of the city of pigs perhaps suggests a critical response to that genre.)[24] The city of pigs thus confirms by way of contrast what the *Cyropaedia* already shows: that the literary resources for something close to Utopia – that is, again, an ekphrastic account of a fantasised particular ideal society – were available to Plato. When it comes to the account of the just city later in the *Republic*, however, the lid of that toolkit is slammed shut.

The same contrast emerges even more strongly if we turn to the other candidate Platonic proto-Utopian text: the *Critias*. The *Critias*, so far as it goes, is remarkably Utopian. It is a kind of travelogue, albeit without the diegetic aid of the later standard figures of visitor and guide. The fragment as we have it consists of extended *ekphrasis* of two exotic normative societies, ancient Athens and Atlantis, with Critias' narrative at the opening of the *Timaeus* supplying a standard distancing/authenticating (and orientalising) backstory. Both depictions are heavy on topography and landscape architecture, with the result that the *Critias* is, let's be frank, every bit as hard to read as its modern Utopian counterparts. And all of this is advertised as build-up to a historical narrative. The mandate of the *Critias*, assigned in the *Timaeus*, is to do what the *Republic* did *not*: to show the just city exercising its virtues in war and in dealings with other cities (*Timaeus* 19b–20b; compare *Critias* 108e–109a). Were the *Critias* to continue, it presumably would be rich not only in further *ekphrasis* of the topography, ethnography and material culture peculiar to both societies, but in narrative, with particular named characters, places and events of just the kind which the *Republic* eschews.

So the *Critias*, in striking contrast to the *Republic*, is a strong candidate for a proto-Utopian text; and it is surely highly significant that its mandate is to *complement* the *Republic*'s account of the just city. But it is equally significant and striking that the *Critias* is, so far as we can tell, a deliberately and explicitly unfinished work, abandoned by its author.[25] That means that, insofar as the possibility was available to him, Plato rejects the Utopian mode *twice*: once silently, by avoiding *ekphrasis* in the account of the just city in the *Republic*, and a second time quasi-explicitly, by proposing it in the *Critias* but refusing to follow through.

24 See Boas and Lovejoy 1935 for the extensive fragmentary evidence; Aristophanes' *Birds* is the most intellectually ambitious and intriguing surviving work along these lines.

25 I mean here to be neutral between two possibilities: that the *Critias* was intended from the start to be the fragment we now have and that, having initially intended a complete work, Plato himself was too bored to go on with it. The only possibility on which the *Critias* does not sustain my point about Plato's rejection of Utopia is if it represents the beginning of an originally complete Utopian text which has otherwise been lost: not only is there no evidence for this, the otherwise complete preservation of Plato's works strongly tells against it.

4.

In sum, the account of the just city in the *Republic* is, in a quite precise sense, the *opposite* of a Utopia: it is a project in radical political theory which is nonetheless an *ekphrasis*-free zone. Moreover, this seems to represent a conscious authorial strategy, even if the thing being avoided does not yet, in Plato's era, have a name or a fully established generic identity. It seems reasonable to suppose that this choice on Plato's part speaks to the basic identity and agenda of the work at hand. So let us ask: if the *Republic* refuses to be a Utopia, what is it instead?

An initial answer is obvious, if a bit crude: the *Republic* is an *argument*, in a way in which a Utopia is not. Plato's resources here are rational and dialectical, not imaginative. This contrast between the dialectic of the *Republic* and the rhetoric of Utopia becomes particularly visible if we focus on the question of possibility. I have proposed that in a Utopia, the burden of convincing the reader on that point is borne by persuasively vivid *ekphrasis*: that is one reason why there has to be so much of it. For Plato too the question whether the just city is possible is of the greatest importance; but his approach is entirely different.[26] Socrates' dialectic addresses the question of possibility head-on and explicitly; he argues briefly – but clearly, explicitly and repeatedly – that the just city as specified *is* possible (5.471e–474b, 6.499b–d, 502a–c and 7.540d–e). These arguments are short, and perhaps not Plato's best. Certainly they are deeply unsatisfying if what we want is what Utopian *ekphrasis* aims to provide, namely an imaginatively robust and persuasive sense that the city described is plausible, practicable, viable, practical, workable, realistic – since, after all, it is already *there*, only a sea voyage away. Scholarly and in-class discussions of the possibility of Plato's just city almost always slide into worries about these other by-no-means equivalent notions. How exactly they differ and which we should care about are questions with their own importance for political thought. But Plato is explicit in claiming that they are not his problem. He has Socrates say as much repeatedly:

> 'Well, it was on account of this,' I said, 'foreseeing it then, that we were frightened; but, all the same, compelled by the truth, we said that neither city nor regime will ever become perfect, nor yet will a man become perfect in the same way either, before some necessity chances to constrain those few philosophers who aren't vicious, those now called useless, to take charge of a city, whether they want to or not, and the city to obey; or a true erotic passion for true philosophy

26 For interesting discussions of Socrates' account of possibility see Laks 1990 and 2022: ch. 2, Ferrari 2013 and Lisi 2013 (for which I rely on the report of Macé 2013).

> flows from some divine inspiration into the sons of those who hold power or the office of king, or into the fathers themselves. I deny that there is any reason why either or both of these things is impossible. If that were the case we would justly be laughed at for uselessly saying things that are like prayers. Or isn't that so?'
>
> 'Yes, it is.'
>
> 'Well then, if there has been some necessity for those who are expert in philosophy to take charge of a city in the infinite time that has gone past, or there even now is one in some foreign place, somewhere far outside our range of vision; or if there will be one later – for this we are ready to do battle in speech, that the regime spoken of has been and is and will be, whenever this Muse has become master of a city. For it's not impossible for this to happen, nor are we claiming impossible things. That they are difficult, we in fact grant.'
>
> (499b1–d6)

Socrates grants the difficulty of the just city; he claims no more for it than mere possibility, by which, as his emphatic phrasing makes clear, he means no more than non-*im*possibility (see also 502a–c). And the emphasis here is not even so much on that weak claim as on the conditional: *if* philosophers ever do take charge of a city, regardless of the time or place, they *will* instantiate the city that has been described. The city is possible for the simple reason that it is not impossible for this to happen.

This point about possibility – what we might call *the possibility claim* – demands a more careful look. For Plato is in fact concerned with two distinct, though complementary claims: (1) *the general possibility claim* that the just city, with the constitutive features he has laid out for it, would, *once founded*, be stable, functional and long-lived (indeed it is stipulated to be as long-lived as any city can be); and (2) *the transitional possibility claim* (or we might call it the *genesis* claim) that its coming into being (*gignesthai*) is possible. The crucial passages at 5.472e–473e, where Socrates first asserts the thesis of philosophical rule, and at 6.502a–c, where he reaffirms it, are both primarily concerned with the transitional possibility claim. Socrates' argument in these passages is that it is possible for his city to *gignesthai*, 'come into being', because a philosophical ruler, the one key change that could bring it about, is not itself an impossibility.[27] The 499b–d passage, cited above, reaffirms this argument for the

27 Note that it is almost exclusively in relation to the transitional possibility claim that Plato refers to his Guardians in terms which later give rise to the compound 'philosopher-kings' (see especially 473c–d, 499b–c): his point is not that this is a correct way of referring to his rulers, but that those who are *antecedently* kings or despots might take up philosophy sufficiently to impose the required framework for the just city. Like 'Kallipolis', the scholarly use of the term 'philosopher-king' as canonical

transitional possibility claim; but it knits this together with an important move in the argument for *general* possibility. In rejecting the charge of 'saying things that are like prayers' (also recalled at 7.540d), it reminds us of 5.456b–c, which argued that it is appropriate – part of the justice of the just city, in fact – for women to become Guardians, sharing fully in the education and tasks of that class. Here Socrates concluded as follows:

> 'Then we weren't giving laws that are impossible or like prayers, since the law we were setting down is according to nature. Rather, the way things are nowadays proves to be, as it seems, against nature.'
>
> 'So it seems.'
>
> 'Weren't we considering whether what we say is possible and best?'
>
> 'Yes, we were.'
>
> 'And that it is possible, then, is agreed?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> (456c1–9)

These are the practices which are then said not to be 'impossibilities' (*adunata*) at 499d4–5. And we can now see that Socrates' line of argument here, for the general possibility of a city with these practices, is quite different from that offered for the transitional possibility claim. In relation to the general possibility claim, he deliberately overshoots: he argues not merely for the bare non-impossibility of a city with the practices specified, but for its naturalness. The radical practices sketched in the 'three waves' of Book 5 are according to nature (*kata phusin*), not against it (*para phusin*); and what is according to nature cannot be impossible. (The point is meant to generalise, I believe, to all the practices of the just city, for its founding principle is the same one at work in Book 5: each citizen will pursue the work (*ergon*) which best accords with their nature (*phusis*).) As he makes clear, Socrates does not want to claim that the just city is easily founded – on the contrary. But neither is the general possibility claim one of bare logical or physical possibility, mere non-exclusion by the laws of nature. It meets a (rather vague, admittedly) higher standard we might call *natural possibility*, which a state of affairs has by being in accordance with the natures of things, and human nature in particular. Natural possibility secures logical and physical possibility, and that is all the work Plato explicitly asks it to do. But presumably it has wider implications: the absence of any friction with the deepest structural features of human nature must also be his basis for supposing that the just city will be maximally long-lived.

is recent, un-Platonic and misleading. Plato's own proprietary name for the rulers of the just city is Guardians; he also refers to them in more generic terms as rulers.

There is a great deal more to be said about Socrates' possibility arguments, but I want to focus on a small moment which, though unemphasised, seems to me importantly load-bearing for Plato's argument. At 499c–d, Socrates carefully makes an important pair of stipulations: that the just city might be instantiated in *any* place and in *any* time, including the remote past or in a foreign land beyond our ken (*barbaros topos*) (compare *Timaeus* 24a–c). This comes as a surprise. Presumably it is to be read as a correction of the dialectic so far, since it was rather casually assumed in the discussion of warfare shortly before that the just city would be Greek (at 5.470e, but ratifying a presumption at work since 469b). The correction is only to be expected, given that it is human nature as such which sets the baseline for natural possibility. And it should cease to surprise on further reflection: given his respect for the wisdom of certain foreign traditions, notably including the already ancient Egyptians, Plato would hardly wish to restrict the possibility of the just city to Greeks alone (see *Timaeus* 24a–c). Moreover, this principle of *unlocatedness*, as I will call it, is very useful to Plato's argument.[28] For it is clearly intended to defend both possibility claims from an obvious empirical or inductive worry. In practice, neither Socrates' interlocutors nor Plato's readers (as he safely guesses) have ever seen or heard of anything remotely like his just city. And that might seem like a telling objection to it – a probable (*eikōs*) argument that such a city either could never be founded by the wise or would not endure if it did, so that one possibility claim or the other must be false. Plato's reasonable response – and here there is a genuine point of kinship with the properly Utopian political theorist, with his depiction of a wholly successful political Other – is to urge us to ascend and consider a more panoramic view. He is pointing out how comparatively tiny, restricted and parochial our frame of reference is. We do not know what the possibilities or even the probabilities are: an unknowably high proportion of the regimes ever to be instantiated are simply unknown to us.

So the just city of the *Republic* is unlocated: it belongs to no particular time or place, or by implication cultural context. No wonder, then, that Socrates avoids giving his just city a name; and no wonder that it cannot be a Utopia, described in vivid, culturally specific detail. It would be wrong to say that a just city could have *any* kind of architecture, food or poetry at all, since many kinds would not be conducive to virtue and so would be excluded by wise rulers. But beyond certain abstract principles (such as those given at 3.401a–402c), we apparently can say little or nothing about the cultural practices of a just city which would be true in every case.

28 The importance of the unlocatedness of the just city has not often been recognised, but see again Burnyeat 1992 [repr. 1999].

If I am right to take unlocatedness seriously, it has important implications for our understanding of the *Republic* as a whole. It implies, for instance, that the Greek-centred discussion of warfare in Book 5 was not only subject to correction but cannot have been anything more than *exempli gratia*, a model for the *kind* of progressive (albeit ethnocentric) attitude to warfare which any just society would take. Likewise the earlier invocation of the Delphic oracle to found the city's religious customs; likewise, above all, the very long and systematic discussion of the censorship of Homer. Philosophical rulers of a just city among the antediluvian Egyptians or postmodern Hyperboreans obviously would not have to worry about which bits of Homer to admit into their city. But they will find that they have to do the same thing, *mutatis mutandis*, with their own poetic and artistic traditions; Socrates' discussion provides a template to illustrate the general principles by which they will do so.[29]

The unlocatedness principle meshes nicely with the general underdetermination of the just city in the *Republic*. For as has often been noted, even its political and legal institutions – the bits that Plato *does* care about, one would think, in contrast to topography and cuisine – are radically underspecified. Rather shockingly, there is almost no discussion of the just city's actual government: of what offices (*archai*) will exist in the just city, and how their occupants will be chosen.[30] What will the supreme political offices be, how many people will fill them, and on what basis? Will the whole body of the Guardians ever vote on anything? Will there be electoral mechanisms, representative bodies, a division of labour by special talents or expertise, term limits, accountability mechanisms, a Supreme Soviet? Plato's *Constitution* leaves out in its entirety what one would expect such a work to focus on, namely a constitution – that is, a specification of the machinery of the regime by which it is governed. What Plato is concerned to set out is rather something still more fundamental, on his view: the cultural and educational framework necessary for the generation

29 For reasons of space I here defer to another occasion a discussion of 472d–473a, the famous passage in which, drawing on the idea of a perfect paradigm (such as a painting of a most beautiful person), Socrates requests a somewhat mysterious concession: 'Then don't compel me to affirm that things just like the ones we went through in speech must also come into being comprehensively in practice' (473a5–7, as I controversially translate it). The passage is commonly read as making a partial retraction of the possibility claims, conceding that no real city could do more than defectively approximate the city Socrates has delineated: see for instance Laks 1990, 1991 and 2022. For my part I do not understand why Socrates would make such a concession, what he could mean by it, or how it could be compatible with the rest of his argument. I hope elsewhere to make the case for a different kind of 'approximation reading', on which the point at hand is rather just this one about multiple realisability.

30 Lane 2023: ch. 7 convincingly shows that Plato assumes that there *will* be offices (*archai*) in the just city; but this makes his refusal to say anything adequate about them all the more marked.

of a trustworthy ruling class. That is, what he cares about is something he takes to be *prior* to constitutional questions – a preconstitution, one might call it. The preconstitution for a just city, according to Plato, consists in the principle of specialisation, the control of art by a wise ruling power, and the system outlined for elite education. In contrast to his rich and careful specifications on these three points, it evidently makes no difference at all by what formal mechanisms the just city is governed.[31] This is an astonishingly radical claim about what does and does not matter for the health of a political community – roughly, the claim that politics itself does *not* matter, insofar as it involves questions detachable from matters of culture, education and the division of labour. These preconstitutional features provide a recipe he considers to be adequate for a political elite who will be able and willing to rule intelligently, selflessly and for the common good – by constitutional, political and legal mechanisms which are otherwise left to them to design.

Plato's thesis of the adequacy of the preconstitutional order for justice thus implies an extraordinary degree of *delegation* (made explicit at 425d–e): an adequate ruling class, the Guardians, can be trusted to figure out constitutional matters for themselves. And unlocatedness and delegation together imply a high degree of *multiple realisability*. Platonically just cities founded in various cultures might do things quite differently – within certain strict parameters, of course. Perhaps one just city might allocate offices on the basis of voting among the Guardian class, another on the basis of seniority. We should not expect the mechanics of philosophical rule to look the same in Egypt and in Hyperborea.

At this point we can see yet another significance attaching to the fact that the *Republic* is not a Utopia – perhaps the deepest one. As I noted in Section 1, a Utopia is a fully and richly specified depiction of a particular *perfect* society. And the ekphrastic comprehensiveness of *Utopia-the-genre* excludes any significant possibility of multiple realisation. The jewellery of Utopia is *ex hypothesi* the best jewellery, its gardens the finest gardens, its cuisine the optimal cuisine: it is a culturally fully determinate particular, in relation to which any deviation or approximation could only

31 See 4.445d for his indifference to the question of constitutional form (and compare 6.502b). Plato clearly does not envisage a society with a one-person Guardian *class*; the prospect is rather that this class might produce a single figure so outstanding that its natural constitutional form would be solo *rule*. But one immediately wonders how the class as a whole would decide on that, and what its more customary alternative form of government would be, questions on which Plato is studiously silent. His real purpose at 445d–e is indeed to signal his indifference to precisely these kinds of constitutional questions. In a truly just city, Plato insists, even the foundational-looking constitutional question of 'rule by how many?' will be determined ad hoc. It comes far downstream from the only question which really matters: is there to be rule by the wise, or something else?

amount to defectiveness. This is why Utopia can only be a place which a traveller visits and returns from: nobody who has been to Shangri-La or Krakatoa can really come back aspiring to recreate it in their hometown. Too many *mutandis* would have to be *mutatis*. (And to suppose that this limitation on Utopia tells us anything about the unrealisability of a fully just society would again be to mistake the constraints of a literary genre for findings of political philosophy.) Plato's just city does not face this difficulty because it is not a city at all; it is a minimalist template for one, which can in principle be realised wherever cultural and economic conditions allow, completed with the materials locally to hand.

5.

So the *Republic* is not a *Utopia-the-genre* but a dialectical argument; and the just city it discusses is a different kind of thing from any *Utopia-the-place*: different in kind, that is, by not being a determinate, richly imagined place at all, but a minimally determinate, multiply realisable template or blueprint.[32] What Plato is offering us is a maximally abstract argument about the requirements for a wholly just society, based on an account of human nature which he takes to hold good across all times and places. His just city is a citadel of abstractions, built up out of necessary and sufficient conditions. This abstraction is less apparent to us than it should be because of two peculiarities of that argument which have already come up. One is that according to Plato's understanding of politics, culture is prior to politics itself: get the music right, and the constitution will take care of itself. Socrates can hardly support that claim, or even make it intelligible, without talking rather a lot about Greek poetry and music; this invests his account with a cultural specificity which the passages considered above must then acknowledge as misleading, and serving only as *exempli gratia*.

The second potentially misleading feature of the account is Socrates' continual recourse to the language of city-foundation and city-construction, which *looks* like a pointer to read his enterprise as something much more determinate, located and concrete. If Socrates' procedure of city-creation is *not* adopted in order to give the just city some of the flavour of a concrete Utopian city, what *is* Plato using it for? As usual with Plato, there are several answers to that question. First, it is striking that Socrates' city-foundation is continuously and emphatically presented as a collaboration

32 For 'blueprint' language compare for example Morrison 2007 and Brisson 2020. It should be kept in mind that a blueprint is not an Ikea page of assembly instructions: it is neutral as to any question of practicability. I take the language of blueprint and in itself, template to be appropriate to readings of the *Republic* as something close to a modern exercise in ideal theory, and am in sympathy with the readings of Thakker 2018, Vegetti 2009, Zuolo 2013 and others along these lines.

with Glaucon and Adeimantus – that is, in the first person *plural* (with the occasional 'your', as in 'your *kallipolis*'). That is the natural practical counterpart to the constructive dialectic being practised in *Republic* 2–10, but 'we' is also inherently open-ended and flexible in scope: as MM McCabe has brought out, Socrates' dialectical proposals are naturally heard as inclusive, and extending an invitation to us as readers.[33] So heard, the activity of city-founding actually *reaffirms* unlocatedness: it makes a gesture of inclusion even to future barbarians like ourselves. Socrates' procedure of city-construction thus unleashes the universality of his political principles, rather than introducing a specificity which would detract from them. As an authorial strategy, the city-construction procedure represents a broad middle path between the touristic *ekphrasis* of Utopia and the unreadable dryness of most abstract political argument; it places us in a rich middle realm of possibility, in which the just city is *neither* already fully realised in a remote Elsewhere *nor* merely a theoretical possibility, but continually on the verge of realisation – if we choose.

At the risk of pressing this thought too hard, I would thus suggest that there is something importantly (and not just rhetorically) *constructivist* about Plato's account of his just city. The *Republic* is obviously not constructivist in the contemporary sense derived from Rawls, inasmuch as that approach is intended to do an end run around contemporary problems in metaethics, and is generally taken to express a recognition that there can be no wholly realist validation of principles of justice.[34] Plato would have no sympathy with constructivism as a metaethical replacement for realism. But dialectic in the cooperative Socratic mode on display here registers as a kind of procedural constructivism. That is, his is a method in which the rationally grounded agreement of the participants is presented as all the justification needed, or possible, for each step in the argument. Since the argument in question undertakes to specify the principles constitutive of a just society, the participants are thus inherently role-playing as founders of that society, with the reader invited to play along at home. And so we can discern a genuine if limited resemblance to (for instance) Rawls' procedure in *A Theory of Justice*.[35] Plato's method gives his theorising of justice the status of an argument which is also a proposal – an

33 See McCabe 2021 and McCabe forthcoming on the 'wandering "we"' in the *Republic*, though her primary concern is to articulate the less inclusive 'we's internal to the text.

34 For a brief but useful comparison of Plato and Rawls, see Dillon 2012.

35 If the resemblance is strictly limited it is, I suspect, because Rawls is doing his best to fight it off: his emphasis on the independence of his project from metaphysics, and its restriction (in his later work) to the context of liberal democracy, seems designed to ward off any attempt to read his project as Platonic. There is a curiously emphatic silence around Plato here and elsewhere in Rawls' work, even on the history of philosophy.

invitation to his readers to participate in his dialectical project by testing it against our own principles and intuitions, and, if convinced, to make it a practical project of our own.

6.

I have tried to draw attention to some aspects of the political project of the *Republic* which are most clearly seen if we look at the pattern of what it does *not* do. In giving his account of the just city, Plato avoids the mytho-touristic topography of the *Critias*, the ethnographic and narrative richness of the *Cyropaedia*, and the visual vividness and specificity of much of the rest of the *Republic* itself. To persuade us that the just city is possible, and in accordance with nature, he relies not on the persuasive rhetorical tools of a Utopia but only on his dialectical arguments for the general and transitional possibility claims. The status of his just city as a multiply realisable template allows for, and requires, nothing else. Looked at with this attention to what my drawing teacher calls negative space, the *Republic* emerges with the clear contours of a thoroughly un-Utopian project in radical political philosophy. It seeks to establish the constitutive features of a just society exclusively through the methods of rational argument, proceeding with the highest possible degree of abstraction and a kind of constructivist method. The object to be built from its blueprint remains an ekphrastic void, nameless because it is not the kind of thing which has a name and undepicted because undepictable. And this can help us to see an answer to my opening question, about the density of images in the *Republic* as a whole. Why is the *rest* of the *Republic* so rich, almost overcharged, with visual imagery? The answer in the end is at least twofold. First, I think that Plato hopes to make us tacitly aware of the contrast I have drawn – to warn us as to the wholly abstract, deliberately underdetermined character of the just city. And second, his ekphrastic artistry is working overtime in the rest of the *Republic* for compensatory purposes. To put it crudely: he aims to hold our imagination over the gaps. The rich imagery of the *Republic* as a whole is designed to at once emphasise and apologise for the fact that its central topic – the justice of any just city, simply as such – can have no imagery at all.[36]

36 For discussion of these issues and comments on earlier drafts, I am indebted to Ben Akrigg, James Allen, Jonathan Beere, Tad Brennan, Sarah Broadie, Dmitri El Murr, David Estlund, Verity Harte, Brad Inwood, André Laks, Melissa Lane, Stephen Menn, my students in PHL2002, William Paris and Owen Ware and their seminar students – and above all the inspirational MM herself, together with the other participants in the wonderful Leventis Conference she convened.