

Carolina Drake

The Burden of Intimacy in Plato's Republic: Justice, Self-Sufficiency, and Chance

Abstract:

I explore the role of intimacy and chance in *Republic* and their function as dangerous or threatening to self-sufficiency. I argue that both intimacy and chance are wrongly construed as a burden, or as disruptive to the regime of the just city and that, ultimately, the job of philosophy is to regulate affect and the risk of chance in the city. I conclude that the repercussions of Plato's strong account of self-sufficiency can be found to this day in our contemporary beliefs of intimacy, a concept which is still perceived as dangerous for its power to bind us to the mercy of chance.

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The Intimacies Project at 41st Street & 8th Avenue is a multi-media event about relationships and the impossibility of love. I encountered this installation one evening when a performer recruiting audience members handed me a flyer, which explained the work:

“This visual art installation and live performance is a rare look at the danger of intimacy expressed through dance, music, film, images, and audience participation. The installation incites individuals to focus on emotion while they are in motion. Commuters and passersby are invited to participate by sharing their thoughts and feelings in response to questions about relationships and love.”

I was reading Plato at the time and believed his thought provided a key to the contemporary belief about the dangers of intimacy, as expressed by such installation. I begin this paper by exploring the motivations behind contemporary accounts of intimacy as threatening or dangerous, and by suggesting we may find answers in Greek thought.

Self-Sufficiency and the Threat of Chance

While to prevent vice the virtuous man must master the rebellious parts of the soul, to prevent injustice the just city must govern over the factions. The just city is, to Plato, self-sufficient from factions and external factors, and the virtuous soul can achieve self-control over the passions and contingent factors. Both vice and injustice produce disharmony and contradiction, while virtue and justice are harmonious states of non-

contradiction. Such efforts to vanish contingency from human life in the pursuit of self-sufficiency successfully produces harmony in the city. But along with contingency; the mutable, and that which binds us to risk and chance also vanishes leaving an array of doubts about the way one must live a good life and how such contingency is regulated in *Republic*. To achieve justice, the city like the soul must remain independent from outside sources and from factions. *Republic* begins with a question about order; how should the city be organized?¹ Socrates organizes the city on the basis of justice comparing justice in a city, which is public, to justice in a soul, which is private, with the purpose of finding out more about the nature of justice. Such comparison also reveals that the nature of justice involves a structural relationship between the public and the private. That is, both the psychic and the political existence must mirror each other, and both must be self-sufficient.² Under this regime, external factors and contingencies are threats to be addressed. Factions represent one of these contingencies: they are special forms of political organization grouped by private or partial interests which create subordination. They can inflict disharmony and disorder in the city. The passions represent another of these contingencies, also producing disharmony in the soul.

The just city is to be free from factions if it is to be free from organizations based on partiality, and the soul is not to be exposed to anything which may produce irrational passions. Socrates opposes mastery of the soul and ruling of the city, to being mastered by the passions and being ruled by the factions. Factions could subordinate the public

¹ I am taking Plato's argument about Justice and the education of the guardians seriously to generate my claims. If I took the whole enterprise in *Republic* as a huge piece of dramatic irony, then my entire paper would, probably, collapse. For further insight on what is or is not at stake in our study of classic thinkers see Bloom's Preface in *The Republic of Plato*, p. xii

² Now that I clarified that self-sufficiency is attributed mostly to the public realm, and self-mastery to the private realm, I may intercalate between the two notions depending on what realm is examined.

good to private gain, for example, causing political struggles in the arena of the city, and passions can subordinate the soul to unreasonable emotional states, causing struggles in the private realms. Both contingencies are threatening to self-sufficiency. Once the just man and the just city are described, Socrates considers injustice, which is compared the passions in the soul and the factions in the city:

“Mustn’t it, in this turn, be a certain faction among those three—a meddling, interference, and rebellion of a part of the soul against the whole? The purpose of the rebellious part is to rule in the soul although this is not proper, since by nature it is fit to be a slave to that which belongs to the ruling class. Something of this sort I suppose we’ll say, and the confusion and wandering of these parts are injustice, licentiousness, cowardice, lack of learning, and, in sum, vice entire.” (444 b)

While to prevent vice the virtuous man must master the meddling, rebellious parts of his soul, to prevent injustice the just city must govern over the confusing, wandering factions. To remain independent from outside sources the regime must not allow different men to “divide into factions over the possession of money, children, and relatives” (464 e). So such independence from outside sources causes all contingent factors from the city to vanish. But along with contingency; the mutable, and that which binds us to risk and chance also vanishes. In book VI Socrates offers us an image comparing the city to a ship, the citizens to the sailors, and the philosopher to the true pilot. It is the true pilot who can lead the ship protecting it from storms, crashing waves, and external threats by paying careful attention “to year, seasons, heaven, stars, winds, and everything that’s proper to the art, if he is really going to be skilled at ruling a ship” (488 e). This passage tell us a lot about those meddling, rebellious, wandering, and uncontrollable factors that threaten to subordinate the city to the unknown; to chance. A city comes into being

precisely because we are not self-sufficient. A city, like a ship, is built by human beings to lessen or prevent the threats of chance. Reflecting on the image offered by Socrates this way, it would be easy to conclude that the task of the city is the removal or regulation of ungoverned chance from human life. The passions and the uncontrollable have long caused pain, anger, and fear in human life and Socrates is convinced that the philosopher cannot spend his time bearing such fears.

Self-Sufficiency and the Threat of Intimacy

Kinship and love relationships are threatening to the city because they can generate factions and they are threatening to the soul because they can generate dependency on outside factors. Because men may divide into factions over the possession of children, relatives, partners, etc., and because the public and private are structurally related in the city, intimate relationships that matter to human beings, are conjoined or conflated with factions. Therefore, intimate relationships and intimacy have no place in the city because, like factions, they may link an agent's value system to the contingent, outside world. The relationship between a pair is only the basic unit of intimacy. Intimacy exists between groups as well, and within families and communities of friends and neighbors giving rise to self-defined, self-identified collectives. Such relational bonds between self and others require partiality and privacy to some extent. They provide us with safety and emotional strength, but our ties to such relationships can affect our ability to sustain mastery of the self. For example, in book X Socrates addressed the issue of personal sorrow and private suffering. Using the example of a "decent man" who "gets as

his share some such chance as losing a son or something else for which he cares for particularly” (603 e)³. Socrates makes the case that such private grief should not be displayed publicly. That is, the city should not suffer or grieve along with the man if it is to remain self-sufficient; therefore the private should not be made public. But the regulation of affect and lament in the city, presupposes the regulation of families, love, and intimate relationships. Plato resolves the tension between intimacy and self-sufficiency by giving human affairs very little seriousness, as Socrates argues:

“The law presumably says that it is finest to keep as quiet as possible about misfortunes and not be irritated, since the good and bad in such things aren’t plain...nor are any of the human things worthy of great seriousness; and being in pain is an impediment...” (604 c)

Consequently, intimate relationships may cause pain, grief, and lament, which may threaten the mastery over the self and the ruling over the city, allowing for those wondering, confusing, uncontrollable factors to come back in-like the force of storms breaking the wooden structure of a ship. So, intimate relationships have the power of making the city and soul more vulnerable to the mercy of chance.

Socrates offers us another image in book III, comparing the soul and the city to a plant:

“Are things that are in the best condition least altered and moved by something else, for example...all plants by the sun’s heat, winds, and other affections of the sort; aren’t the healthiest and strongest least altered?” (381 a)

³ I would like to thank Bart Slaninka for helpful comments on this section of my paper, and for his close reading skills which helped me locate this specific passage in *Republic*, key to supporting my view that regulating private grief is another way to guard the city from the dangers of intimacy.

Those souls which, like plants, are the least altered by the forces of chance are the healthiest, strongest and less vulnerable to outside factors. But does not the plant rely on external factors to remain alive? Are not sunlight and rain forces of nature allowing for its growth? Socrates rather focuses on the strength coming from the inside, a self-sufficient strength which allows for the plant to remain unaltered despite any affection—despite the storms and extensive heat. This second image is an example of the tension between self-sufficiency and intimate relationships.

So far, the image of the city-ship and the image of the plant serve as examples to support a reading where dangers of relying on the contingent, and on chance, are a burden to self-sufficiency and ultimately, to justice. The philosopher proves trustworthy to guide the city-ship but less than trustworthy to engage in intimate relationships which may cause pain, grief, and lament in the future. In book IX Socrates provides us with a definition of the philosopher as the “real lover of learning,” the lover of that which *is* and of truth,” and the one who can distinguish between seeming and being: “it is the nature of the real lover of learning to strive for what is; and he does not tarry by the many things opined to be but goes forward and does not lose the keenness of his passionate love...(490 b). Such a thinker, always in company with the divine and the orderly would not consider human life and human affairs to be something important and, thus, would not fear death. Therefore, such a thinker would not consider intimacy to be something important and would rather engage in intellectual relationships. We either have one or the other. The incompatibility between wisdom and intimacy, which begins with Plato, has repercussions in contemporary categories such as that of the platonic relationship. To this day, such relationship designates a rational meeting of minds between two people.

Although Platonic rationalism is particularly timely to us, its leftover binaries and value systems are not.

Dangers of Intimacy

But such disregard for one's own life and affairs leads to the disregard for others and other lives.⁴ Socrates considers acts such as investing in one's own life, taking risks, failing, and lamenting private losses to be evils which citizens of the ideal city would be free from:

“Because of their unseemliness, I hesitate to mention the pettiest of the evils of which they would be rid: poor men flattering the rich, all the want and grief they have in rearing children and making money for the necessary support of the household, making debts and repudiating them, doing all sorts of things to provide for allowances that they turn over to women and the domestics to manage. What and how they suffer from these things, my friend, is perfectly plain, ignoble, and not worth mentioning.” (Book V. 465 b-d)

If philosophy is the activity that makes sense of the world through reason, in human affairs things are opaque, unclear, and confusing. Such private affairs, and the risks these bring, can distract men and philosophers from that which is true. Martha Nussbaum examines the aspiration for self sufficiency in Greek ethical thought which she denominates “the aspiration of making the goodness of a good human life safe from luck through the controlling power of reason” (p. 3). To Nussbaum “what happens to a person by luck will be just what does not happen through his or her own agency, what just *happens* to him, as opposed to what he does or makes.” Her examination of self-

⁴ Elaine Scarry discusses this problem at length. See *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2004

sufficiency and luck offers a relevant reading of *Republic* where the tensions between self-sufficiency and intimacy are clearly problematic. Ultimately, human affairs, like waves crashing against the city-ship may bind men to the mercy of ungovernable, contingent factors. But the philosopher is terrified of such factors, and of giving his life up to the mercy of chance. Nussbaum writes: “But on the other side of this pursuit of self sufficiency, complicating and constraining the effort to banish contingency from human life, was always a vivid sense of the special beauty of the contingent and the mutable, that love for the riskiness and openness of empirical humanity which finds its expression in recurrent stories about gods who fall in love with mortals” (p. 3). In book II, Plato expurgates the city from the special beauty of the contingent expressed in the stories of Homer and Hesiod, doing away precisely with what Nussbaum calls “the openness of empirical humanity.” Plato’s chief objection, particularly to tragedy, is that it misrepresents the truth by offering characters with mixed or opposite values in conflict with each other, and mixed values do not belong in an ordered city. We find in Homer and Hesiod Gods falling in love with mortals, changing forms, being both good and evil. I now explain how censoring any form of poetry because it reveals conflict or contradiction is doing away with such “openness of empirical humanity.” I argue that, ultimately, what is at stake is the regulation of affect and chance in the city.

Empathy is generally understood as an emotion which considers and regards the private pain of the other, so it would be distinct from cognition or intellect. To experience empathy one must apprehend another’s grief and suffering from a first-person perspective rather than a third-person perspective.⁵ This may be a reason why Socrates, in book III,

⁵ I would like to thank both Matt Reyes and Bart Slavinka for their helpful objections to this claim in an earlier draft. Second order trauma, or totalizing experiences where the pain of the other leaves me in pain are arguments against my

distinguishes between narration or speech, and imitation. While speech and narration are descriptive of events, and take place from a third person perspective, imitation is speaking with the voice of the other. While the person who speaks “doesn’t attempt to turn our thought elsewhere, as though some other than he were speaking” (393 b), the poet who imitates is “likening himself to someone else” (393 d). But, in conclusion, the poet must not “hide” himself if his poetic work ought to take place without imitation. If empathy requires we get close enough to the other and to the pain of the other, then the rejection of imitation entails the rejection of empathy from the city. Empathy is an intimate relationship where we assimilate the other’s experience to our own, thus, it is a threat to self-sufficiency. Jill Bennett argues for the capacity of art to transform affect and I find here a reason to comprehend why Plato argues for the censorship of poetry in *Republic*. Socrates warns us about the effects of poetry because it has the power to affect even the most self-controlled men in the city. He claims that “when even the best of us hear Homer or any other tragic poets imitating one of the heroes in mourning and making quite extended human lamentation...you know that we give ourselves over to the imitation; suffering along with the hero in all seriousness...”(605 d). This passage reveals that the problem of poetry is that it makes public what is private: the pain of the other, and in doing this, it crosses a boundary regulated by the law of the city. Bennett’s account of empathy is compelling because it is grounded on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible through mere intellect. Bennett’s conception of empathy as a mode of seeing implies a closeness to the

defense of empathy and affect as effective political tools. I do not defend either reductive or totalizing views about pain and for matters of space; I cannot make the case that Plato’s understanding of affect only includes such totalizing experiences. On trauma, see Elaine Scarry “The Body in Pain, Making and Unmaking of the World.” Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

other which she describes as “going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from...empathy is about the process of surrender.” (EV 10) Such process of surrender to the other’s pain is dangerous, therefore excessive grief and lamentation must be regulated through the censorship of poetry and tragedy. If philosophy must regulate affect in the private and public realms for the sake of self-sufficiency, then tragedy presents a threat to this self-sufficiency.

Dangers of Chance

What happens to a person by luck or chance will be just what does not happen through his or her own agency, what just *happens* to him, as opposed to what he does or makes, or whom he falls in love with. In book V, Adeimantus reproaches Socrates for robbing him of a whole section of the argument, that is, the section on relationships and on chance. Although from the perspective of the philosopher the dissolution of family ties, love relationships, and private interests is described as a reasonable step towards justice in the city, Adeimantus has been waiting for Socrates to really convince him through an argument:

“In our opinion you’re taking it easy” he said “and robbing us of a whole section of the argument, and that not the least, so you won’t have to go through it. And you supposed you’d get away with it by saying, as though it were something quite ordinary, that after all it’s plain to everyone that, as for women and children, the things of friends will be in common” (449 c)

According to Adeimantus, even though such organization “makes a big difference, or rather the whole difference, in a regime being right or not right” (449 d) it also “admits of many doubts” (450 c) What Adeimantus may be wondering, in other words, is whether

the dissolution of intimate relationships is really worth it. First of all, no woman is to live privately with any man, so all the women will belong to all the men in common. Second, the children will also be in common and neither will a parent know his own “offspring” (457 d) nor a child his parent. Third, the women guardians will collectively nurse their children, breast-feeding mechanically whatever child is designated to each of them. And fourth, once an artificial family is created through impersonal ties, human beings become conveniently replaceable, and their unique, contingent qualities are neutralized as best as possible. This project seems useful if the goal is to give up on relationships that are not beneficial: intimate relationships which (like poetry) can seduce us until we drop our guard, causing pain, grief, and robbing us from our self-sufficiency. But the dissolution of intimate relationships also negates the openness of empirical humanity and the beauty of being at the mercy of chance. Socrates may be anticipating that at one point or another, somebody is going to start wondering why such arrangements allow for no surprises, for no luck or chance. But he solves this by relying on the creation of stories, myth, and the establishment of a false sense of chance: “I suppose certain subtle lots must be fabricated so that the ordinary man will blame chance rather than the rulers for each union” (460 a). What makes one fall in love is a sudden expansion of those feelings of kinship and intimacy, the surprise of finding in a stranger, a deep part of one’s own being. But for the sake of self-sufficiency, Socrates sees loved persons as functions of the civic good and replaceable producers of citizens. No living being is to be loved for his or her personal qualities.

The shift from seeing a beloved person as unique, to seeing her as just a participant in a common good helps prevent the dangers of intimacy: “if the guardians’

species is going to remain pure, won't they supervise the nursing, leading the mothers to the pen when they are full with milk, inventing every device so that none will recognize her own, and providing others who do have milk if the mothers themselves are insufficient" (460 d). Since a child can have various mothers, and a mother various children, a fellow guardian can walk into this city and with everyone he meets he'll hold that he's meeting a brother, or a sister, or a father, or a mother, or relatives. Such project could offer a radical and even progressive idea about community if affect and empathy were distributed differently, or if affect were not at all regulated in the city.⁶ But what human can survive in a community without affect or empathy? It is the drunken character of Alcibiades walking in late to the Symposium, who does not seem to bear such community. Nussbaum's reading of Symposium presents this view. She argues that Alcibiades is claiming "not just an ineffable familiarity with Socrates, but the ability to tell the truth about Socrates. He wants to claim that through a lover's intimacy he can produce accounts (stories) that are more deeply and precisely true" (FG 191). Alcibiades, offering a first person account of his private relationship to Socrates, is dismissed by the others for making no sense. From the perspective of the philosopher, here is Alcibiades, drunk and in pain, experiencing passionate feelings for this one man, Socrates, who refuses to reciprocate his feelings.⁷ This is incomprehensible. Why does he think that Socrates is not precisely replaceable by any other object in the world? Certainly he would be a more self-sufficient human being if he did.

⁶ I am loosely defending an account of relational autonomy were persons participate in collective decision making processes, collective grieving, care and forgiveness. Drucilla Cornell who has written on relational autonomy defends a similar account. See "The Post Structuralist Challenge to the ideal of Community." *Cardozo Law Review* (1987) "Two Lectures on the Normative Dimension of Community in the Law." *University of Tennessee Law Review* (1987) I am aware that such account does not accommodate the political concerns in *Republic*.

⁷ I am taking homosexual relationships as a given in Greek life, although it is interesting that Plato wants to censor tragedy and the theater from Republic, specially when this is the only space men get to dress as woman and engage in gender performativity. For matters of space, I cannot make the case that the regulation of poetry is also the regulation of sexuality and gender roles.

Conclusion

The incompatibility between intimacy and self-sufficiency has repercussions in our contemporary beliefs about relationships. The “dangers of intimacy” as expressed in the installation and media art I refer to, reflects on present day fears grounded in ancient Greek thought. Such fears are caused by the threat of external and contingent factors that may produce disharmony both in the city and the soul. Further, such fears call for a regulation of affect if one is to live a truly self-sufficient life.

I explored the role of intimacy and chance, and their function as dangerous or threatening to self-sufficiency. I argued that both intimacy and chance are wrongly construed as a burden, or as disruptive to the regime of the just city and that, ultimately, the job of philosophy is to regulate affect and the risk of being at the mercy of chance, in the city. My reading of *Republic* allows me to suggest that the motivations behind contemporary accounts of intimacy as threatening or dangerous to human beings begin in Greek thought.

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