

PLATO AND THE SPELL OF THE STATE

PATRICK C. TINSLEY*

I. Plato's Austrian Enemies

THE VIEW OF PLATO AS AN APOLOGIST for totalitarianism has become something close to orthodoxy in the Austrian wing of the libertarian tradition. The purpose of this essay is to contest that view and thereby reclaim Plato as an ally in the age-old struggle against the state.

Appropriately enough, there is something distinctly Platonic about a reclamation project such as this one. For Plato, to mistake a true friend for an enemy is to have no wisdom greater than a dog's.¹ A misplaced hostility toward Plato, however, dogs a great many libertarians of the Austrian persuasion.

Carl Menger, for instance, considers Plato an early proponent of the statist theory of money, according to which its origins are to be found in law, that is, in an act of political fiat.²

Ludwig von Mises, who correctly perceives Plato's antipathy to democracy,³ nevertheless argues that he "elaborated a plan of totalitarianism."⁴

*Patrick C. Tinsley (patrick.tinsley@gmail.com) is an attorney practicing in Belmont, MA.

CITE THIS ARTICLE AS: Patrick C. Tinsley, "Plato and the Spell of the State," *Libertarian Papers* 3, 2 (2011). ONLINE AT: libertarianpapers.org. THIS ARTICLE IS subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (creativecommons.org/licenses). Published by the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

¹ See *Republic* Book I 375d-376a. *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

² *Principles of Economics*, Appendix J, "History of Theories of the Origin of Money." Webbed at <http://www.mises.org/etexts/menger/appendixj.asp>.

Friedrich von Hayek identifies Plato as one of the chief “theoreticians of the totalitarian system” and goes so far as to equate Plato’s political philosophy with “the racial doctrine of the Nazis or the theory of the corporative state of Mussolini.”⁵

Murray Rothbard, although he credits Plato with important contributions to economic science,⁶ nevertheless concurs with Menger that Plato “called for a government fiat currency”⁷ and he echoes Mises and Hayek in proclaiming Plato’s thought “statist...to the core”⁸ and his *Republic* a “classic apologia for totalitarianism.”⁹

Proto-Austrian libertarians are occasionally more sympathetic.

Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, for example, confirms “Plato’s thesis that democracy naturally evolves into tyranny”¹⁰ and reads Plato’s *Republic* as “an exact description of the transition from the Weimar Republic to National Socialist tyranny.”¹¹

Frank van Dun finds Plato more concerned with investigating justice in the individual than promoting the total state. He observes that, “despite its title, we very soon find that *The Republic* is a book of moral rather than

³ “Neither Plato nor Saint-Simon were democrats.” *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, translated by J. Kahane (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), p. 73. Mises does not appreciate the full implications of Plato’s antipathy to democracy, however, because he fails to understand the systematic relationship between democracy and socialism. Thus his next sentence: “One finds nothing in history or in the literary history of socialist theory which shows an internal connection between the socialist order of society and political democracy.”

⁴ *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science: An Essay on Method* (Irving-on-Hudson, New York: Foundation for Economic Education, 2002), p. 133.

⁵ *The Road to Serfdom*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 172.

⁶ For instance, Rothbard acknowledges Plato as “being the first to expound and analyze the importance of the division of labor in society.” *Economic Thought Before Adam Smith: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought, Volume I* (Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006), p. 11.

⁷ *Id.* at 12.

⁸ *Id.* at 7.

⁹ *Id.* at 11.

¹⁰ “Monarchy and War,” available in *The Myth of National Defense: Essays on the Theory and History of Security Production*, ed. Hans-Hermann Hoppe (Auburn, Alabama: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2003), p. 84. See also *Leftism: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Marcuse* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1974), p. 171.

¹¹ *Id.* at 85. See also *Liberty or Equality: The Challenge of Our Time*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (Front Royal, Virginia: Christendom Press, 1993), p. 12.

political philosophy.”¹² But even van Dun later succumbs to the more standard view, according to which Plato “rhapsodied about perfect unity under the supreme authority of a Philosopher-King” and his *Republic* envisioned “the construction of an absolute power-base... [and] a new kind of men, unconditionally loyal to their ruler...”¹³

Likewise, Franz Oppenheimer compares Plato to Marx, unfavorably even. “Plato and the followers of Karl Marx endow the State with omnipotence, making it the absolute lord over the citizen in all political and economic matters; while Plato even goes so far as to wish the State to regulate sexual relations.”¹⁴

Roderick Long contends that, for Plato, the Athenian polis allowed its citizens “too much freedom,” a condition that could be remedied by imposing a regime dominated by a small cadre of experts and elites.¹⁵ Long recognizes Plato’s animosity toward politicians, whom he regarded as “untrustworthy” because “improperly brought up,” but he contends that Plato wished to grant politicians vastly increased control over the process of education.¹⁶ According to Long, “Plato was convinced that if this power [to educate the youth] were taken away from the arbitrary and ill-informed decisions of parents and transferred instead to the state, so that future leaders could be subjected from birth to a rigorous program of moral training and indoctrination, the problem of untrustworthy politicians would be solved.”¹⁷

Against this view, we will contend that totalitarianism is not at all Plato’s proposed solution to the problem of untrustworthy politicians. His mistrust runs too deep for that. Far from advocating the totalitarian state, Plato opens it up to the light of truth, exposing it as an unjust and literally unnatural breach of the convivial social order. And he does something else as well. As we shall see, Plato attempts to show that the totalitarian state is an abomination not only for its victims, but also for its rulers. This is so, it turns out, because the desire to rule is an unruly desire; it corrupts, corrodes, and

¹² “National Sovereignty and International Monetary Regimes,” available in *Money and the Nation State: The Financial Revolution, Government and the World Monetary System*, ed. Kevin Dowd and Richard H. Timberlake, Jr. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 68 n. 12.

¹³ “Philosophical Statism and the Illusions of Citizenship: Reflections on the Neutral State,” pp. 8-10. Webbed at <http://users.ugent.be/~frvandun/tekstmenu.htm>.

¹⁴ *The State* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1914), p. 3.

¹⁵ “The Athenian Constitution: Government by Jury and Referendum,” originally published in the August 1996 issue of *Formulations*.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

even colonizes the soul that it seduces. In the end, the desire to possess the body politic will possess the body of the politician. Whosoever would be master is doomed to be a slave.

But Plato sees hope for a slave. He can learn. Even enslaved by *eros*, the politician can still learn to transform *libido dominandi* into *philos sophia*. The slave can regain his freedom if he can first cast off his mental bondage.¹⁸ To do that, the slave must come to realize that the power that enthralls him rests on lies. Politicians are nothing but puppeteers. Their kingdoms are nothing but caves. Persuading us otherwise, after all, is the consummate political art—the art of replacing freedom with force and reducing sovereignty to a shadow. The art of politics, in other words, is just that: art. Politics represents the triumph of artifice over nature, fiat over law. Politics is craft, spell-casting, sorcery, sophistry. Its practitioners can only dominate those they can deceive.

For Plato, however, it is politicians who are the most misled of all. The politician has a doubly difficult task in shedding his mental bondage, because the slave who fancies himself a master is doubly bound by moral error. The politically powerful are most powerfully stricken by the spell of the state—sorcery beguiles no one more than the sorcerer himself. After all, political power's ultimate illusion is its allure. The man who wants to lord over others is tragically mistaken about his own best interests. He does not see that the king is the most miserable man in the realm because power is the daydream that becomes a nightmare.¹⁹ The desire to control other men requires the ultimate sacrifice: the loss of self-control. Minding the business of others, the politician disregards the business of ordering his soul. His grasping, envious, acquisitive urges will soon overwhelm him and make him their tool. In order to reclaim himself, the politician must learn to relinquish his subjects. This knowledge will be rare, and arduous to come by, but without it, the politician will never be happy or whole. And rare though this self-realization may be, it is not impossible. Even minding the business of others, the politician may eventually learn to mind his own, and learn to own his mind. It is in this spirit that Plato suggests that self-knowledge can be experienced as recollection. When we learn to keep our desires in their proper place, so that we renounce any attempt to exert an unnatural control over others, we recall our true

¹⁸ The liberating possibility of self-realization is dramatically depicted in *Meno*.

¹⁹ In portraying the tyrant as miserable and unfulfilled, Plato does not rely on interpersonal comparisons of utility. Indeed, Plato underscores their impossibility when Socrates suggests a facetious formula according to which the tyrant is precisely 729 times more miserable than the just man. *Republic* Book IX, 587d-e. Rather than deploy a dubious utilitarianism, Socrates demonstrates to Glaucon that his own beliefs, properly clarified, imply that happiness and tyranny cannot co-exist.

selves. We are re-minded. The purpose of Plato's dialogues is to deliver his readers into the liberating truth of this insight.

To rouse his readers out of their dogmatic slumbers, Plato must show them the truth about the poets whose lyrical celebrations of the state first lulled the Athenian masses into accepting their servitude—and who forfeited their own freedom in the bargain. The following investigations reconstruct Plato's confrontation with three of the most seductive, and self-deluded, poet-politicians: Aristophanes (section II), Solon (section III), and Sophocles (section IV). Ironically, Plato's ally in this attempt to awaken Athens is Homer, himself a poet known to nod from time to time. In the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Plato finds a friend in the enemy camp. Enemies of Plato would do well to do likewise.

II. Rescuing Speech, Recovering Natural Law: Plato's Rhetorical Strategy

What is conspicuous about a Platonic text is the absence of its author. Even when Plato mentions himself, it is only to point out his absence.²⁰ Plato speaks only through his characters, never in *voce propria*, at least not in his dialogues. On the topic of justice, as on all others, Plato's approach is indirect. But this is by design. To break the spell of the state, Plato believes that we cannot simply state the spell. We cannot dissuade those who wish to govern others merely by arguing that such desires are irrational or evil. Plato does not believe that argument alone could convince the tyrant to renounce tyranny. The tyrant rejects reason. His desire for power is pathological—and he yields to it anyway. Plato's esoteric style—his use of *dramatis personae*, his poetic allusions, his irony, his musical, mythical language, even the dialogue form itself—is part of a deliberate strategy to cope with this phenomenon. It is an attempt to cultivate not only an understanding of justice, but also the desire to live it.

Socrates, of course, does explicitly denounce tyranny. In *Republic*, for instance, Socrates says that “a real tyrant is really a slave, compelled to engage in the worst kind of fawning, slavery, and pandering to the worst kind of people.... [H]e is inevitably envious, untrustworthy, unjust, friendless, impious, host and nurse to every kind of vice...[and] extremely unfortunate.”²¹ But elsewhere Socrates appears to defend the tyranny in which “philosophers rule as kings” and “political power and philosophy

²⁰ See *Phaedo* 59b.

²¹ Book IX, 579d-580a.

entirely coincide.”²² If we assume that Socrates speaks for Plato, we are left wondering through which side of Socrates’ mouth Plato speaks. In actuality, Socrates never speaks for Plato. The weak-voiced²³ Plato can nowhere be heard in the conversations his dialogues depict. The Platonic Socrates remains almost equally silent; his speech is typically elenctic, showing his interlocutors the unappreciated consequences to which their beliefs commit them, and it is frequently ironic, conveying his true meaning in words that appear to express its opposite. The first quote above is an example of the former, the second an example of the latter. The playwright writes playfully.²⁴

Before we understand Plato’s rhetorical strategy, therefore, we must see that the view of Plato as totalitarian proceeds from the false assumption that Plato’s dialogues express the author’s true beliefs, typically through the character Socrates. In fact, Austrians from Menger to Rothbard fail even to acknowledge that the Platonic Socrates *is* a literary character. They simply read the dramatic elements out of Plato’s plays and treat them as treatises instead. According to them, Plato believes what Socrates says, and nothing besides. But this way of reading Plato produces a paradox. Namely, that if Plato believed the words that he wrote for Socrates, then he should never have written them.

After all, Socrates (and therefore, on this view, Plato) condemns the written word and despairs at its impotence to convey true understanding. At the end of *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates self-referentially recommends the wisdom of “a man who thinks that a written discourse on any subject can only be a great amusement, that no discourse worth serious attention has ever been written in verse or prose, and that those that are recited in public without questioning and explanation, in the manner of the rhapsodes, are given only in order to produce conviction,” not truth.²⁵ The wise man, says Socrates, “won’t be serious about writing” his knowledge. Similarly, in his *Seventh Letter*, Plato writes that, “anyone who is seriously studying high matters will be the last to write about them,” and that anyone who commits his thoughts to writing does so “because men, not the gods, ‘have taken his wits away.’”²⁶ Taken as Plato’s deepest thoughts, these words would erase

²² Book V, 473c-d.

²³ See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classic Library (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1938), 1:3.

²⁴ G.K. Chesterton was the rare scholar who understood this. “Plato,” observes Chesterton, “was only a Bernard Shaw who unfortunately made his jokes in Greek.” *Eugenics and Other Evils*, ed. Michael W. Perry (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2000), p. 17.

²⁵ 277e-278a.

²⁶ 344c-d.

themselves from the page on which he wrote them. To read Plato literally, it seems, one must not read him at all.

The way out of the paradox is to substitute a literary reading of Plato for a literal one. We cannot take Plato, or Socrates, at his word. Instead, we must read between the lines. In order to understand Plato, we must understand that his meaning, very often, is what he leaves unwritten—and that what his characters say in dialogue, Plato delights in deconstructing with dramatic details and unspoken textual cues. His text “knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent.”²⁷ If Plato speaks through Socrates, then, it is only because Socrates’ speech is so frequently ironic, concealing his true beliefs behind a veil of silence.²⁸

Other times, Socrates explicitly disavows his own speeches, attributing ownership of them to others. Such retractions abound in the Platonic corpus. In *Symposium*, for instance, Socrates reneges on his promise to praise *eros*, protesting that he is ignorant of how properly to do so, and insisting that whereas “the tongue promised, the mind did not.”²⁹ He proceeds to attribute his speech on the subject to “a woman of Manitea, Diotima.”³⁰ In *Phaedrus*, Socrates takes comic lengths to disown a speech in which he inveighed against *eros*, repeatedly blaming the speech on Phaedrus³¹ and even Lysias,³² the democracy-sympathizing sophist³³ and son of Cephalus, who appears in Book I of *Republic*.

This last remark is Socrates’ hint that his hostility to speech and speech writing is really an expression of his antipathy to arbitrary power. By recanting the democrat Lysias’ speech, Socrates symbolically repeals democratic legislation and disenfranchises the demos. Because “if Lysias or anybody else ever did or ever does write—privately or for the public, in the course of proposing some law—a political document which he believes to

²⁷ *Phaedrus* 276a-b.

²⁸ It is seldom noticed that Aristotle makes this same point—appropriately enough, with knowing indirection. After suggesting that the political regime recommended in *Republic* cannot be taken literally, Aristotle observes that “how we are to interpret it is nowhere precisely stated.” *Politics*, Book II, ch. 2, 1261(a)13-15. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941). Moreover, and tellingly, Aristotle does not attribute this regime to Plato, the author of *Republic*, but rather to Socrates, its protagonist. See, e.g., *id.* at 1261(a)6. In that way, Aristotle acknowledges the ironic distance between Plato and his dialogic characters.

²⁹ 198d-199a.

³⁰ 201d.

³¹ See 242b, 242d, 244a, and 257a.

³² 257b.

³³ *Plato: Complete Works*, p. 507 fn. 1.

embody clear knowledge of lasting importance, then this writer deserves reproach, whether anyone says so or not. For to be unaware of the difference between a dream-image and the reality of what is just and unjust, good and bad, must truly be grounds for reproach even if the crowd praises it with one voice.”³⁴

If that hint were not enough to demonstrate that Socrates’ hostility to writing is only a disguise for his opposition to legislation—the displacement of natural law by democratic decree—he explicitly aims his critique of writing at “Solon and anyone else who writes political documents that he calls laws.”³⁵ When Phaedrus responds that “the most powerful and renowned politicians are ashamed [to declare new laws],”³⁶ Socrates ridicules the young man’s credulity. “Phaedrus,” Socrates says, “you don’t understand the phrase ‘Pleasant Bend’—it originally referred to the long bend of the Nile. And, besides the bend, you do not understand that the most ambitious politicians love speechwriting and long for their writings to survive.”³⁷ Socrates makes at least two points here. First, and most obviously, he suggests that politicians are psychically disordered because lawmaking, a shameful activity, is to them no more shameful than the Nile River is a pleasant little bend. Second, and somewhat more subtly, Socrates shows that words can have multiple—and even opposite—meanings. This is another of Plato’s clues that his diatribe against writing should not be taken literally. Instead, it should be taken as a revolt against the “orator or king who acquires enough power to match Lycurgus, Solon, or Darius as a lawgiver.”³⁸

Plato sides with what is right—not what is “write.” His polemic against the written word, then, is a repudiation of the legislative state. A prolific author, Plato does not oppose writing; he opposes the authority of the state to draft law. In his *Seventh Letter*, where Plato writes, with self-reflexive irony,

³⁴ *Phaedrus* 277d-e.

³⁵ *Phaedrus* 278c. Socrates not only opposes legislation; he also suggests that the act of legislating is self-negating. That is why he refers to documents that are *called* laws. Socrates implies that what are called laws are not necessarily the genuine article. Socrates’ point is that legislation, insofar as it is not grounded in nature but in mere declaration, undermines its own claim to authority because its force rests on nothing more than convention, which can be altered at will. If we can give laws effect by decree, we can just as well decree them void.

³⁶ *Phaedrus* 257d.

³⁷ *Id.* 257d-e.

³⁸ *Id.* 258c.

that no one would write unless “men...‘have taken his wits away,’”³⁹ the witless writings he has in mind are “the laws of a legislator.”⁴⁰

It may be that this interpretation is an unusual one. Perhaps the more common interpretation is that Socrates identifies the origins of his oratory in others, and Plato inveighs against writing, because the highest philosophical wisdom is beyond words. Both Kenneth M. Sayer and Jürgen Mittelstrass, for example, claim that Socrates and Plato held that view.⁴¹ But Plato wrote dialogues, and even Socrates, after a lifetime in which he wrote nothing, responded to his imminent execution by composing a hymn to Apollo.⁴² Their animosity to speeches, and speech writing, is only apparent; in actuality, Socrates and Plato seek to vindicate the possibility of genuine communication against those who would reduce discourse to dictation, dialogue to monologue.⁴³ Philosophy takes place in conversation, whereas the state, like the crowd that praises it, speaks “with one voice.”

It is not the philosopher but the sophist, therefore, whose “wisdom” is beyond words—because, for the sophist, words mean whatever he says they mean, just as, for the politician, the law is whatever he says it is. Each in their own way, sophists and senators collapse *logos* into *nomos*. When, at the beginning of *Republic*, Polemarchus forcibly insists that Socrates stay for a night of philosophical discussion, Socrates responds by saying, “If it is so resolved, then that is how we must act.”⁴⁴ Socrates ironically invokes the declaration by which the Athenian legislature passed a new law.⁴⁵ The same declaration also appears at the beginning of Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, as Strepsiades’ facetious response to the snoring Pheidippides.⁴⁶ In that opening joke, Aristophanes implies that speech, like law, is no more meaningful than

³⁹ 344d.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ See *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold, Jr. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

⁴² See *Phaedo* 61a-b.

⁴³ In *Republic*, for example, Socrates struggles against Thrasymachus, whose attempts to steal his voice. Book I, 336d. In *Symposium*, it is Agathon who threatens to strike Socrates dumb with the Gorgon head of his teacher Gorgias’ rhetoric. 198c.

⁴⁴ Book I, 328b. See also Book II, 369b.

⁴⁵ Socrates makes the same declaration in *Phaedrus* to satirize the “solemnity and self-importance” of the legislator who “resolves” that a new law be decreed. See 258a. The English term “resolve” is a felicitous translation of the Greek because it preserves the sense in which legislation is an imposition of will. Resolved legislation expresses the legislator’s resolve.

⁴⁶ Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, line 11.

the gas a man passes in his sleep.⁴⁷ An even clearer indication that Aristophanes sees no essential difference between discourse and flatulence is the prevalence of scatology in his comedies. Plato parodies it in *Symposium*, where Aristophanes is rendered speechless first by a case of hiccups, then by a bout of sneezing.⁴⁸ The point of Plato's joke, of course, is that Aristophanes' "argument" for the meaninglessness of language can only take the form of an inarticulate emission.

But Aristophanes, the comedian, does not get the joke, which is why his comedy is truly tragic. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes has Pheidippides tell his father, "But look at the cocks and all these other animals...How do they differ from us, except that they don't write down their decrees?"⁴⁹ Absurdly, Pheidippides suggests that the ability to speak and to write does nothing to separate men from the wordless cock, and that law can be nothing other than the pecking order of raw power. Strepsiades objects, but only to preserve his position in the pecking order, not out of principle. He is in fact the source of his son's belief that words and laws have no substance beyond that we give to them.⁵⁰ Aristophanes offers no refutation to Pheidippides' view because it is, in fact, his own.⁵¹

Unlike Plato's strategic self-subtraction, which reflects his refusal of the rhetorician's art,⁵² Aristophanes asserts himself explicitly in his comedies. Thus, when Aristophanes reworked *Clouds* because Athenian audiences hated it, he wrote himself a role in which he addressed the demos directly.⁵³ But Aristophanes was never absent from *Clouds*. The poet expressed his own views through the character Strepsiades, who opposes his son's legal innovations, but only in the name of an established political regime that is "grounded on an equally arbitrary self-assertion."⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Jacob Howland, *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), p. 36.

⁴⁸ 185c-e and 189a. For still another instance of Aristophanes' speechlessness, see 212c.

⁴⁹ *The Clouds*, lines 1425-29.

⁵⁰ See *The Clouds*, lines 110-120.

⁵¹ See Stanley Rosen's discussion of this point in *Plato's Symposium* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), pp. 122-123.

⁵² Symbolic of this refusal is Plato's decision to burn his own tragic poetry rather than publish it. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1:3.5.

⁵³ See Thomas K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and Intertextual Parabasis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁵⁴ Claudia Baracchi, "Beyond the Comedy and Tragedy of Authority: The Invisible Father in Plato's *Republic*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2001, p. 159.

Against Aristophanes, Socrates “assumes the burden of showing that speech is more than inarticulate and intrinsically noxious or combative noise of ‘sleeping’ men, in that it is capable of pointing beyond the personal and private desires of the speaker and towards standards of worth that can potentially be shared by many.”⁵⁵ Just as Socrates opposes the poet’s linguistic fiat with the view that speech can capture the truth but does not create it,⁵⁶ so he opposes the politician’s legislative fiat with the view that genuine law exists by nature, not by stipulation of the state.⁵⁷ It is already written in the letters of the soul.⁵⁸ Socrates’ frequent retraction of his speeches is intended as an ironic antidote to an opponent’s assertive will to power, drawing forth a silence out of which nature’s laws can speak.

If, as I suggest, Socrates’ repulsion to rhetoric amounts to a radical rejection of politics, then we should expect retraction to play a central role in *Republic*, an explicitly political dialogue. And so it does. Indeed, Book Ten, which concludes *Republic*, is a “carnival of retractions.”⁵⁹ These retractions conclusively demonstrate that the totalitarian doctrine of *Republic* cannot be taken seriously as Plato’s point of view.⁶⁰

III. Against Athens: Plato’s *Republic* as the Subversion of Solon’s State

In order to understand Plato’s *Republic*, we must first understand that, in an important sense, it is not Plato’s at all. Neither is it Socrates’. Just as Plato remains withdrawn in authorial anonymity, Socrates recants his remarks

⁵⁵ Howland, *The Republic*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ See generally *Cratylus*.

⁵⁷ Socrates blends both these views in his confrontation with the sophist Gorgias, for whom oratory is simply a craft the purpose of which is to persuade the people to accept an unnatural servitude under laws imposed by their political masters. Among the ruling elite, Gorgias tells Socrates, “orators are the ones who give advice and whose views on these matters prevail.” “Yes, Gorgias,” Socrates agrees ironically, “my amazement at that led me long ago to ask what it is that oratory can accomplish. For as I look at it, it seems to be to something supernatural in scope.” *Gorgias* 456a.

⁵⁸ See *Phaedrus* 276a.

⁵⁹ Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 387. Rosen notices that Book Ten, which concludes *Republic*, involves philosophical reversals and retractions that “are too many” and that “cut too deep to be explained as careless errors on Plato’s part.” *Id.* Rosen denies, however, that the purpose of Book Ten is to show that the arguments for totalitarianism found in books One through Nine rely upon premises that “are false.” *Id.* In fact, that is precisely its purpose.

⁶⁰ Innumerable hints within *Republic* point to the same conclusion. For example, while proposing several of the more outlandish features of the totalitarian state he supposedly supports, Socrates repeatedly refers to comedy and laughter. See 452a-b; 473c; 518a-b. See also footnote 70 below.

and proposes that his elenctic encomium to political power belongs not to him but to Glaucon, the aspiring politician.⁶¹ The totalitarian regime that Socrates constructs, then, does not reflect the philosopher's ideal. Instead, it reflects Glaucon's innermost desires.⁶² Socrates does not speak the truth about justice to Glaucon; he does justice to the truth about Glaucon. He does not reveal the nature of the subject about which he speaks so much as reveal the nature of the subject *with whom* he speaks. Socrates knows that, "to use speech artfully," he must "determine which kind of speech is appropriate to each kind of soul, and arrange [his] speech accordingly, and offer a complex and elaborate speech to a complex and elaborate soul and a simple speech to a simple one."⁶³ Seldom does Socrates offer a more elaborate speech than the one he offers in *Republic*, suggesting that Glaucon's soul is exceedingly complex—like "a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon," the hundred-headed monster.⁶⁴ The city mirrors the soul,⁶⁵ and the tyranny that Socrates draws forth from Glaucon reflects the soul of a savage tyrant.

Glaucon is as psychically self-divided as his argument for tyranny is dialectically self-refuting. Glaucon does not see the fatal irony in his defense of tyranny, that it is inherently "impious to have breath in one's body and the ability to speak and yet to stand idly by and not defend justice when it is being prosecuted."⁶⁶ Socrates' discussion with Glaucon is an attempt to show him that dialogue and tyranny are incompatible because the tyrant "no longer makes any use of persuasion but bulls his way through every situation by force and savagery like a wild animal."⁶⁷ Socrates' use of animal imagery is not accidental—he clearly implies that to renounce peaceful persuasion is to lose one's humanity. The tyrant is no more than a dog, his decrees just so

⁶¹ See Book IV, 427c-d, wherein Socrates says to Glaucon, "Well, son of Ariston, *your* city might now be said to be established" (emphasis added).

⁶² It is Glaucon who proposes that every person's natural desire is to dominate others. For Glaucon, tyranny is natural, and will prevail unless "nature is forced by law into the perversion of treating fairness with respect" (Book II, 359b). The tyranny that emerges in *Republic* is the regime over which Glaucon wishes to rule. Although Socrates constructs the tyranny, he does so at Glaucon's behest. Glaucon wants Socrates to "grant to a just man and an unjust person the freedom to do whatever they like," so that "we can then follow both of them and see where their desires would lead" (359c). Socrates obliges.

⁶³ *Phaedrus* 277b-c.

⁶⁴ *Phaedrus* 230a. See also *Republic* Book IX, 588c-e.

⁶⁵ *Republic* Book II, 368c-369a.

⁶⁶ *Republic* Book II, 368b.

⁶⁷ *Republic* Book III, 411d.

much “yelping and screaming.”⁶⁸ Thus Socrates’ punning description of the tyrant as a guard-dog of dogma.⁶⁹

The political order that arises in *Republic* is a fantastic reflection of Glaucon’s dogmatic soul, but it is not only that. By acquiescing in Glaucon’s command to found a city in speech,⁷⁰ Socrates obscures the reality that the city of which he speaks has already been founded in deed. Calling the city “Kallipolis,”⁷¹ Socrates conceals its true name: Athens. Glaucon’s ambition, after all, is not to rule a city founded only in words.⁷² His desire is to rule Athens.⁷³ Socrates attempts to extinguish that desire, but not, as Xenophon would have it, in order to save Athens from Glaucon’s rule.⁷⁴ To the contrary, Socrates would save Glaucon from ruling Athens. By allowing Glaucon to found a city and declare himself its tyrant, Socrates attempts to tame his dogged desire to dominate. Plato casts Glaucon, his elder brother,⁷⁵ in the role of Solon, the father of Athenian democracy, in order to destroy the political tyranny that Solon created and the spiritual enslavement from which he suffered.⁷⁶

The identification of Glaucon and Solon confirms our thesis that Plato’s ostensible rejection of rhetoric and writing is in fact a rejection of legislative government, whose statesmen—or state’s men—assume the authority to write and rewrite the law.⁷⁷ In Book X of *Republic*, Plato makes a cryptic allusion to Ardiaeus, who “was said” to be a “tyrant [who] killed his

⁶⁸ *Republic* Book X, 607b.

⁶⁹ See *Republic* Book III, 412e.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Republic* Book VII, 527c. By naming this grim tyranny “the Beautiful City,” Socrates gives still another ironic indication that the city he proposes is an atrocity.

⁷² *Republic* Book VII, 471c-e.

⁷³ See Xenophon, *Conversations of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Robin Waterfield (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 152-156.

⁷⁴ See *id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 152, fn. 2.

⁷⁶ Plato has several purposes in conflating brother and father. One is to demonstrate the way in which the state, by rendering fathers and brothers equally subservient, replaces a natural hierarchy of authority with unnatural equality, sowing confusion among successive generations. This theme is taken up in *Republic* Book V. See especially 461d. Another of Plato’s purposes in conflating brother and father will be the subject of Section IV below.

⁷⁷ For Plato, natural law is always the same, whereas its artificial simulacrum is continually rewritten to suit the shifting interests of the legislators. Thus the politician will “make the same thing appear to the same people sometimes just and sometimes, when he prefers, unjust,” so as to persuade the people to “approve a policy at one time as a good one and reject it—the very same policy—as just the opposite at another.” *Phaedrus* 261d.

aged father and older brother.”⁷⁸ This Ardiaeus is none other than Plato himself, who defends his attempt to “kill” Solon,⁷⁹ the Athenian patriarch, and Glaucon, his older brother, by insisting that his motive is only to destroy their tyranny, not to promote his own. Like Ardiaeus, the Plato who aspires to dictate “has not arrived here yet and never will.”⁸⁰ As Plato writes in his *Second Letter*, “[t]here is no writing of Plato’s, nor will there ever be.”⁸¹ Plato writes only in defense of the natural law, the content of which is etched into the soul – a law that transcends the fickle whim of a legislator and commands universal respect.

In the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry,”⁸² therefore, Plato’s ultimate opponent is Solon, who created the Athenian state with a code of law composed in epic verse.⁸³ Solon used his poetry to entice Athenians into accepting laws that primarily served the legislator himself, concealing his self-enrichment with lyrical appeals to the virtue of moderation. Thus Solon wrote that:

Often the wicked prosper, while the righteous starve;
Yet I would never exchange my state for theirs,
My virtue for their gold. For mine endures,
While riches change their owner every day.⁸⁴

What Solon neglected to say, however, was that his own statecraft allowed the wicked to prosper, the righteous to starve, and riches to exchange owners. Solon hid his injustice behind spellbinding sophistry in which words meant their opposite.

⁷⁸ 615c.

⁷⁹ In addition to being the father of Athenian democracy, Solon was an ancestor of Plato. In *Timaeus*, we learn that Solon was related to Dropides, the great-grandfather of Critias, who was Plato’s uncle. 20e. Plato suggests a connection between Solon’s poetry and his tyranny when Critias, one of the Thirty Tyrants, expresses regret that Solon did not devote more of his time to poetry. If he had, says Critias, “not even Hesiod or Homer... would ever have become more famous than he. That’s what I think anyhow.” 21c-d. The irony in this observation becomes clear, although not to Critias, when he reveals that Solon was forced to abandon his poetry “on account of the civil conflicts and the other troubles he found here when he returned.” Solon fled Athens not long after establishing his tyranny of the demos. Upon his return, Solon found Athenian society in such upheaval that it was no longer safe to practice his poetry.

⁸⁰ Book X, 615d.

⁸¹ 314c.

⁸² *Republic* Book X, 607b.

⁸³ See Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin Books, 1960) p. 45.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

It must be said, of course, that his semantic sleight of hand found a ready audience among Athenians already in the habit of referring “to whores as *mistresses*, taxes as *contributions*, garrisons of cities as *guards*, and the common gaol as *the residence*.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Solon “became a pioneer in this device,”⁸⁶ through which he did indeed exchange his virtue for gold. Solon pronounced his very first act of law-making a “discharge” of debts, but whereas discharging a debt previously meant repaying it, Solon’s discharge “decreed that existing debts were wiped out.”⁸⁷ Solon founded the Athenian polis with this act of fundamental injustice, the extortive effect of which he then intensified by debasing the currency.⁸⁸ Solon’s debasement of the currency required a prior debasement of the language, under which “discharge” came to mean its opposite.⁸⁹ In turn, Solon’s debasement of the coinage coined a word: through his *nomos* (law), Solon created *nomisma* (fiat currency).

In a calculated attempt to obscure his personal stake in eliminating debts, Solon purported to be the first to comply with his own law by forgiving a loan of five talents.⁹⁰ In reality, however, Solon and his political allies appropriated enormous wealth by incurring debts in the knowledge they would never be repaid. Prior to decreeing his discharge, Solon “confided to his most intimate friends [that he] had decided to cancel debts. They promptly took advantage of this confidence and anticipated the decree by borrowing large sums from the rich and buying up big estates. Then, when the decree was published, they went on enjoying the use of their property but

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 57.

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ *Id.* See also Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution* Book II, part 10. Although Aristotle uncritically accepts many aspects of the Solonic state, he correctly points out the democratic character of Solon’s coin debasement, which artificially equalized unequal amounts of silver. “These seem to be the democratic features of [Solon’s] laws; but in addition, before the period of his legislation, he carried through his abolition of debts, and after it his increase in the standards of weights and measures, and of the currency. During his administration the measures were made larger than those of Pheidon, and the mina, which previously had a standard of seventy drachmas, was raised to the full hundred.” In other words, one hundred of the debased drachmas contained no more silver than seventy (according to Plutarch, seventy-three) of the old.

⁸⁹ The sophistry through which Solon plundered the property-owning classes resonates throughout Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, in which Strepsiades urges his son to learn the “unjust logic” that will enable him to con his creditors.

⁹⁰ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens* at 58.

refused to pay their creditors.⁹¹ It was widely believed that Solon's decree wiped out substantial debts of his own.⁹²

Socrates demonstrates the corruption of Solon's decree—and the entire Athenian empire it helped establish—by leading Cephalus and Polemarchus to the conclusion that justice requires repaying one's debts.⁹³ In contrast to Solon, Socrates embodies the virtue of repaying what is owed. Indeed, Socrates' final act before death was to fulfill an obligation.⁹⁴ As the defender of “speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred,”⁹⁵ Socrates is equally opposed to Solon's currency inflation. Whereas Solon dishonestly diluted Athenian coins, Socrates refuses to exchange gold for bronze.⁹⁶ Socrates understands that monetary debasement proceeds from a prior spiritual debasement. Developing that insight, Socrates posits a politico-psychic analogue to Gresham's Law. Just as, under conditions of imposed equality, bad money drives out good, Socrates warns that the city will come to ruin if natural social hierarchies are leveled, placing the corrupt on equal standing with the virtuous.⁹⁷ As with money, so with so the polis and the psyche, there is nothing more to be feared “than the mixture of metals,” so

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution* Book II, part 6.

⁹³ 331b-332d.

⁹⁴ *Phaedo*, 118a. Socrates' last words are: “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.”

⁹⁵ *Republic* Book I, 331b.

⁹⁶ See, for example, *Symposium* 218d-219a.

⁹⁷ *Republic* Book III, 415c. Plato scholars generally fail to notice his bitter attacks on the political manipulation of money. The reason for this, perhaps, is the common—but mistaken—view that the inflationary regime Plato describes in *Laws* represents his understanding of the best *possible* polis, second only to the allegedly ideal, but unattainable polis envisioned in *Republic*. By underestimating the supreme importance of irony in Plato's political writings, these scholars get Plato's meaning precisely backwards. In *Laws*, Plato does not construct a second-best state; he only deepens his diagnosis of the totalitarian tendency inherent in all states. *Laws* depicts an ideal state *from the state's point of view*. The dialogue develops a legal code whose purpose is to “make the state as huge and as rich as possible.” *Laws* 742d. It is for the sake of expanding and enriching the state that the Athenian Stranger proposes laws forbidding the private possession of gold and silver, imposing worthless token currency, and confiscating foreign money. *Id.* at 742a-b. Likewise, it is for the sake of the state that the Athenian Stranger—with obvious irony—proposes a law according to which “it will be quite in order for the borrower to refuse absolutely to return both interest and principal.” *Id.* at 742c. Far from approving the monetary fraud perpetrated by states for their own aggrandizement, Plato exposes it for the injustice that it is. Plato's preference is clearly for “[t]he man who spends his money for honest ends and uses only just methods to come by it.” *Id.* at 743b-c.

that inferior elements dilute their superiors, and counterfeit authority replaces true law.⁹⁸

Solon's monetary decrees were calculated to exacerbate the spiritual poverty that led to their acceptance in the first place. With debtors enriched and creditors extorted, wealth and social status became as capricious as Solon's decree itself, and Athenians increasingly disregarded the debt of mutual respect they owed to one another as members of a community. Eliminating debts, Solon sowed the social strife upon which the state thrives. Similarly, by debasing the currency, Solon encouraged avarice and appetitive indulgence, thereby debasing the spiritual values that resist encroachments by political authority. Just as debased alloys displaced genuine silver, depraved lust displaced civilized self-restraint as the coin of the realm, with disastrous consequences for Athenian liberty.

In order to deflect attention from his own debasement, Solon resorted to another poetic perversion of the language, cloaking his law discharging debts in liberationist rhetoric. Of course, the founder's rhetoric was not entirely unfounded. Prior to Solon, it was common practice for creditors to take a security interest in the debtor's person. A debtor who defaulted on such a loan became a slave to his creditor.⁹⁹ By abolishing debts, Solon could plausibly portray himself as an emancipator of slaves, and he spared no opportunity to do so. Thus Solon wrote:

To Athens, to their home of divine origin,
I brought back many who had been sold,
Some justly, some unjustly,
And some who had fled out of dire necessity,
Who no longer spoke the Athenian tongue
After wandering in many places.
Others, who were subjected here to shameful slavery,
Fearing the whims of their masters, I set free.¹⁰⁰

But abolishing slavery was simply rhetorical camouflage for recasting it in a more insidious form. Solon did away with debt slavery for the sake of unleashing a slavery of the passions. Solon made sex slaves, literally, by founding tax-funded brothels in which the state owned the prostitutes, forcing them to sell their bodies and even fixing the price at which they did so. As Athenaeus observed, these sex slaves, to whose bodies everyone could claim equal access, reflected perfectly the democratic essence of Solon's regime:

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 415b.

⁹⁹ See Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens* at 57.

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution* Book II, part 12.

But you found a law for the use of all men; for you, they say, Solon, were the first to see this—a thing democratic, Zeus is my witness, and salutary (yes, it is fitting that I should say this, Solon); seeing our city full of young men, seeing, too, that they were under the compulsion of nature, and that they went their erring way in a direction they should not, purchased and stationed women in various quarters, equipped and ready for all alike. They stand in nakedness, lest you be deceived; take a look at everything.

Perhaps you are not feeling quite up to your form; maybe you have something that distresses you. But their door stands open. Price, one obol; hop in! There isn't a bit of prudishness or nonsense, nor does she snatch herself away; but straight to it, as you wish and in whatever way you wish. You come out; you can tell her to go hang, she is nothing to you.¹⁰¹

More figuratively, Solon made sex slaves of all Athenians by encouraging the unbridled indulgence of *eros*. Knowing that intemperance leads to tyranny, he sought to enshrine pederasty, his own personal vice, as civic virtue. Solon therefore “proposed a law which forbade slaves...to have a boy lover, so that his intention was evidently to class this as an honourable and dignified practice and thus, in a sense, to recommend it to reputable men by the act of forbidding it to the unworthy.”¹⁰² By excluding slaves from pederasty, Solon implicitly “acknowledged...that the two things go together.”¹⁰³ Slavery and pederasty go together because both proceed from the same disordered desire to transgress natural interpersonal relations—a characteristically democratic desire. The slave master takes a naturally independent man and infantilizes him into dependency; the pederast takes a naturally dependent child and (mis)treats him as a free adult. Both the slave master and the pederast give themselves over to the desire to oppress the powerless, only to find themselves beholden to a merciless spiritual bondage.

¹⁰¹ *Deipnosophists*, trans. Charles Burton Gulick, 1937.

¹⁰² Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens* at 43-44. It should be unsurprising that a democrat, accustomed to obliterating natural differences in the name of an artificial equality, would be a homosexual pederast. There is truth in Aristophanes' lewd double entendre, according to which Athenian politicians are “shameless assholes.” See *Clouds*, lines 1090-1105. Solon's boy lovers included Pisistratus, the future tyrant and Solon's life-long ally. Although Solon, with characteristic duplicity, represented himself as an opponent of Pisistratus, “Solon actually became his adviser and approved many of his measures.” *Op. cit.* at 75.

¹⁰³ Wilhelm Kroll, “Knabenliebe,” in Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopaedie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 11, cols. 897-906, fn. 3. Although adult slaves could not take boy lovers, boy slaves “were forced sometimes to make themselves available for pederasty, and indeed for the gratification of sensual lust in general....” *Id.*, fn. 1. Pederasty was always a predatory affair.

The dialectic between pederasty and slavery unfolds in the beginning of Plato's *Symposium*, in which the tragic poet Agathon presides over a drinking party convened in honor of his victory at the city's annual drama contest. As the festivities commence, Agathon, an effeminate, cross-dressing pederast,¹⁰⁴ releases his slaves, inviting them to behave as if they were his masters.¹⁰⁵ Agathon's democratic gesture symbolizes his debauched soul, in which base appetites reign over reason. "The house of Agathon becomes an image of the decadent soul that has neglected the proper ordering of its unequal parts. The unequal parts that properly rule and are ruled, the higher and the lower, are instead treated equally.... Pederasty, as a 'lack of self-restraint with regard to pleasure,' is an image of this sort of decadent equalization of the ruling and the ruled parts of the soul."¹⁰⁶

In *Republic*, Glaucon, playing the role of Solon, embodies the psychic disturbance common to both pederasty and political ambition. Like Solon (and Agathon), Glaucon is a boy-loving politician who employs linguistic legerdemain to conceal his lust for power. Addressing the aspiring tyrant, Socrates rebukes him for his insatiable appetite for young boys: "[I]t isn't appropriate for an erotically inclined man to forget that *all* boys in the bloom of youth pique the interest of a lover of boys and arouse him and that all seem worthy of his care and pleasure. Or isn't that the way *you people* behave to fine and beautiful boys?"¹⁰⁷

To emphasize the grotesque unnaturalness of this appetite, Socrates likens Glaucon's desire to desecrate a young boy's body, and the body politic, to cannibalism. By indulging his hunger for young flesh, Glaucon would encourage the city to gorge itself on meat.¹⁰⁸ The implication is that politicians feed on the flesh of the people. More precisely, the implication is that Solon, founder of the democratic feast, cannibalized the demos. The revolution eats its children. Socrates suggests as much when he recounts the myth of the Lycean Zeus, whose worshippers sacrificed men to their god.

¹⁰⁴ See Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*.

¹⁰⁵ *Symposium* 175b-c. See also *Lysias* 208c.

¹⁰⁶ Sean Steel, "Katabasis in Plato's *Symposium*," *Interpretation*, volume 31, 2004, p. 61. The internal quotation is from *Laws* 636c. This decadent equalization of the soul's natural hierarchy is symbolically reenacted in the opening of *Republic*, where Socrates observes, ironically, that the strange religious customs of a barbarian culture are "no less outstanding" than the customs native to Athens. Book I, 327a.

¹⁰⁷ Book V, 474d (emphasis added). The theme of the tyrant as pederast runs throughout *Republic*. See also Book IX, 572e, where Socrates describes how the tyrant seizes every opportunity to "keep hold of a young man" and "plant in him a powerful erotic love."

¹⁰⁸ See *Republic* Book II, 372d and 373c.

According to Socrates, “anyone who tastes the one piece of human innards that is chopped up with those of other sacrificial victims must inevitably become a wolf.”¹⁰⁹ This wolf with a taste for human flesh is Solon, who once described his relation to the Athenian citizenry as that of a “wolf among many dogs.”¹¹⁰ Making the target of his remarks even more clear, Socrates observes the inevitability with which a democratic leader becomes a wolf among his people “and does not restrain himself from spilling kindred blood[.] He brings someone to trial on false charges¹¹¹ and murders him (as tyrants often do), and, by thus blotting out a human life, his impious tongue and lips taste kindred citizen blood. He banishes some, kills others, and drops hints to the people about *the cancellation of debts and the redistribution of land.*”¹¹²

As Socrates demonstrates, Solon inflamed the passions of the people in order to slake his own blood lust. “During the first days of his reign and for some time after,” asks Socrates, “won’t [the tyrant] smile in welcome at anyone he meets, saying that he is no tyrant, making all sorts of promises both in public and in private, freeing the people from debt, redistributing the land to them and to his followers, and pretending to be gracious and gentle to all?”¹¹³ That Socrates refers specifically to Solon—who released debtors and redistributed land to his political cronies—is unmistakable. “But,” Socrates continues, “when he has dealt with his exiled enemies by making peace with some and destroying others, so that all is quiet on that front, the first thing he does is to stir up a war, so that the people will continue to feel the need of a leader... [and] also so that they will become poor through having to pay war taxes, for that way they will have to concern themselves with their daily needs and be less likely to plot against him.”¹¹⁴ This is precisely what Solon did.

Before Solon seized power, Athenians had suffered incalculable death and debt in a vain attempt to conquer the island of Salamis. The war was so

¹⁰⁹ *Republic* Book VIII, 565d. Similar imagery can be found at Book I, 336b, where Socrates describes Thrasymachus as a “wild beast...[poised to] tear us to pieces.” The theme of cannibalism recalls the horrors of the Peloponnesian War, during which starved soldiers occasionally resorted to eating the remains of their fallen comrades. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.70.

¹¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution* Book II, part 12. Solon’s poetic self-portrait sets the stage for Socrates’ ironic reference to Autolykus, who is said to be “better than anyone at lying and stealing.” *Republic* Book I, 334a-b. Punning on the name “Auto-lycus,” Socrates suggests that injustice is in no one’s self-interest because the wolf becomes a wolf against himself. See also *Republic* Book III, 416a.

¹¹¹ This does not refer to Solon, of course, but to that other “wolf,” Lycon, who joined Meletus and Anytus in bringing Socrates to trial. See *Apology* 36b.

¹¹² *Republic* Book VIII, 565e-566a (emphasis added).

¹¹³ *Republic* Book VIII, 566d-e.

¹¹⁴ *Republic* Book VIII, 566e-567a.

devastating that a law was passed “forbidding anyone in the future, on pain of death, either to speak or write about reviving the Athenian claim to Salamis.”¹¹⁵ By disobeying this law, Solon was able to become Athens’ new lawgiver and war leader. Solon composed and performed an elegaic battle hymn, persuading Athenians to resume their war for Salamis, under his command.¹¹⁶ Resuming the war, of course, meant resuming war taxation, whereby the city’s wealth was plundered for the benefit of an avaricious alliance of political and military elites.

Solon’s cancellation of debts, then, was not calculated to liberate the poor. It was calculated to expropriate the tyrant’s rich enemies, to enrich his scheming friends, and to crush the entire citizenry beneath the tax burden of an imperialistic war. Solon’s discharge of debts was a declaration of moral bankruptcy, encouraging Athenians to default on their moral obligations and to embrace the boundless desire for empire that would establish a legacy of democratic warfare persisting long after Solon’s demise.¹¹⁷ The dramatic date of *Republic*, sometime between 411 and 421 B.C., coincides with Athens’ fateful escalation of the decades-long Peloponnesian War.¹¹⁸ That escalation

¹¹⁵ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, pp. 49-51.

¹¹⁶ *Id.* As if to confirm the connection between poetry and warfare, the battle of Salamis involved the three most prominent tragic poets of ancient Greece: “Aeschylus was one of the combatants, and helped to gain the victory, Sophocles danced at the festival that celebrated it, and on the same day Euripides was born.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), part II, section III, p. 294.

¹¹⁷ Solon’s enthusiasm for war reveals that his true motive was to collect unjust debts, not to discharge them. Democratic warfare, under Solon and for centuries afterwards, was nothing but the organized expropriation of subjugated peoples, as epitomized by Athens’ protracted entanglement in the Peloponnesian War. When the revolution of 410 restored democracy to Athens, the regime immediately renewed its commitment to a war that had already “inflicted great suffering on the poor and brought poverty to many who had previously not been needy.” Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003), p. 422. The democratic revolutionaries “continued to need a great deal of money to carry on the war, and while the treasury was almost empty, the revival of Athenian power and prestige after Cyzicus promised to generate income. Although subject states had already been defaulting on their payments, the Athenians in their new confidence restored the old tribute system in place of the tax on trade, expecting to collect both arrears and current assessments. The restored democracy was also willing to impose another direct war tax,” known as the *eisphora*. *Id.*

¹¹⁸ Allan Bloom argues for 411. See *The Republic of Plato*, Second Edition (United States of America: BasicBooks, 1991), p. 440, fn. 3. Both Martha Nussbaum and Jacob Howland contend that *Republic* is set in the year 421, during the Peace of Nicias. See, respectively, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 13 and *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy*, p. xii. Stanley Rosen is less definitive, finding only that the dialogue takes place

allowed weapons manufacturers and financiers to reap illicit profits, extract usurious interest, and plunge Athenians deeply in their debt. Cephalus, who appears briefly in Book I of *Republic*, was among those arms merchants who owed their fortunes to war profiteering.¹¹⁹ Socrates hints indelicately at the source of Cephalus' ill-gotten gains when he points out the injustice of returning weapons to a man who "asks for them back when he is out of his mind."¹²⁰ Agents of the Thirty Tyrants seized Cephalus' weapons factory.¹²¹ Socrates suggests that returning the factory to its owner would be unjust because Cephalus has gone out of his mind with avarice. Cephalus, whose name means "head," and who presides as head of the household in which the dialogue takes place, has lost his head. Condemned equally by Socrates' remark is Solon, the patriarch of Athenian democracy, who incited the citizens to return (to) their weapons and wield them against Salanis during an impassioned performance in which he "pretended to have gone out of his mind."¹²²

Even more damning, however, is Socrates' definition of justice, a solemn indictment of Solon's regime. For Socrates, justice consists of "minding one's own business,"¹²³ and the just man is content to live a private life, with no desire for political power.¹²⁴ By design, Socrates' definition of justice precludes the very possibility of a legitimate state, and consigns all

"somewhere between 431 and 411, in the early or middle stages of the Peloponnesian War." *Plato's Republic*, p. 20.

¹¹⁹ See section 8 of "Against Eratosthenes," a speech by Cephalus' son, Lysias, who admits that his father's weapons factory was staffed by slaves. All of Lysias' speeches are webbed at www.perseus.tufts.edu.

¹²⁰ Book I, 331c.

¹²¹ See "Against Eratosthenes," especially sections 1-8.

¹²² Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, p. 49. Plato reinforces the comparison by drawing attention to the wreath Cephalus wears on his head. *Republic* Book I, 328c. When Solon feigned madness in order to recite his battle hymn, he wore a "small felt cap on his head." *Op. cit.*

¹²³ See *Republic* Book IV, 433d-e; see also *Charmides*, where the future tyrant, who threatens to subdue Socrates by force (176c), must learn that "temperance is minding one's own business" (161b).

¹²⁴ See *Republic* Book VI, 489c and 499b. See also *Apology* 31c-32e, wherein Socrates explains why "[a] man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time." The state, as the organized usurpation of individual decision-making and the institutionalized interference in private affairs, cannot be governed justly, and anyone who even attempts to do so will be destroyed. "[N]o man will survive who genuinely opposes [the Athenian masses] or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city."

coercive government to its rightful place among the unjust.¹²⁵ Socrates shows the state to be an unnatural rupture in the convivial social order where self-possessed individuals govern their own private affairs and recognize in others the sovereignty that is properly theirs.¹²⁶ The politician who would tend only to his own affairs must abdicate his position of power; no politician can be just, and no just man can be a politician.¹²⁷ Even as Socrates' definition of

¹²⁵ For a portrayal of Socrates as an anti-political "revolutionary," the "deadliest foe" of the Athenian state—and all states—see G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, part II, section III, pp. 308-9.

¹²⁶ Although Socrates' political point of view amounts to natural-law anarchism, he is frequently mistaken for an extreme authoritarian. Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith interpret Socrates' argument in *Crito* as demonstrating that "the authority we should recognize in the state's relationship to the citizen is *even more one-sided*" than "that of parent over offspring and master over slave." *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chapter 5.2.2 (emphasis in original); reprinted in *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 236. This gross misinterpretation overlooks the dialectic distance that Socrates puts between himself and the argument for subservience to the state, an argument he imagines *the laws of Athens* would present if only *they* could speak. See *Crito* 50a-54d. Far from respecting the authority of legislative decree, Socrates draws attention to its utter inability to claim obedience. That the laws cannot speak for themselves demonstrates their inhumanity and the abject ignorance of those who "listen" to them. See *Phaedrus* 275c-e. Legislation cannot truly "speak" to us because it is not truly law, but merely an "echo." Such inauthentic authority cannot command our rational assent, but must induce obedience by unleashing the irrational frenzy of desire, as Socrates indicates by telling *Crito* that "these are the words I seem to hear, as the Corybants seem to hear the music of their flutes, and the echo of these words resounds in me, and makes it impossible for me to hear anything else." *Crito* 54d. In actuality, of course, Socrates does hear something else: the voice of his *daimon*, which has consistently urged him against participating in government, in the maw of which just men perish. *Apology* 31c-32a. Like Odysseus, Socrates resists the spellbinding Siren song of the state, impervious to the irrational temptation of power. See *Phaedrus* 254e and 259a-b. This is confirmed in a parallel scene in *Symposium*, where the personified laws of Athens fail to subdue Socrates. The enticing intemperance of "violet-crowned Athens" is embodied by violet-crowned Alcibiades, the debauched homosexual general who bursts onto the scene, in all his renowned beauty, to the accompaniment of deafening flutes. *Symposium* 212d-e. But despite all his charms, Alcibiades, like Athens, cannot seduce the philosopher. See *Symposium* 219c. It is highly ironic, then, that in the *Crito* the personified Athenian laws claim to have satisfied Socrates like a lover whom he never wished to leave. 52b-53a. Athens has never satisfied Socrates and he has most certainly left it, because justice lies outside the city (state), in a place where the philosopher is far more at home. See *Phaedrus* 229b-c, 230bd and *Lysias* 203a.

¹²⁷ This is not at all refuted, but only confirmed, by *Gorgias* 525d, where Socrates tells Callicles that "tyrants, kings, potentates, and those active in the affairs of cities" are virtually all wicked men, "for these people commit the most grievous and impious errors because they're in a position to do so." Socrates condemns every ruler in Athenian

justice excludes all political rulers, however, it excludes Solon in particular. Not only did Solon fail to mind his own business, projecting a meddlesome influence on domestic and foreign affairs alike,¹²⁸ but he passed a law that punished anyone who minded his own business rather than taking sides at a time of political revolution.¹²⁹ In carrying out this unparalleled act of interventionism, “Solon’s intention was evidently that men should *not* remain indifferent or apathetic to the public interest or *safeguard their private affairs* while congratulating themselves upon having nothing to do with the disorders and misfortunes of their country....”¹³⁰

Socrates sees the perverse truth in Solon’s decree. By refusing to govern one’s private affairs and instead venturing into political life, a man truly does share in the disorders and misfortunes of his country. The tyrant is the most disordered and unfortunate man of all, afflicted by a lust for power that breaks his soul into multiple erotic afflictions. In fact, a man who will not live harmoniously with his fellow men is not a man at all. He is many men, a democracy of disintegrated psyches plunging into insanity as they struggle for control. Socrates describes the tyrant as concealing his tremendous psychic decomposition and disunity behind the “outer covering”

history, except one: Aristides, son of Lysimachus. *Id.* at 526b. Socrates honors Aristides as the vanguard of a peaceful revolt against the state’s unjust usurpation of ultimate decision-making authority. As an archon renowned for his equity, Aristides undermined the government legal system by facilitating the private resolution of disputes. His enemies alleged that “by determining and judging all matters privately, [Aristides] had destroyed the courts of judicature, and was secretly making way for a monarchy in his own person, without the assistance of guards.” Plutarch, *Lives* (NewYork: Bartleby.com, 2001), ch. 3, p. 9. Under the pretense of smashing an incipient tyranny, Athens’ true tyrants banished Aristides into ostracism. By praising Aristides alone among politicians, Socrates makes the point that the only just ruler is the one whose authority rests on natural virtue, not force of arms.

¹²⁸ Apart from his debt-cancellation, currency inflation, and war-mongering, Solon forbade nearly all exports, and in fact exerted control overly nearly every aspect of the Athenian economy. See Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, pp. 56 and 66.

¹²⁹ *Id.*, p. 52.

¹³⁰ *Id.* (emphasis added). Socrates’ definition of justice as minding one’s own business is an ironic commentary on this law and, by implication, the democratic political order. Solon’s law forced the citizens always to ally themselves with one faction or another, ensnaring them in interminable internecine struggles. By contrast, Socrates extols that small number of philosophers who have “seen the madness of the majority and realized, in a word, that hardly anyone acts sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might go to the aid of justice and survive..., just like a man who has fallen among wild animals and is neither willing to join them in doing injustice nor sufficiently strong to oppose the general savagery alone. Taking all this into account, they lead a quiet life and do their own work.” *Republic* Book VI, 496d-e.

of a human being, such that “anyone who sees” him “will think it is a single creature, a human being,” whereas it is in reality a “many-headed beast.”¹³¹ The desire for interpersonal hegemony is both a cause and a symptom of severe psychic instability because it knows no natural limits. The tyrant “attempts to rule not just human beings, but gods as well,” thereby revealing himself to be “mad and deranged.”¹³² The tyrant’s inhumanity and insatiability will lead to his insanity.

Cephalus himself sounds this theme when, quoting Sophocles, he describes his waning libido as an “escape from a savage and tyrannical master”—in fact, from “many mad masters.”¹³³ By invoking the authority of Sophocles, Cephalus reveals the key to a seldom-understood secret of Plato’s *Republic*. It is, self-consciously, a philosophical meditation on Sophocles’ famous portrayal of a savage and tyrannical master: Oedipus.

IV. Sophocles and Socrates: Defeating the Sphinx, Dispelling the State

To illustrate the depraved depth of the tyrant’s erotic abnormality—and the unfathomable extent of his misery—Plato invokes, appropriates, and transforms Sophocles’ three-play “Theban” cycle: *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. As already noted, Cephalus explicitly attributes his description of the tyrant’s savage desires to Sophocles. Then Polemarchus, Cephalus’ son, interrupts him, just as Oedipus intrudes upon his father Laius. The implication is that Polemarchus, like Oedipus, has struck his father dead. Cephalus is not heard from again; Polemarchus inherits his father’s argument.¹³⁴ Indeed, like Oedipus, who took his father’s wife as his own, Polemarchus will be his father’s heir “in everything.”¹³⁵ Extending the Oedipal theme, Socrates accuses Polemarchus of “speaking in riddles,”¹³⁶ just as the Sphinx, the oracle, and Teiresias speak in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Embedded in Socrates’ remark on the injustice of returning weapons to a madman¹³⁷ is another sly allusion to Oedipus, who, in the throes of madness, demands a

¹³¹ *Republic* Book IX, 588d-589b.

¹³² *Republic* Book IX, 573d.

¹³³ *Republic* Book I, 329c-d.

¹³⁴ See *Republic* Book I, 331d.

¹³⁵ *Republic* Book I, 331d. This passage suggests a Platonic rejoinder to Heraclitus’ aphorism that war is the father of all things. Cephalus, the war-profiteer, fades into oblivion, only to be replaced by his son Polemarchus, whose name means “war leader.” War, for Plato, is not the father of all things; it is only the father of more war.

¹³⁶ *Republic* Book I, 332b.

¹³⁷ *Republic* Book I, 331c.

sword from his subjects, who refuse him one for fear that he will commit another crime of passion.¹³⁸

By recalling that scene, Socrates suggests that Sophocles—like Oedipus, Cephalus, and Solon—never escaped the many mad masters that conquer and divide the tyrannical psyche. The philosopher exposes the poet’s insanity by showing that, like Oedipus, he cannot be trusted with weapons. Sophocles, after all, was not only a renowned writer of tragedies; he was another poet-warrior whose professions of piety masked pitiless acts of atrocity. Sophocles’ Theban plays masterfully depict the misery and madness that inevitably accompany political ambition, but Sophocles himself was a general in the Athenian army and an influential member of the Ten,¹³⁹ the inner circle of political elites that orchestrated the tyranny of the Four Hundred. After that murderous regime collapsed, and Sophocles was interrogated about his support for the ousted oppressors, he summoned the power of poetry to justify his complicity. When Peisander asked Sophocles whether he had knowingly aided the Four Hundred in carrying out their brutal repression of Athens, Sophocles admitted that he had, but claimed “there was nothing better to do.”¹⁴⁰ Sophocles’ self-serving *mea culpa* echoed that of Oedipus’ father Laius, who also confessed to his crime while denying that he could have avoided it: “I have understanding [of my wicked misdeed], but nature forces me.”¹⁴¹

Socrates disputes the poet’s claim to understanding, reviving the charge of insanity brought against Sophocles by his sons, who accused their aged father of senility in an attempt to seize control of his property.¹⁴² Once more, the poet defended himself by hiding behind his craft. Whereas Sophocles responded to Peisander’s accusation by recalling the mythic origins of the Oedipus tragedy, he responded to his sons’ accusation by previewing its dramatic conclusion. Flattering the Athenian jurors with his *afflatus*, Sophocles read aloud the opening stasimon of the yet-unpublished *Oedipus at*

¹³⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1250-1260. The citations to this work that follow rely on the Oxford University Press edition, translated by H.D.F. Kitto.

¹³⁹ See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.18.1419a27-28. Allusions to the Ten abound in Plato’s *Republic*, which has ten books and in which Socrates engages ten interlocutors.

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.18.1419a29-30.

¹⁴¹ See T.H. Irwin, “Euripides and Socrates,” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (July 1983), whose translation I have modified slightly. Laius does not speak these words in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but they are part of the mythic backdrop against which his drama is set. Similar formulations of fatalism recur throughout the play. See, e.g., lines 975-980.

¹⁴² Mark Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 97.

Colonus, including the ode to Athens. The defense succeeded, and Sophocles “was escorted from the court as if from the theater, with the applause and shouts of those present.”¹⁴³ Socrates sets out to demonstrate that this triumphant coup de théâtre, which charmed Athenians into upholding Sophocles’ sanity, only confirms the poet’s derangement.

The Oedipus myth through which an insane Sophocles acquitted himself therefore serves for Socrates as a template of the tyrant’s irrational desires—among them the irrational desire for tyranny. Enflamed by *eros* and “free of all control by shame or reason,” the tyrannical soul dares to do anything and, like Oedipus, “doesn’t shrink from trying to have sex with a mother...or with anyone else at all, whether man, god, or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat.”¹⁴⁴ In acting out what other men only dream, the tyrant recapitulates the crimes of Oedipus: incest and parricide. Socrates’ reference to cannibalism—“there is no food [the tyrant] refuses to eat”—reinforces the Oedipal theme in two ways.

First, it deliberately recalls the imagery with which Sophocles casts Oedipus’ double desecration. Cannibalism symbolizes both Oedipus’ murder of Laius and his marriage to Jocaste because both involve illicit consumption and consanguinity. Sophocles describes Oedipus’ parricide as “drinking [his] father’s blood” and his incest as bearing the “commingled blood of fathers, brothers, sons, brides, mothers, wives....”¹⁴⁵

Second, as we have seen, Socrates uses cannibalism to portray another unnatural, flesh-defiling appetite: pederasty. Pederasty, in turn, was the root cause of the Oedipus tragedy. The crime of Laius, which doomed his house, was the rape of a young boy.

In his youth, Laius, the future king of Thebes, was exiled to the court of Pelops, King of Pisa, while his cousins ruled in his absence. Upon reaching adulthood, Laius was entrusted with the care of Pelops’ young son, Chrysippus, whose name means “golden horse.” Under Laius’ tutelage,

¹⁴³ Plutarch, *Moralia* 785; cited in *id.*, p. 98.

¹⁴⁴ *Republic* Book IX, 571c-d.

¹⁴⁵ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1400-08. Aristotle also observes the close connection between incest and cannibalism in the opening of his *Politics*. “For, just as man, when perfected, is the best of the animals, so he is when divorced from law and right the worst of all. For injustice is harshest if it has weapons. But man is born having the possession of weapons such as prudence and virtue which he can use to the highest degree for opposite ends. Therefore man is most impious and most savage without virtue, and worst with regard to sexual things and food.” 1253a31-37. The man who revolts against nature, and nature’s laws, is a savage who fucks his mother and feasts on his fellow man.

Chryssipus commenced training in chariot racing.¹⁴⁶ Laius, however, could not suppress his lust for the boy, whom he kidnapped and sodomized. Already violated by his surrogate father, Chryssipus was later murdered by his mother Hippodameia, “the horse tamer.”

As punishment for Laius’ sexual deviance, Apollo’s oracle at Delphi warned him to restrain himself by remaining celibate. “No son are you to have,” the oracle warned Laius, “for if you do, the boy will kill his own father and sleep with his own mother.”¹⁴⁷ Oedipus’ birth is testimony to his father’s Dionysian defiance of Apollo, the god of measured and rational self-restraint. King Laius, the archetypal tyrant, allows *eros* to rule over reason. His sexual perversion is spiritual inversion. Reflecting the upside-down orientation of the tyrannical psyche, the crimes committed by Oedipus, Laius’ son, are an inversion of the crimes committed against Chryssipus. Chryssipus was penetrated by his father (figure) and murdered by his mother; Oedipus will murder his father and penetrate his mother.

Like a flag turned upside down to signal distress, Sophocles’ myth of Oedipus, unfolds as an inversion of the accursed crime from which it sprang.¹⁴⁸ As we shall see, when Socrates recollects themes and scenes from Sophocles’ Oedipus trilogy, he (re)inverts them, thereby setting things right-side up again. In this way, Socrates establishes himself as the anti-Oedipus.

There are, of course, similarities. Both Oedipus and Socrates must solve a rhapsode’s riddle or face death.¹⁴⁹ Oedipus must answer the deadly Sphinx, a “cruel singer,”¹⁵⁰ and Socrates must answer capital charges brought

¹⁴⁶ Chryssipus’ apprenticeship in the charioteer’s art already implies the relationship between pederastic *eros* and death. The charioteer’s art is the art of war.

¹⁴⁷ T.H. Irwin, “Euripides and Socrates.”

¹⁴⁸ As Charles Segal observes, “Sophocles’ version of the Oedipus story is built in part on a structure of opposites that fuse into one another. He exploits a certain logic encoded into the myth and expressed through the succession of generations. From Oedipus’ father, Laius, to his sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, the myth moves from homosexual rape to threatened childlessness and then to incest and the father’s deadly curse on his sons... Oedipus’ marriage contrasts with Laius’ (overabundance of children versus threatened childlessness), but is also parallel to it in the transgressive nature of the sexual union it contains: the oracle to Laius prohibiting children is analogous to the oracle to Oedipus foretelling his crime against father and mother that will produce incestuous children.” *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

¹⁴⁹ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 34-7 (recalling Oedipus’ solution to the riddle of the deadly Sphinx) and *Apology* 27a (presenting the charges of Meletus, who seeks the death penalty against Socrates, as a “riddle”).

¹⁵⁰ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 36.

by Meletus, a poet.¹⁵¹ In facing their tests, both Oedipus and Socrates present themselves as the savior of a dying polis,¹⁵² the cure for a plague that pollutes its people.¹⁵³ Both Oedipus and Socrates recount a prophecy in which their deaths will be the life of the city.¹⁵⁴ And just as Oedipus, whose name can be translated as “swollen foot,” is first wounded on his feet, death comes to Socrates feet first.¹⁵⁵

Despite these similarities, however, Socrates is the antithesis of Oedipus. In addition to “swollen foot,” Oedipus also translates as “knows the foot,” but of course he does not at all know what his scarred feet signify.¹⁵⁶ It is the famously shoeless philosopher who truly knows the foot. In *Symposium*, Socrates, a foot soldier equally remarkable for his bare feet and bold feats, takes the unusual step of wearing shoes—fancy shoes—although his habit of standing still suggests he has no need for them.¹⁵⁷ Socrates’ ironic attire, fit for a celebration, anticipates his victory over Agathon, who proposes a close connection between *pedia* and pederasty. Socrates “defeats” Agathon’s contention that *eros* is a “delicate-footed”¹⁵⁸ desire for young boys by portraying *eros* as the strong-footed and “shoeless” ascent on a “ladder of love” that conveys the soul away from the practice of pederasty.¹⁵⁹

Although the connection between *eros* and the foot may seem obscure, it illustrates Socrates’ status as the anti-Oedipus. Unlike Oedipus, who does not “know the foot” but conceals his ignorance beneath the pretense of knowledge, Socrates conceals his feet with conspicuous shoes and conceals his knowledge with ironic professions of ignorance, thereby revealing both. By modestly covering up, Socrates unveils the symbolic sexual significance of “knowing the foot.” Oedipus possesses unlawful carnal knowledge, the illicit knowledge that comes from overstepping natural boundaries, whereas Socrates knows the true art of erotic moderation. Hence Oedipus is a prolific

¹⁵¹ See *Apology* 23e.

¹⁵² See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 30-40, and *Apology* 36b-37a.

¹⁵³ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 14-57, and *Symposium* 201d and 207b.

¹⁵⁴ Compare scene I of *Oedipus Colonus* with *Apology* 39c-42a.

¹⁵⁵ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1032-36, and *Phaedo* 117e.

¹⁵⁶ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1031-34.

¹⁵⁷ See 174a, 175a-b, and 220a-221a.

¹⁵⁸ *Symposium* 195d-e.

¹⁵⁹ *Symposium* 203d. For a dramatic illustration of Socrates overcoming the temptation of pederasty, see *Charmides* 155d.

progenitor, whom the entire city calls father,¹⁶⁰ whereas Socrates is but a philosophical midwife.¹⁶¹

And whereas Oedipus, like his father Laius, attempts to disprove the Delphic oracle in order to demonstrate the superiority of his own wisdom,¹⁶² Socrates attempts to disprove the Delphic oracle in order to demonstrate his own ignorance.¹⁶³ In the end, Oedipus' wisdom shows itself to be nothing but tragic illusion¹⁶⁴ and a blasphemous affront to Apollo,¹⁶⁵ whereas Socrates' professions of ignorance conceal great wisdom¹⁶⁶ that honors the god.¹⁶⁷ Only the philosopher can fulfill the Delphic imperative to know oneself, because only love of wisdom will sustain the insight needed to organize the elements of the soul into an organically unified identity.¹⁶⁸ Knowing oneself requires being one self. The blind king, however, has no eye to see, no I to be. Whereas Socrates embodies the justice of minding one's own business, therefore, Oedipus (dis)embodies the tragic loss of natural self-possession that accompanies every attempt to achieve unnatural possession of another. Socrates is a self-controlled individual; Oedipus is many people and, having no (one) self, has no self-control. Sophrosune requires that the "stronger self that does the controlling is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred to," whereas a licentious person is not one person at all.¹⁶⁹

Plato dramatizes the opposition between self-control and the loss of (one)self—the opposition between Socrates and Oedipus—with a clever allusion to Homer's *Odyssey*. In *Republic*, Thrasymachus refers to Socrates as a "no one."¹⁷⁰ By implication, Socrates is Odysseus, who tells Polyphemus that his name is "No One."¹⁷¹ But if Socrates is as anonymous as Odysseus, then Oedipus, whose "name has gone over all the earth,"¹⁷² is like Polyphemus, whose name means "much renown." These Homeric identifications allow

¹⁶⁰ The very first words of *Oedipus Tyrannus* describe the citizens of Thebes as Oedipus' "children."

¹⁶¹ See *Theaetetus* 149a.

¹⁶² See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 790-98 and 960-73.

¹⁶³ See *Apology* 21a-c.

¹⁶⁴ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1182-83.

¹⁶⁵ See *id.*, lines 1329-30 and 1426.

¹⁶⁶ See *Apology* 23a-b.

¹⁶⁷ See *id.* 22a.

¹⁶⁸ See *Republic* Book IX, 588d-e.

¹⁶⁹ *Republic* Book IV, 429a-430a.

¹⁷⁰ Book I, 341c.

¹⁷¹ *Odyssey* 9.366-367. Plato's *Laws* takes this identification further by substituting for Socrates an unnamed Athenian.

¹⁷² *Oedipus at Colonus*, Scene II.

Plato to carry out yet another inversion of Oedipus. Because no matter how widespread his notoriety, it is Oedipus, whose parents gave him no name at all,¹⁷³ who is truly a “no one,” just as it is the one-eyed Polyphemus who becomes “no one” when Odysseus blinds him. Even in name the Cyclops is an appropriate analogue for Oedipus, because “Polyphemus” suggests an affinity with the many, just as Oedipus’ name reveals his multiple identities. But the similarity does not end there. Like Polyphemus, the son of Poseidon, the first god to take a boy lover, Oedipus is the son of Lauis, the originator of pederasty. And like Polyphemus, Oedipus is a murderous, flesh-defiling monster blinded by no one (but himself). That Oedipus does not know the crimes he has committed demonstrates the extent to which he has forgotten his own name, which signifies them. Just as the sightless Cyclops demands to know Odysseus’ name, Oedipus seeks the true identity of the “no one” who is hidden to him. Odysseus, by contrast, remembers his true name,¹⁷⁴ just as Socrates remembers his true nature. The secret to the identities of both Oedipus and Odysseus lie in their scarred feet—but only Odysseus understands this.¹⁷⁵ Whereas self-aware Odysseus and Socrates preserve themselves from oblivion, blind Polyphemus and Oedipus are no(t) one.

Sophocles tells us that Oedipus is a multiplicity of men when Creon says that Lauis was killed not by one brigand, but by a whole company of them.¹⁷⁶ He tells us again when Oedipus wonders whether the only surviving witness to the murder will confirm that account. “You said that he reported it was brigands who killed the king. If he still speaks of ‘men,’ it was not I; a single man, and ‘men,’ are not the same. But if he says it was a traveler journeying alone, why then, the burden of guilt must fall on me.”¹⁷⁷ Even more dramatically, however, Sophocles *shows* his audience that Oedipus is a mask for many men—when the actor who plays Oedipus becomes the face of the blinded king. A master of meta-theater, Sophocles displays Oedipus’ undefined identity by using all his actors in multiple roles *except* the actor who plays Oedipus. The second actor plays the priest, the shepherd, and Jocaste; the third actor plays Tiresias, Creon and the two messengers; but the first actor plays only Oedipus.¹⁷⁸ With just this one role, the first actor nevertheless plays many men.

¹⁷³ See *Oedipus Rex*, lines 1036-1040.

¹⁷⁴ Odysseus’ wanderings are a mythic reenactment of the journey out of self-forgetfulness. See, e.g., *Odyssey* 5.215-224 and 9.95-100.

¹⁷⁵ See *Odyssey* 19. 343-475.

¹⁷⁶ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 120-124.

¹⁷⁷ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 841-846.

¹⁷⁸ See Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn*, pp. 81-82.

Sophocles' deliberate division of dramatic labor creates important meta-theatrical moments, such as when Creon and Tiresias, whom Oedipus accuses of conspiring, literally speak with one mouth, because the same actor plays both roles.¹⁷⁹ Whereas the second and third actors speak as multiple characters, the first speaks only as Oedipus. The tyrant speaks with one voice. Socrates, as the anti-Oedipus, insists that the state's unilateral dictates are unjust, even though the crowd may praise them, as Oedipus declares them, with "one voice."¹⁸⁰ Crowds, like Oedipus, do not know what is truly just.

Oedipus's "wisdom," after all, is the knowledge of his father's transgression, but ignorance of his own—and himself. Answering the Sphinx requires the very self-awareness that Oedipus lacks. Her famous riddle, which Sophocles leaves unspoken, states: "There is on earth a being two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed that has one name [literally, one voice]; and, of all creatures that move upon earth and in the heavens and in the sea, it alone changes its nature. But when it goes propped on most feet, then is the swiftness in its limbs the weakest."¹⁸¹ Oedipus' answer to the riddle, which Sophocles also leaves unspoken, is "man."

But man is not the (only) answer to the riddle. Like Neil Armstrong, Oedipus overlooks the distinction between "man" and "*this* man." By offering a universal answer to the riddle, Oedipus overlooks its personal implications. Oedipus does not know himself—does not know that *he* is the answer the Sphinx is looking for (and at). From the beginning, Oedipus is already a blind man, who cannot see the truth about himself, or his interlocutor, because, like his father, he has refused the light of Apollo.

Apollo's prophet at Delphi foretold that Oedipus would kill his father and sleep with his mother. Oedipus fulfills the prophecy by striking a much older man and sharing his bed with a much older woman. These are the crimes of a supremely tyrannical soul—one that recognizes no authority beyond itself. Unlike Socrates, whose *daimon* urges him always to show restraint,¹⁸² Oedipus' desires overwhelm all inhibition and demand boundless self-indulgence. Whereas Socrates hears divine commands, Oedipus is deaf to

¹⁷⁹ *Id.*

¹⁸⁰ *Phaedrus* 277d-e.

¹⁸¹ I have slightly amended the translation found in Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, p. 36. For an essentially identical translation, and a definitive citation of ancient sources, see Joshua T. Katz, "The Riddle of the *sp(h)ij*:- The Greek Sphinx and her Indic and Indo-European Background," version 1.0, Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics (December 2005), p. 9 and fn. 14. Katz attributes this version of the riddle to Asclepiades of Tragilus (4th Century B.C.).

¹⁸² See *Apology* 31d.

Apollo, the voice of reason, and hears only the demands of his own deformed libido.¹⁸³ Oedipus hears only echoes,¹⁸⁴ because his voice suppresses all others, whom he suffers to speak only at his command.¹⁸⁵ By contrast, Socrates allows even a slave to speak freely.¹⁸⁶ But recognizing freedom in others, Socrates demands it for himself.¹⁸⁷ Whereas Oedipus stifles himself at King Creon's command,¹⁸⁸ Socrates refuses to remain silent when the state demands it.¹⁸⁹ Like Tiresias, Socrates addresses the king with "the right of equal answer."¹⁹⁰ Oedipus, the tyrant who recognizes no equal,¹⁹¹ and who answers to no one, not even Apollo, cannot recognize himself as the answer to the Sphinx's riddle about the creature with one voice.¹⁹²

¹⁸³ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1386-1387.

¹⁸⁴ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 421.

¹⁸⁵ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 358-361.

¹⁸⁶ See *Meno* 82a and passim.

¹⁸⁷ By attending to Plato's portrayal of Socrates as the anti-Oedipus, we see yet another way in which Socrates stands opposed to the state. In *Crito*, as we have seen, Socrates imagines that the laws of Athens, if they could speak, would argue that he must approve these laws because he has remained in the city nearly all his life, having "been away from Athens less than the lame or the blind...." 52b-c and 53a. Although it is natural to assume that the laws contemplate two sets of people—the lame, and the blind—in fact they make a riddling reference to just one person: the lame and blind Oedipus. Solving this riddle reveals Socrates' true stance toward the state. The laws of Athens appeal to the length of Socrates' residence to show the extent of his obligation to honor them. But the laws prove nothing with their oblique suggestion that Socrates has been away from his native Athens less than Oedipus from his native Thebes. Oedipus spent virtually his entire life away from Thebes. For the comparison to be meaningful, we must recall the legend that Oedipus was not exiled, but remained in the city to rule until his death. See, e.g., Homer's *Odyssey*, xi.271-76. Viewed from this perspective, however, the laws undermine their own authority. By implicitly comparing Socrates' relation to Athens with that of King Oedipus to Thebes, the laws only succeed in demonstrating Socrates' superior claim to rule. The laws of Athens must submit to Socrates, just as Thebes submitted to Oedipus. As demonstrated above, this is confirmed by a parallel scene in *Symposium*, where Alcibiades' invidious lust yields to Socratic chastity. See 219d. The philosopher does not give in to evil, but proceeds ever more boldly against it.

¹⁸⁸ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1512-1520.

¹⁸⁹ See *Apology* 29c-30b and 37e-38a.

¹⁹⁰ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 408-409.

¹⁹¹ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1019.

¹⁹² Of course, unjust decrees cannot truly speak and, therefore, the tyrant's "one voice" is none at all. The tyrant who coerces others loses his voice, whereas the philosopher, who seeks only to persuade, finds his. Compare *Oedipus Rex*, line 1310 with *Republic* Book I, 336d-e. This opposition between tyranny and philosophy, monologue and dialogue, recapitulates itself in Plato's identification of Oedipus with Polyphemus and Socrates with Odysseus. Socrates, whose inner voice urges him to resist the tyranny of

Apollo, who speaks through an oracle, has two voices, and so the god that Oedipus repressed returns twice, once for each of his crimes. In his first return, Apollo disguises himself as the Sphinx, an unnatural admixture of human and beast, to show Oedipus what he has become. In his second return, Apollo disguises himself as the blind foreigner Tiresias, to show Oedipus what he will become. The Sphinx and the prophet reveal their true identity, and Oedipus' true destiny, when they demand of Oedipus what Apollo demands at Delphi: know thyself. The answer to both of their lofty riddles lies in the lowliest of places: Oedipus' feet.¹⁹³

The Sphinx's riddle seeks the identity of a four-, two-, and three-footed creature. Tiresias' riddle recalls who Oedipus was as a newborn child, when his parents pierced his feet, making four out of two, and bound his feet, making of two a third;¹⁹⁴ who Oedipus is as king, standing on his own two feet while others kneel before him as supplicants;¹⁹⁵ and who Oedipus will be as a blind old man, "tapping his way along" with his staff in hand.¹⁹⁶ Oedipus is the answer to the Sphinx's riddle—and to the mystery of who killed Laius. Oedipus is the parricide.

By trampling the natural order, Oedipus calls down a "dread-footed curse"¹⁹⁷ upon the city. Nature's law is "high-footed,"¹⁹⁸ whereas Oedipus the

"speaking with one voice," is akin to Odysseus, who speaks with many voices (which not even his wife can recognize—see *Odyssey* 23.105-110); who hears the Siren's voices that no one else hears (*Odyssey* 12.175-200); and who identifies the true voice of polyphonic Helen (*Odyssey* 4.271-289). And once again, this kinship sets Socrates in opposition to Oedipus, who speaks with one voice; who hears only his own voice (see *Oedipus Rex*, line 545); and who cannot identify the sound of his own daughter (see *Oedipus at Colonus*, scene II). But we would be remiss to neglect the way in which these roles reverse themselves, such that Oedipus, the tyrant with a fractured identity, speaks with many voices, whereas Socrates, fully self-possessed, speaks with one. For while Oedipus dissembles with words that convey double meanings, Socrates speaks the simple truth—his manner of speech is (a) "just one." See *Apology* 17d-18a. In this way, double-speaking Oedipus again resembles Polyphemus, who has two voices, one that commands and one that wails in lament, whereas Socrates, "a stranger to ways of speaking" that are not his own (*Apology* 17d), resembles Odysseus, whose dog recognizes his master's voice even if others do not (*Odyssey* 17.290-310).

¹⁹³ See *Oedipus Rex*, lines 129-130, where Creon recalls how the Sphinx "forced us to look at what was at our feet," and lines 1349-1350, where Oedipus is forced to look at his own feet.

¹⁹⁴ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1030-36.

¹⁹⁵ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1-30.

¹⁹⁶ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 456.

¹⁹⁷ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 417.

¹⁹⁸ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 866.

tyrant is not an “upright man,”¹⁹⁹ but walks only with a staff, his “third foot.” Oedipus is “thrice a slave,”²⁰⁰ like the tyrant whom Socrates says is “three times removed” from the true king.²⁰¹ Symbolizing Oedipus’ triple identity as king, killer, and blind man, his staff is at once a scepter, a murder weapon, and a cane.

In addition, Oedipus’ “third foot” has a fourth meaning—his phallus, the “swollen foot” with which he committed his *other* crime.²⁰² It is appropriate that the tyrant’s scepter is a phallic image because his reign is made possible by the triumph of *eros*.²⁰³ Laius rapes the king’s young son; Oedipus violates the king’s elderly wife. Like Laius’ pederasty, Oedipus’ incest, which begets sons that are his brothers, involves an unnatural act against children. Their transgressive sex is reflected in both the Sphinx and her riddle.

Sphinx, according to the received etymology, means “constrict” or “strangle”—“appropriate to her function as a demon of death.”²⁰⁴ This etymology is not incorrect, but the name Sphinx is also related to “sphincter,” and derives from the Greek word for “anus” or “buttocks.”²⁰⁵ The Sphinx’s association with the anus figures prominently in extant iconography, which depicts the creature’s elevated hindquarters. In name and in nature, the Sphinx represents an exposed posterior.²⁰⁶ More specifically, the Sphinx (re)presents “the homosexual’s upended backside.”²⁰⁷

¹⁹⁹ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 614. Here, too, we see Oedipus as the opposite of Socrates. The description of Oedipus as a man who is not “upright,” and his doubly-significant obsession with “l(a)ying down” (see *Oedipus at Colonus*, scene I), contrast starkly with Socrates, who is the last man standing when everyone else has gone to bed (*Symposium* 223d). Still standing while the poets sleep, Socrates is like Odysseus, “standing among the dead men he killed, and they covered the hardened earth, lying piled on each other around him.” *Odyssey* 23.45-47.

²⁰⁰ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1063.

²⁰¹ See *Republic* Book IX, 587d and Book X, 597d.

²⁰² The sexual implications of Oedipus’ “third foot” are already present in his name, the first element of which can refer to an engorged penis.

²⁰³ For the same reason, it is appropriate that Solon wielded a golden tripod. See Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1:2.

²⁰⁴ See Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, p. 33.

²⁰⁵ Joshua Katz observes that “[o]n this interpretation, the name *Sphinx* might actually be connected to the creature’s riddling nature...: the greatest riddle of all is sex and the greatest sexual riddle the forbidden part of one’s own body that one cannot see, namely the buttocks or anus.” See “The Riddle of the *sp(h)ji*,” p. 13.

²⁰⁶ The poet John Milton draws this connection when he describes a flatulent man who “dares not swell out his belly with laughter, lest not his Sphinx, but his sphincter anus, accompany his mouth in its incantations, and against his will babble some riddles,

This anal orientation can also be found in the Sphinx's riddle, which, by suggesting the two-, four-, and three-footed sexual positions associated with sodomy, "quite clearly [calls for] a pederastic explanation."²⁰⁸ Oedipus must solve the riddle of his father's crime. That the Sphinx's "riddle of the foot" plays on the relationship between pedia and pederasty is confirmed by several ancient sources. According to a recently-discovered epigram by Nicarchus: "At first, no one was able to say what on earth is two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed. Well, it's a pathic, passive homosexual. When he stands, he is two-footed. And supporting himself on his two hands, head down to the ground, he is four-footed. But with his phallus he is three-footed, and his anal sphincter is like (explains the name of?) the rock nearby in Thebes."²⁰⁹ Hesiod, although more cryptic, also hints at the homoerotic meaning of the Sphinx's riddle by using "third foot" as a euphemism for phallus and by suggesting that the "three-footed" old man with a walking stick (Oedipus) is a sexual submissive.²¹⁰ Just as Nicharchus compared Oedipus' sphincter to a rock near Thebes, Hesiod refers to Oedipus as a man "whose back is broken and whose head looks down upon the ground" and whose anus is like "some hollow rock" that provides comfort "to the horned... denizens of the wood."²¹¹ Similar imagery can be found in Sophocles' version of the Oedipus myth, where the unknown killer, Oedipus, is "the bull of the rocks," roaming "savage woods and caves."²¹²

Plato takes up these materials—wood and rock—as another means of constructing Socrates as the anti-Oedipus. Once again, Plato sets the opposition between Socrates and Oedipus against the backdrop of Odysseus's erotic moderation and Polyphemus' polymorphic perversity. The motif of wood and rock is already present in the works of Homer and

which I pass over to the doctors, not to Oedipus, for interpretation...." Donald Lemen Clark, ed., *The Works of John Milton*, volume XII (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 238-239.

²⁰⁷ Katz, "The Riddle of the *sp(h)ij*," p. 19.

²⁰⁸ Katz, "The Riddle of the *sp(h)ij*," p. 18. In this connection, it is instructive to consult Plato's *Phaedrus*, which links pederasty with four-footedness. Socrates says, "[A] man who has become defiled... surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast... and, wallowing in vice, he goes after unnatural pleasure... without a trace of fear or shame." 250e. See also the contrast between two-footed men and four-footed beasts in *Statesman* 266e and *passim*.

²⁰⁹ P.J. Parsons, "4502. Epigrams (Nicharchus II)," in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. LXVI, ed. by N. Gonis et al. (London: Egypt Exploration Society), pp. 43-57; quoted in Katz, "The Riddle of the *sp(h)ij*," pp. 18-19.

²¹⁰ *Works and Days*, lines 504-535, trans. by Hugh G. Evelyn-White.

²¹¹ *Id.*

²¹² *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 477-478.

Hesiod, where wood and rock symbolize the phallus and the anus. Homer describes Polyphemus, who has a taste for men, taking a heavy load of trees and thrusting them inside his cave,²¹³ just as Hesiod describes Oedipus, like a passive homosexual, enticing “the denizens of the wood” to take shelter in his “hollow rock.” As the pederast to whom the Sphinx’s riddle refers, Oedipus is a union of wood and rock. Oedipus is made of wood because he is closely identified with the wooden instrument that pierced his feet and the wooden staff with which he killed his father; he is made of rock because he grows angry with Creon, whose treachery he says “would provoke a stone to anger.”²¹⁴ It is suitable that a pederast, whose natural desire for procreation is perverted into the desire for sterile sodomy, is made of wood and rock, not human flesh. Like wood and rock, the pederast has no progeny. From this point of view, Oedipus is as barren as the dead timber and cold crags of the mountainside on which he was cast as an infant.²¹⁵ He is like Polyphemus, a childless creature of forests and caves. Socrates, on the other hand, is like Odysseus—he was “not born from ‘oak or rock,’ but from men,” and so he has “a family, indeed three sons.”²¹⁶

To demonstrate how the philosopher restores the natural family relations that the tyrant perverts, Plato inverts the Sphinx’s riddle. Plato preserves its pederastic overtones, however, by replacing the riddle of the foot with a riddle of wood and rock. In *Republic* Book V, Socrates presents the following riddle: “A man who is not a man saw and did not see a bird that was not a bird in a tree (literally, a piece of wood) that was not a tree; he hit and did not hit it with a stone that was not a stone.”²¹⁷ Although Socrates

²¹³ See *Odyssey* 9.234-235. See also 9.387-390.

²¹⁴ *Oedipus Rex*, lines 333-334. Sophocles’ play draws many parallels between its tragic protagonist—a miserable spectacle—and the spectacle of tragic theater itself. The theme of wood and rock offers one of them, because Athens’ theater was itself first made of wood, then later stone.

²¹⁵ See the priest’s opening speech in scene I of *Oedipus Rex*.

²¹⁶ *Apology* 34d. Socrates’ self-description quotes Penelope’s description of Odysseus, whom she says was “not born from any fabulous oak, or a boulder.” *Odyssey* 19.163. Elsewhere, however, Socrates denounces the anti-reproductive practice of pederasty by drawing a distinction between trees, which can reproduce themselves, and rocks, which cannot. In a passage in *Laws* that explicitly invokes the name of Oedipus, Socrates (disguised as the Athenian Stranger) reminds Megillus that the “natural law,” which organizes the family and the wider convivial social order, “permits the sexual act only for its natural purpose, procreation, and forbids not only homosexual relations, in which the human race is deliberately murdered, [and incest between parent and child], but also the sowing of seeds on rocks and stone, where it will never take root and mature into a new individual.” 838c-839b.

²¹⁷ See 479b-c.

claims this is a “children’s riddle,” it bears four telling similarities to the Sphinx’s riddle—and one telling difference. Like the man who confronts a bird that is not a bird, Oedipus confronts the Sphinx, both “maiden and bird.”²¹⁸ Like the man who sees and does not see, Oedipus has sight but not insight, until at last he sees the truth and blinds himself. Like the man who throws a stone that is not a stone, Oedipus strikes his father with a staff that is not a staff, and pierces his mother with a foot that is not a foot. And like the man who is not a man, Oedipus is both many men and no one. But whereas Oedipus’ self-alienation is symbolized by his swollen phallus, the man in Socrates’ riddle—the man who is not a man—is a eunuch.²¹⁹ With this ironic stroke, Socrates reverses Oedipus in a most vivid way: by castrating him. Socrates unmans the tyrant, showing him to be no man at all.²²⁰

In the end, Oedipus’ swollen foot carries him into exile—no man’s land. Signifying the self-alienation wrought by a licentious libido, Oedipus’ feet will never again touch Theban soil.²²¹ Oedipus chooses exile over death.²²² Socrates, of course, chose death over exile.²²³ Oedipus is cast out from his home because he enforces an unjust law;²²⁴ Socrates returns home rather than enforce an unjust law.²²⁵

²¹⁸ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1200. The Sphinx, a horrible half-woman, half-bird hybrid, represents Oedipus’ unnatural desires. But of course, those desires are not truly his own—they have merely “nested within him.” *Republic* Book IX, 573e. With his avian avarice—his “feathered *eros*” —, Oedipus is reminiscent of another bird-man: Phoenix. Like Oedipus, Phoenix resolves to murder his father and to sleep with his lover. See *Iliad* 9.460-473. And like Oedipus, Phoenix becomes king of a foreign land, only to find himself lame and blind, discovering too late that he has “followed in Folly’s footsteps.” See *Iliad* 9.497-519. Whereas Plato’s *Republic* traces the tragic trajectory of Oedipus, its companion piece, *Symposium*, follows the rise and fall of Phoenix. See 172b.

²¹⁹ *Republic* Book V, 479b.

²²⁰ Here, too, Socrates shows his kinship with manly Odysseus. Socrates’ riddle about the bird that is not a bird suggests not only the Sphinx, but also Penelope’s puzzling dream about “a great eagle” that is really her husband. *Odyssey* 19.535-550. Similarly, Socrates is a swan that is not a swan. See *Phaedo* 84e-85b and *Republic* Book X, 620a.

²²¹ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1449-53. This scene is by no means unique, however, in depicting *eros* as a force that removes one’s feet from their native ground. Laius, after returning from his own exile, is killed while journeying outside the city, and Jocaste hangs herself. Socrates, once again, is like Odysseus, who resists foreign temptations to return to the city of his birth.

²²² See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1430-40.

²²³ See *Apology* 37c and see generally *Crito*.

²²⁴ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1381-1383.

²²⁵ See *Apology* 32b-32e.

By showing Socrates as the man that Oedipus is not, Plato calls attention to the tyrant's self-destructive nature. Plato's technique of disclosing the tyrant's inner contradictions by reversing constitutive elements of the Oedipus myth is on display in each of *Republic's* five signature scenes: the story of Gyges' ring, the story of Leontius, the proposed community of wives and children, the allegory of the cave, and the myth of Er.

The story of Gyges' ring, which Glaucon tells Socrates, is this:

Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. There was a violent thunderstorm, and an earthquake broke open the ground and created a chasm at the place where he was tending his sheep. Seeing this, he was filled with amazement and went down into it. And there, in addition to many other wonders of which we're told, he saw a hollow bronze horse. There were windowlike openings in it, and, peeping in, he saw a corpse, which seemed to be of more than human size, wearing nothing but a gold ring on its finger. He took the ring and came out of the chasm. He wore the ring at the usual monthly meeting that reported to the king and the state of the flocks. And as he was sitting among the others, he happened to turn the setting of the ring towards himself to the inside of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to those sitting near him, and they went on talking as if he had gone.... If he turned the setting inward, he became invisible; if he turned it outward, he became visible again. When he realized this, he at once arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. And when he arrived there, he seduced the king's wife, attacked the king with her help, killed him, and took over the kingdom.²²⁶

The Oedipal undertones in this story are unmistakable. Just like Oedipus, a man who must have his way in all things,²²⁷ Gyges kills the king, rapes the queen, and takes over the kingdom. But although Gyges commits the same crimes as Oedipus, he does so in reverse order, suggesting a reversal of the Oedipus myth. Whereas Oedipus' crime is "unseen" to him,²²⁸ Gyges' crime is invisible to others. Oedipus accuses others of polluting the city, never looking at himself; Gyges turns inward, so that others cannot look at him. Oedipus is the king whom a shepherd destroyed;²²⁹ Gyges is the shepherd who destroyed a king. Oedipus' tragic decline begins with the desecration of Chryssipus, a small boy; Gyges ascends to power by desecrating a giant. Oedipus' father penetrated Chryssipus, the "golden

²²⁶ *Republic* Book II, 359d-360b.

²²⁷ See the last words of *Oedipus Rex*.

²²⁸ See *Oedipus Rex*, lines 108-109.

²²⁹ See *Oedipus Rex*, lines 1178-1181.

horse”); Gyges penetrates a hollow bronze horse. Oedipus wrests the brooches from the cloak that covers Jocaste’s dead body and blinds himself with them;²³⁰ Gyges plunders the ring from a naked corpse and uses it to make himself invisible. Oedipus subjects himself to his own decree, attempting to demonstrate that, under his rule, all men are equally subject to the law; Gyges shows that the reverse is true. The tyrant only “proposed the equality of law” as a means “to conceal his usurpation of rule.”²³¹ In this way, the story of Gyges, by reversing the myth of Oedipus, reveals its hidden truth. The tyrant only pretends to serve “the sacred laws that Heaven holds in honor,”²³² the better to “make what laws [he] will.”²³³ Beneath his façade of righteousness, the tyrant is a thief, a rapist, and murderer.

The story of Leontius confirms the tyrant’s duplicity. As Socrates tells the story:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner’s feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned

²³⁰ See *Oedipus Rex*, lines 1268-1270. Removing the brooches, Oedipus loosens his dead wife’s garments, revealing her naked corpse. Implicitly condemning this defilement, Socrates will later announce that “to strip the dead of anything more than their arms” is “cowardly,” the mark of a man who ignores his living enemies while attending to “the body of the dead enemy who has flown away.” *Republic* Book V, 469c-d. (This remark applies to both Oedipus and Creon. Creon, in *Antigone*, is obsessed with punishing Polyneices, even though he has died and his comrades have fled. Likewise, Oedipus attends to his dead wife even while he, the pollutant of Thebes, remains at large.) By mediating the story of Gyges through the figure of Oedipus, who symbolically strips the queen, Plato establishes a connection with Herodotus’ version of the Gyges story. According to Herodotus, the king of Sardis arranged for Gyges, his most trusted minister, to secretly spy on the queen while she disrobed in her bedchamber. See *History*, Book I. When the queen caught Gyges in the act of “beholding what it is not lawful for him to see,” she offered him a choice. Either Gyges must murder the king, taking both the throne and the queen as his own, or he must die himself. Herodotus records that, like Oedipus, Gyges slew the king and stole the queen. The connection between Plato’s story of Gyges and Herodotus’ story of Gyges allows Plato to carry out another inversion of the Oedipus myth. In Herodotus, the man with unlawful knowledge of the queen murders the king in his sleep, when he cannot see his assailant. In the Oedipus myth, it is the man with unlawful knowledge of the queen who loses his sight—twice. Oedipus, of course, blinds himself after uncovering the truth about his marriage to Jocaste. And for the crime of seeing Athena’s naked form, Tiresias, too, is blinded.

²³¹ Seth Benardete, *Socrates’ Second Sailing: On Plato’s Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 37.

²³² *Antigone*, line 78.

²³³ *Antigone*, line 213.

away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses saying, “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful spectacle!”²³⁴

Leontius is a stand-in for Oedipus. He is an outsider to the city, to himself, and to the moral order. He is sexually perverted, overpowered by appetite, and at his feet are corpses that “lie upon the ground, unpitied, unburied....”²³⁵ He even combines the two crimes of Oedipus in his necrophilic desire to defile the dead. And like Oedipus, who disowns his malicious intent, as if someone else moved his hand to murder,²³⁶ Leontius’ unnatural desires take over his body, like a colonizing enemy, so that he speaks to them as if speaking to a foreign agent. Like Oedipus, Leontius is one man acting like another.

Fittingly, Socrates reveals the truth through role reversal: what Oedipus internalizes, Leontius externalizes. Oedipus *becomes* the “horrible, dreadful spectacle;”²³⁷ Leontius comes upon it from the outside. Oedipus is witness to crimes of his own commission; Leontius is witness to the crime of another. Or so it seems. Socrates hints that what appears to lie outside Leontius may in fact lie within—he looks out on dead bodies, but he takes his fill of them, too. The killings that Leontius attributes to an anonymous public executioner actually belong to him. Like Oedipus, Leontius is the uni(denti)fied assassin—he is, so to speak, both jury and executioner. In this way, Leontius is one man and many. Indeed, the word translated as “executioner” means literally “he who belongs to the people.”²³⁸ Leontius, like Oedipus, is a psychic menagerie—multiple personalities that no longer belong to one man.

Once more, Plato presents Socrates as the anti-Oedipus by uniting him with Odysseus. Just as Oedipus and Leontius speak to themselves as if to another person, Socrates quotes Odysseus’ self-addressed soliloquy, in which Odysseus “struck his chest and spoke to his heart, ‘Endure, my heart, you’ve suffered more shameful things than this.’”²³⁹ But whereas Oedipus and Leontius speak in “third person” out of psychic decomposition, Socrates and Odysseus do so out of self-mastery. Unlike Leontius, who succumbs to his horrible desires, Odysseus subdues them. By striking his chest and speaking

²³⁴ *Republic* Book IV, 439e-440a.

²³⁵ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 180-181.

²³⁶ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1329-1330.

²³⁷ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1298-1299.

²³⁸ See Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 457, fn. 30.

²³⁹ *Republic* Book III, 390d.

to his heart, Odysseus resists the urge to kill the servant girls who cavort in his palace with his wife's rapacious suitors.²⁴⁰ The more shameful thing that Odysseus endured was "that day when the irresistible Cyclops ate up [his] strong companions."²⁴¹ There in the Cyclops' blood-soaked cave, Odysseus restrained his irrational desires "until intelligence found a way."²⁴²

Not coincidentally, this is precisely the challenge Socrates poses in his allegory of the cave. Before he can explore that strange, otherworldly image, however, Socrates must withstand three waves of paradox.²⁴³ Socrates' success at navigating these treacherous waters already suggests his opposition to Oedipus, whose regime is "storm-tossed, and can no longer raise its head above the waves and the angry surge of death."²⁴⁴ But while all three waves resonate with themes from Sophocles' Theban plays, the second wave—Socrates' ironic proposal for a community of wives and children—carries with it a particularly anti-Oedipal implication. Once again, Socrates will hold up Oedipus as the model politician, that is, the embodiment of injustice, and invert his corrupt character by aligning himself with Odysseus.

The inversion begins with the "three waves" themselves. Whereas Oedipus cannot raise his head above the water, Odysseus survives three great waves in his journey out of Kalypso's island cave.²⁴⁵ The contrast deepens, however, when one considers the word Plato selects for "wave," which also translates as "fetus."²⁴⁶ This connotation sets the stage for an especially dramatic inversion—again upending Oedipus with an allusion to Odysseus. Odysseus, in an effort to avoid the Trojan War and remain at home with his wife and son, feigned madness by plowing his field with salt. Palamedes uncovered the ruse by placing the infant Telemachus in front of Odysseus' plow. Odysseus changed course to avoid killing his young boy, thereby revealing his sanity—a superb example of *sophronuse*, "the salvation of reason."²⁴⁷ Odysseus, the father who saved his newborn son, is an inverted Oedipus, the newborn son whose father attempted to murder him—and the

²⁴⁰ *Odyssey* 20.01-24.

²⁴¹ *Odyssey* 20.18-20.

²⁴² *Odyssey* 20.20-21.

²⁴³ See *Republic* Book V, 457b-c and 472a.

²⁴⁴ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 23-24.

²⁴⁵ *Odyssey* 5.313-393.

²⁴⁶ See Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 459, fn. 16; see also Howland, *The Republic*, p. 113.

²⁴⁷ The contrast with Sophocles is clear. Whereas Sophocles acquitted himself of insanity through the inspired madness of his poetry, Socrates, like Odysseus, saves himself through reason.

father whose sons kill each other.²⁴⁸ By taking the side of Odysseus against Oedipus, Socrates chooses life over death—family over infanticide. On the crest of the second wave, Socrates sees what Odysseus saw, a vision “as welcome as the show of life again in a father is to his children.”²⁴⁹

The contrast between natural and artificially-disrupted reproduction moves to the foreground when Socrates elicits from Glaucon a eugenic scheme for holding women and children as the “common possession” of the ruling class, which will secretly destroy unworthy infants born to the underclass.²⁵⁰ Glaucon eagerly agrees that, in his Kallipolis, “All these women shall belong in common to all the men, that none are to live privately with any man, and that the children, too, are to be possessed in common, so that no parent will know his own offspring or any child his parent,”²⁵¹ assuming the state allows them to live at all. It is significant that it is the pederast, Glaucon, who perverts natural family relations by subordinating procreation to the demands of political power.

Socrates shows Glaucon the proper order of things by inverting the crimes of Oedipus. Whereas Oedipus committed patricide and incest between parent and child, the “community of wives and children” involves infanticide²⁵² and incest between siblings.²⁵³ Socrates forces Glaucon to confront the grotesque consequences of empowering the state over the family: a society in which every “illegitimate, unauthorized, and unhallowed child” shall be destroyed, so that “not one fetus see[s] the light of day,”²⁵⁴ and where the city’s “fathers” shall decree that “brothers and sisters... have sex with one another.”²⁵⁵ The inevitable outcome of empowering the state in sexual matters is children who belong to no one—if their mothers do not kill them in the womb—and displaced, dysfunctional fathers who abandon their children to wanton displays of *eros*. With the state as surrogate family, nation as “fatherland,” the citizens are bastards all. Smashed and atomized, uprooted from all family relations, the citizens lose their very identities.

And so do the rulers.

The rulers subordinate everyone to their desires, abandoning themselves to the desire for mastery. By refusing to recognize the natural

²⁴⁸ *Antigone*, lines 56-57.

²⁴⁹ *Odyssey* 5.394-395.

²⁵⁰ *Republic* Book V, 460c.

²⁵¹ *Republic* Book V, 457c-d.

²⁵² See *Republic* Book V, 460c and 461c.

²⁵³ See *Republic* Book V, 461d-e.

²⁵⁴ *Republic* Book V, 461c.

²⁵⁵ *Republic* Book V, 461e.

borders separating them from their subjects, the rulers no longer rule themselves, but deteriorate into an unruly mob “in which most people say ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ about the same things in the same way.”²⁵⁶ The unnatural desire for mastery brings them nothing but misery—until it brings them to nothing. As Nietzsche observes, “whosoever plunges nature into an abyss of annihilation, must also expect to experience this dissolution of nature in himself.”²⁵⁷

That self-surrender is the price of political power is a theme to which Socrates returns in the allegory of the cave:

Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling. They’ve been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.

Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you’d expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent. The prisoners cannot see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them. They believe that the shadows passing in front of them are talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so. The prisoners believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before. I suppose, then, that he’d need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above.

Eventually, however, he would be able to see that the sun governs everything in the visible world.

²⁵⁶ *Republic* Book V, 462c.

²⁵⁷ *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Clifton P. Fadiman (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), p. 30.

If this man went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes—coming suddenly out of the sun like that—be filled with darkness?

Wouldn't it be said of him that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eye-sight ruined and that it isn't worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?²⁵⁸

This allegory, perhaps the most enduring image in the entire Platonic corpus, depicts the philosopher turning toward the truth by turning the Oedipus myth on its head. In familiar fashion, Plato identifies Oedipus with the unruly masses and identifies Socrates with the self-composed individual. Thus Oedipus, a cave-dwelling killer who has looked upon the sun for the last time, serves as the model for the murderous mob that remains imprisoned in subterranean darkness. Socrates, by contrast, represents the liberated individual who overcomes blind desire and opens himself to the light of reason. Oedipus cannot find even “one ray of light,”²⁵⁹ whereas Socrates sees clear as day.

Like the prisoners whose cave is lit only by a burning fire, Oedipus must resort to artificial illumination from a “blazing torch.”²⁶⁰ But Oedipus does not share his torch; he gathers the darkness. Oedipus is the secret source of moral pollution, the king who must conceal his illegitimacy. Like the hidden rulers of the cave whose shadow play projects captivating illusions, King Oedipus, the surreptitious usurper of the throne, displays “the show, not the substance of royalty.”²⁶¹ As the man who sees through these political ploys, Socrates vindicates natural authority against artful imposters. Socrates is a lover of wisdom; having been freed from his bonds, he attempts to restore his fellow men to their rightful places in the natural order. Oedipus is a lover of illusion; the “savage fetters” have been released from his feet,²⁶² but he uses this advantage to ensnare his subjects in ignorance. Like the invisible puppeteers who take a privileged position behind the fire and manipulate the shadows it throws on the wall, Oedipus is false and deceptive in all his deeds.²⁶³ Like the ventriloquists who exploit the cave's acoustics to

²⁵⁸ *Republic* Book VII, 514a-517a. In order to focus attention on the allegory's most essential features, this translation makes small alterations to the text and omits certain details.

²⁵⁹ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 120-121.

²⁶⁰ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 212-213.

²⁶¹ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 589.

²⁶² *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1350.

²⁶³ See *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1420-1421.

disorient the prisoners, replacing authentic speech with echoes, Oedipus is audacious enough to address his subjects in the manner of a god, with a “voice... ringing out in the holy cavern.”²⁶⁴

The allegory’s carefully chosen imagery identifies Oedipus with the ruler of another cave: Polyphemus. Like the Cyclops, whose giant eye surveys his cavernous domain and whose voice “rattles the rocks,”²⁶⁵ Oedipus is an “overseer” whose violent commands resound throughout his kingdom. Once more, this thrusts Socrates into the role of Odysseus, who escaped Polyphemus’ cave. By transposing Oedipus with Polyphemus and Socrates with Odysseus, Plato reveals the tragedy of political power and the redemptive possibility of abandoning it. Polyphemus loses not only his captives, but himself as well, while Odysseus finds his way home again. Odysseus reclaims his proper identity; Polyphemus becomes “no one.”

This contrast between self-negation and self-fulfillment reemerges in the allegory of the cave, where the prisoners cannot see their own bodies. These spectral spectators are like Oedipus, who sees nothing of himself, because he is himself nothing. Unlike Socrates, who shares the organic unity of the natural world that grows in the light of the sun, Oedipus is like those statues of men that populate the cave, made of wood and stone. There is no real substance to the tyrant. Oedipus is just a “shadow who swiftly fades away,”²⁶⁶ no better than a prisoner in the cave who mistakes his true self for a fleeting shadow on the wall.

The suggestion that everyone in the cave, whether ruler or subject, is simply a shade reveals something about the cave. It is Hades. The purpose of Socrates’ allegory of the cave is to portray the state, which entralls men into an unnatural equality, as nothing less than hell itself. Only in death are all men equal. And where political power reigns, all men, rulers and ruled alike, are equally dead. That is why Socrates quotes Achilles, whose shade Odysseus encountered on his descent into Hades.²⁶⁷ Achilles tells Odysseus that it is preferable to be the lowliest peasant farmer “than to be a king over all the perished dead.”²⁶⁸ These words are a succinct summation of Plato’s teaching in *Republic*. It is essential that they are spoken by Achilles’ shade. Achilles, whose feet were his undoing, and who is now just a shadow of a man, is another Oedipus. But he is also another Socrates, because he has learned

²⁶⁴ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 464-465.

²⁶⁵ *Odyssey* 9.395-396.

²⁶⁶ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1191.

²⁶⁷ See *Republic* Book VII, 516d.

²⁶⁸ *Odyssey* 11.489-491.

what Oedipus has not: that the life of a private man is incomparably more fulfilling than that of the most powerful tyrant.²⁶⁹

This is the precisely the lesson that Socrates teaches Glaucon by recounting the myth of Er:

Er once died in a war. Preparations were made for his funeral. But, when he was already laid on the funeral pyre, he revived and, having done so, told what he had seen in the world beyond. He said that, after his soul had left him, it traveled together with many others until they came to a marvelous place, where there were two adjacent openings in the earth, and opposite and above them two others in the heavens, and between them judges sat. Those souls who came up from Hades wept as they recalled all they had suffered and seen on their journey below the earth, while those who came down from the heavens told about how well they fared and about the inconceivably fine and beautiful sights they had seen. Those, for example, who had caused many deaths by betraying cities or armies and reducing them to slavery or by participating in other wrongdoing, they had to suffer ten times the pain they had caused to each individual. But if they had done good deeds and had become just and pious, they were rewarded according to the same scale. Er spoke of even greater rewards or penalties for piety or impiety towards gods or parents and for murder with one's own hands.

When the souls arrived at the light, they had to go before Lachesis right away.

There a Speaker arranged them in order, took from the lap of Lachesis a number of lots and a number of models of lives, mounted a high pulpit, and spoke to them. "Ephemeral souls, this the beginning of another cycle that will end in death. Your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him. The one who has the first lot will be the first to choose a life to which he will be bound by necessity. Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he

²⁶⁹ In order to exhume this vital wisdom from the crypt of Hades, a shade must first drink a sacrifice of blood. See *Odyssey* 11.96 and 11.147-149. This trope becomes another means for Socrates to invert the myth of Oedipus. Oedipus, who tastes kindred blood, has been linked to Polyphemus, the cannibal who feeds on human flesh and quaffs his victims' blood like so much "milk unmixed with water." *Odyssey* 9.297. This profane thirst is symbolized by Polyphemus' excessive consumption of Odysseus' drugged wine, after which he succumbs to slumber, like the witless shades in Hades. See *Odyssey* 9.360-362. Odysseus, by contrast, is impervious to drugged wine. See *Odyssey* 10.316-319. Socrates shares this Odyssean sobriety and represents moderate, wakeful rationality. Socrates will not intoxicate himself with potions and, unlike Oedipus, he will not "make of himself a blood sacrifice for the dead." Steel, "Katabasis in Plato's *Symposium*," p. 73.

values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none.” After that, the models of lives were placed before them. There were more models of lives than there were souls present, and they were of all kinds, for the lives of animals were there, as well as all kinds of human lives. There were tyrannies among them, some of which lasted throughout life, while others ended halfway through in poverty, exile, and beggary.

The first soul to come up chose the greatest tyranny. In his folly and greed he didn’t notice that, among other evils, he was fated to eat his own children as part of it. When he examined at leisure, the life he had chosen, however, he beat his breast and bemoaned his choice. And, ignoring the warning of the Speaker, he blamed chance, daemons, or guardian spirits, and everything else for these evils but himself.

Now, it chanced that the soul of Odysseus got to make its choice last of all, and since memory of its former sufferings had relieved its love of honor, it went around for a long time, looking for the life of a private individual who did his own work, and with difficulty found one lying off somewhere neglected by the others. He chose it gladly and said that he’d have made the same choice even if he’d been first.²⁷⁰

Here, where Socrates counsels Glaucon to “consider the nature of the soul, to reason out which life is better and which worse and to choose accordingly, calling a life worse if it leads the soul to become more unjust, better if it leads the soul to become more just,”²⁷¹ his inversion of the Oedipus myth becomes most apparent. Oedipus, after all, is the model for the unjust soul that Socrates urges Glaucon to avoid. This is already apparent from *Republic* Book IX, where Socrates says that the tyrant will “not hold back from any terrible murder” or even the most “lawless” erotic love, and that he will “chastise” his subjects “just as he once chastised his mother and father.”²⁷² To get what he wants, the tyrant will fawn on his subjects, “as if he were dealing with his own family,” but once he does, “they become strangers again.”²⁷³ In order to spare Glaucon the tyrant’s fate, Socrates reveals the damnation and degradation that await those who are impious toward their parents. Like Oedipus, these miserable souls will end in poverty, exile, and beggary. The tyrant destroys others, only to find that he is fated to destroy his own children. And although the tyrant blames chance, or even the gods

²⁷⁰ *Republic* Book X, 615b-620d. The text has been condensed for convenience.

²⁷¹ *Republic* Book X, 618d-e.

²⁷² 574e-575d.

²⁷³ *Republic* Book IX, 575e-576a.

themselves, for his demise, the responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none. The tyrant has only himself to blame for not even having himself, because he has chosen to enter another cycle that will end in death.

With the myth of Er, Socrates accomplishes his final, and most complete, reversal of the Oedipus myth. Whereas Sophocles contemplates Oedipus living forever, blessed, beatified, and more “wondrous than any mortal,”²⁷⁴ Socrates suggests that Oedipus will die a thousand deaths, crossing the threshold into ultimate annihilation. Previously, in the allegory of the cave, Socrates identified himself with Odysseus, another strong-minded hero, and he identified Oedipus with Achilles, another weak-footed killer. Now, in the myth of Er, Socrates reveals the divergent fates that await these men by recreating Odysseus’ journey to the underworld, where he spoke with the shade of Achilles.²⁷⁵ That exchange between the living Odysseus and the dead Achilles already demonstrates their respective destinies. Odysseus, who renounces his love of honor and contents himself with minding his own business as a private individual, is blessed with enduring life.²⁷⁶ Achilles, by contrast, is cursed with a swift death because he prefers to fight in a glorious and unjust war than to live in humble obscurity.²⁷⁷ Socrates indicates the finality of Achilles’ choice by omitting him entirely from the myth of Er. Whereas Er beholds Odysseus reborn, he sees nothing of Achilles, who “no longer exists, alive or dead.”²⁷⁸ Like Achilles, Oedipus will fade into everlasting oblivion, “shrouded in eternal darkness.”²⁷⁹

In carrying out his examination—even exhumation—of the tyrannical soul, it is clear that Socrates takes up Sophocles’ poetic portrayal of Oedipus and philosophically re-verses it. What is ultimately at stake in Socrates’

²⁷⁴ *Oedipus at Colonus*, scene VIII.

²⁷⁵ There are at least two hints that Socrates’ myth of Er reenacts Odysseus’ descent into Hades. First, Socrates denies, with obvious irony, that his myth will be another “tale of Alcinoos.” *Republic* Book X, 614b. It is in his tale to King Alcinoos, of course, that Odysseus recounts his descent into Hades. See *Odyssey* 9-12. Second, the twentieth soul that Er encounters is that of Ajax. See *Republic* Book X, 620a-b. Ajax is the twentieth shade whom Odysseus encountered in Hades. See *Odyssey* 11.469-470.

²⁷⁶ In addition to the myth of Er recited above, see also *Odyssey* 13.241-246.

²⁷⁷ See *Iliad* 9.424-430, where Achilles recounts the “two fates” that “sweep me onto my death. If I stay here and fight, I’ll never return home, but my glory will be undying forever. If I return home to my dear fatherland, my glory is lost but my life will be long, and death that ends all will not catch me soon.”

²⁷⁸ Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 436.

²⁷⁹ *Oedipus at Colonus*, scene VIII.

inversion of Oedipus, however, is the subversion of Sophocles himself.²⁸⁰ Behind the tragic protagonist, Socrates perceives a tyrant, the tragic poet who attempts to hide himself with the imitative effect of his art.²⁸¹ Tragedy draws a veil over tyranny.²⁸² Socrates argues that, in order to imitate the speech of Oedipus, Sophocles had to become as much like his character as possible.²⁸³ Indeed, Sophocles was not only a poet, but he acted in his plays as well.²⁸⁴ Through his words and his deeds, Sophocles played the role of Oedipus. Sophocles, the poet, spoke through his subjects, and Sophocles, the politician, spoke for them. As both the author and the actor behind Oedipus, Sophocles addressed the demos “with one voice.”

That Oedipus is just a mask for Sophocles is nowhere more evident than in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the play with which Sophocles vindicated himself in court. “In telling the story of Oedipus’ final moments, Sophocles... found a means of absorbing his own persona into the artifice of the play” and “immortalizing himself in the stage figure of Oedipus.”²⁸⁵ With the posthumously-performed *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles attempts to immortalize himself by giving Oedipus, his alter ego (or, more accurately, his alter id), the everlasting reign of a god.²⁸⁶ Just as he exalts Oedipus as the immortal savior of Athens, the city that received his body,²⁸⁷ Sophocles was

²⁸⁰ Of course, Sophocles is not Plato’s only target. By designating Oedipus as the epitome of injustice, Plato also refutes the political doctrine of Zeno, for whom all things are permitted to the wise man, including cannibalism, incest, illicit copulation, and the sharing of wives. See generally Brian S. Hook, “Oedipus and Thyestes among the Philosophers: Incest and Cannibalism in Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno,” *Classical Philology* 100 (2005), pp. 17-40. Just as Plato’s *Republic* portrays Oedipus’ unnatural *eros* as an expression of shameful pederasty, *Parmenides* portrays Zeno as a passive homosexual. See 127b and 128a. That Plato’s *Parmenides* recapitulates the action of *Republic* is suggested by their common cast of characters, which includes Cephalus, Adeimantus, and Glaucon. See *Parmenides* 126a

²⁸¹ See *Republic* Book III, 393d-394c.

²⁸² See *Republic* Book IX, 577a-b, where Socrates endeavors to remove the tyrant’s theatrical “façade” and show him “stripped of his tragic gear.”

²⁸³ When the tragic poet “gives a speech as though he were someone else,” he must “liken his own style as much as possible to that of the man he has announced as the speaker.” *Republic* Book III, 393c.

²⁸⁴ Géza Kállay, *The Sight, the Voice, and the Deed: An Introduction to Drama from Sophocles to Goethe*, p. 9.

²⁸⁵ Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn*, p. 99.

²⁸⁶ See *Oedipus at Colonus*, scene VIII.

²⁸⁷ See *Oedipus at Colonus*, scenes II and VIII.

worshipped as a deity after his death and given the cult name “Dexion,” meaning “the receiver.”²⁸⁸

Socrates reveals Sophocles’ self-deification as the ultimate act of self-destruction. According to Socrates, the man who would be god receives nothing of immortality and loses everything of his own humanity. The super-human, after all, is the inhuman. Only the philosopher, who practices dying,²⁸⁹ will find his life worth living, whereas the tyrant, in denying death, will discover that he never truly lived.²⁹⁰ Sophocles’ quest for divine omnipotence, his attempt “to rule not just human beings, but gods as well,” is nothing but the dream of a man who has lost his mind and descended into madness.²⁹¹ Socrates, who has awakened from this nightmare and reclaimed his reason, is content to “make himself as much like a god as a human being can.”²⁹² Socrates resists the urge to exalt himself above others—the deadly desire to which Sophocles tragically surrendered. Socrates is not swayed by the spell of the state.

As a final display of his victory over this spiritual death, Socrates’ last words in *Republic* deliberately echo the last words of Oedipus, through which the dying Sophocles spoke directly to his audience, foretelling his descent into “the dark underworld.”²⁹³ Turning Sophocles’ vision of Hades upside down, Socrates anticipates an ascent into the life of justice, in which he will “hold always to the upward path.”²⁹⁴ Whereas the tyrant defiles his soul, ensuring himself a life of pain and suffering, the just man, “whose soul won’t be defiled,” will “do well and be happy” both in this life and the next.²⁹⁵

V. Conclusion

Plato is not at all the totalitarian that most Austro-libertarians perceive him to be.

He is an enemy of the state—and a friend of ours. By recognizing this friendship, we gain a valuable ally in the fight for freedom. Moreover, we gain

²⁸⁸ Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn*, p. 97.

²⁸⁹ See *Phaedo* 64a.

²⁹⁰ See Socrates’ closing words in *Apology*, “Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god.”

²⁹¹ *Republic* Book IX, 573c.

²⁹² *Republic* Book X, 613a.

²⁹³ *Oedipus at Colonus*, scene VII.

²⁹⁴ *Republic* Book X, 621c.

²⁹⁵ *Republic* Book X, 621c-d.

a valuable strategy. As we have seen, Plato has a unique method for dispelling the state. He demonstrates that it is a source of misery not only for its subjects, but also for its rulers. Plato's guiding insight is that the politician's attempt to subjugate others leads ineluctably to self-surrender. When a tyrant perverts the natural order, the natural order perverts him, afflicting him with the most revolting and unnatural appetites. He becomes a pederast, a parricide, and a self-mutilated exile from convivial society. Like Oedipus, the tyrant is "banished by his own decree." By demonstrating to the ruling class that ruling is not in their self-interest, Plato makes an essential contribution to the cause of freedom. Plato does not tell the powerless what they already know: that they would be better off without their chains. Instead, Plato shows the powerful that, by unchaining their subjects, they can liberate themselves as well. To reclaim the happiness and wholeness that is naturally theirs, politicians must release their grip over persons who are not.