

Plato's Writerly Utopianism

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I propose in this paper to develop a thesis first mooted in my book *City and Soul in Plato's Republic* (pp. 104-9, 117-18): the thesis that Plato is a "writerly" utopian. By this I mean that although the *Republic* is a political and a sincerely utopian work, it is at the same time primarily a project of utopian writing rather than of utopian reform.

My focus will be on the long stretch of argument that begins when Socrates raises the joint issue of the feasibility and optimality of the ideal city's social structure at the beginning of Book 5 (450c) and culminates when he declares it settled toward the end of Book 6 (502c).

One turn in the argument that will hold my particular attention comes when Socrates compares the imaginary construction of Callipolis to a painting of the most beautiful (*kallistos*) man possible (472d-e). No one would consider the painting a lesser achievement, he says, if it could not be shown that such a man could ever exist. Similarly, the excellence of Callipolis should not be gauged by the standard of feasibility. Nevertheless, for Glaucon's sake, Socrates promises now to consider how Callipolis could realistically be brought into existence. The reader surely expects that he will go on to provide some practical advice for founders (471e, 472e). Instead what we are given is, in effect, an extended portrait of the most beautiful (i.e. the finest) human being possible

— the philosopher. Nothing short of this is required for Socrates to justify his claim that Callipolis will only come into existence if philosophers become kings. But the twist in Plato's presentation is that, however unlikely Callipolis may be, the most beautiful individual imaginable is already among us. Provided we distinguish the few true philosophers from the many pretenders, we may find such individuals in Athens. And it is on this point, I claim, rather than on the feasibility of Callipolis, that Plato's emphasis falls in Books 5-6. In particular, the seriousness of the philosophic imagination employed to construct Callipolis does not stand or fall by Plato's willingness to face the question of Callipolis' feasibility in the end.

Here is a further consideration to which I will appeal in order to support this point. At first, the fact that the proposed utopian reforms are "in accordance with nature" suffices to demonstrate their feasibility, 456c. Later, however, this claim is implicitly withdrawn; for in the transition to the "third wave" at 466c-d, the fact that the previous reforms are in accordance with nature no longer suffices to demonstrate their feasibility. And what *does* then purport to demonstrate their feasibility (namely, the rule of philosophers) is, as suggested in the previous paragraph, something whose connection to the question of feasibility is tellingly remote and indirect.