

# THE PLATONIC ROOTS OF JUST WAR DOCTRINE: A READING OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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## INTRODUCTION

The just war tradition is often dated back to St. Augustine (354–430), sometimes with the caveat that it has roots back to Augustine's teacher St. Ambrose (c. 337/40–397), and even to Roman thought, especially Cicero (106–43 BC).

Arguably, the lineage can be traced further back, at least to Plato (c. 427–347 BC), whose thought contains a wealth of materials highlighting the importance of virtues in the preparation for and actual use of armed force. Although he wrote no single dialogue with war as its explicit, main topic, it should still come with some surprise that there has been so little secondary literature on Plato's treatment of ethical aspects of warfare and indeed of his treatment of warfare as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of scholarly attention to Plato's discussions about war is even more surprising in light of the fact that most of his dialogues are set during or shortly after the Peloponnesian War, which lasted – with interruptions – from 431 to 404. This war was the single most significant feature of the political life of Athens during this period. Hence, when we see Socrates and his interlocutors discussing ethical questions, relating these to the life of the city and the right way to live for human beings, we can reasonably assume that the topic of war is rarely far away, even if the link is not always made explicit.

The *Republic* and the *Laws* are the two dialogues where war – or, to be more specific, preparation for war – is the most directly taken up by Plato. Both dialogues detail the education and political framework that are needed for rearing

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<sup>1</sup> Craig [1994], Baracchi [2002], and Kleemeier [2002] are some of the relatively few exceptions in treating war as much more than a passing and tangential topic within Plato's philosophy. All three works can be recommended as useful complements to this article, even if they sometimes draw different conclusions from what I do. See also my own discussion in Reichberg et al. [2006] p. 18 ff., where I somewhat inaccurately claim that there is surprisingly little to be found about war in Plato's works. The point I was trying to make is that war is never treated in its own right as the express topic of a dialogue, but that there are nonetheless several substantial insights about war in Plato.

good soldiers.<sup>2</sup> These are also *ethical* dialogues in a very real sense: they raise questions about the right way to live and the proper way to organize a city, with the presumed aim of educating the reader about virtue in general and political justice in particular.

In the following I will discuss some aspects of what one of these dialogues, the *Republic*, has to tell us about the justice of war. The aim is not to give a complete exegesis of a long and complex text – that would have required a different format and also more attention to the original Greek – but rather to indicate to those working on the just war tradition, and normative aspects of war more generally, my suggestions as to:

- a) what Plato says, openly and sometimes more indirectly, on the relationship between morality and warfare in the *Republic*;<sup>3</sup>
- b) how we can find important elements of an ethics of war being formulated and debated by Plato long before the point at which we normally place the beginnings of just war doctrine; with the additional claim on my behalf that these are elements which may be of use to us in our discourse on ethics and war even today (even though I will not here discuss these implications in any detail).

This is not to argue that Plato singlehandedly invented the just war idea. Firstly, its organization as a recognizable “theory” or “doctrine” clearly came much later.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, anyone familiar with Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* knows well that a certain, even if only a loose, framework or code for ethical relations between Greek cities did exist even before Plato, and that this is one reason for the moral reactions that were expressed from many quarters against the warring parties, not least the Athenians, when they were seen to break with that code. In the famous Melian dialogue, retold (or invented) by Thucydides, the Melians refer to a common understanding that ought to hold between

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<sup>2</sup> There are also several other dialogues where warfare plays a significant role, the most important being the *Laches*, which has courage as its main theme (see Rabieh [2006]), and also to a certain extent the *Protagoras*, which includes a lengthy discussion about courage. War is also important to the argument and basic structure of the *Timaeus* (see Baracchi [2002] p. 139 ff.). For an organized and well-rounded discussion of political preparation for war, we must, however, turn to the *Republic* and the *Laws*.

<sup>3</sup> My emphasis will be on the discussions in books II-V. I will not go into the place of war in the discussion of the different regimes in books VIII and IX, nor the role that war plays in the myth of Er in book X (to which Baracchi [2002] gives interesting attention).

<sup>4</sup> See Johnson [1975] and [1981] for authoritative overviews of the development of the tradition. There are also important parallels to just war theorizing, and well-developed ideas about the ethics of war, in non-Western traditions; see Brekke [2006] and Popovski et al. [2009].

Greeks, even in times of war – which, however and admittedly, the Athenians claim is merely an ineffectual comfort for the weak, with no power to stop the truly powerful and power hungry.<sup>5</sup>

This is exactly where Plato enters the scene. As I have argued elsewhere, Plato in the *First Alcibiades* dialogue picks up a crucial narrative from Thucydides – namely, the story of Alcibiades, the great hero-cum-traitor of Athens, and his first major appearance before the city as an officer and politician – and arguably gives it an ethical twist: It was Alcibiades' failure to appreciate the intimate link between justice and warfare that caused his and subsequently Athens' downfall.<sup>6</sup> I will, however, leave the figure of Alcibiades to one side here and instead concentrate on what we can reasonably call the ethics of war in the *Republic*.<sup>7</sup>

### WAR, HEALTH, AND LUXURY

Overall, war and human conflict are central topics in the long dialogue we know as the *Republic*. Several of its leading protagonists have names associated with war;<sup>8</sup> it uses the words for war (*polemos*) and civil unrest (*stasis*) far more often than their opposite: peace (*eirene*);<sup>9</sup> and the question of the origin of war is cen-

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<sup>5</sup> The dialogue is found in book V of Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, see, e.g., Thucydides [1993] pp. 102-109, and Reichberg et al. [2006] pp. 12-17. For an excellent introduction to the customs that did exist between Greeks in times of war, customs that to a large extent broke down during the Peloponnesian War, see Ober [1994].

<sup>6</sup> See Syse [2006]. Some commentators have held the *First Alcibiades* to be spurious, i.e., not by Plato. But it was considered one of the most important Platonic works in antiquity, and it is, even if it was not written by Plato, undoubtedly the work of someone firmly belonging to the Platonic circle. It seems to have been considered authentically Platonic by students of Plato's works in the first centuries following his death. For more on this question, see Thomas Pangle's and Steven Forde's instructive comments in Pangle [1987].

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, and interestingly, the topics of justice (Gr. *dikaiosyne*) and war are not brought together explicitly in the *Republic* (as pointed out in Kleemeier [2002] p. 71). On this score, the *First Alcibiades* is more explicit. However, the overall theme of the *Republic* is justice in the city and in the human being, so it can be assumed without much controversy that the prescriptions for military training and virtue are meant to serve justice in and for the city, even if there is some tension between some of the ideals of justice championed in book I and the arrangements concerning warfare in book II ff., see note 21 below.

<sup>8</sup> Craig [1994] contains a powerful argument for the centrality of war and warlike images to the *Republic*, and at p. 3 ff. he carefully goes through the Greek meaning of each protagonist's name, as well as their role and posture in the dialogue, showing how they together make up an army of warfighters.

<sup>9</sup> Arguably, though, this dialogue (as most other dialogues of Plato) seems to have peaceful interrelations between human beings as its ideal, not valorizing the fighting of war *per se* (as, for instance, the Spartans were known to do), but rather emphasizing the proper preparation for war as a means to securing the goods of the city and harmonious relations within it. See also *Laws*, bk. I, 628c-e, in Reichberg et al. [2006] pp. 28-29, for an important Platonic reflection on the relative priority of peace over war; cf. Trampedach [1994] pp. 172 and 251, who emphasizes the unity of the virtues in

tral to the discussion of different cities in book II, which in turn is pivotal for the whole further development of the dialogue. Indeed, from this point on in the *Republic*, preparation for war commands a crucial place in the set-up of the ideal city, with the soldiering class singled out for special attention, and with an emphasis being put on its education and moral character. Even a casual reader cannot avoid noticing the fact that a thorough education in what we would call ethics, with the right conditioning of the city's soldiers as an essential part (i.e., *military ethics*), constitutes the backbone of Plato's movement towards the ideal city.

As a backdrop to this discussion, if we ask what the *Republic* overall is about, at least two answers can be given. Firstly, and most famously, it is a dialogue about an (or the) ideally just city – a city created in speech by Socrates and his interlocutors. Founding this city merely in speech, with implicit and explicit doubts about its real-life possibility of being created, Plato presents a number of schemes probably not meant for actual realization in 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Greece – possibly not at any time – yet gives us ideals and critical standards that we can reasonably suppose were meant as guides to virtue, challenging prejudices and accepted opinions by juxtaposing the latter with radical, sometimes shocking alternatives. (By this I do not mean that some of these suggestions, such as planned breeding and commonality of property for the guardians, were not also put forward in an ironic or playful sense; some proposals probably were. The point is that there is no reason to doubt that Plato was quite serious in his endeavor to portray an ideal political society as a *normatively relevant ideal* when debating the virtue of individuals as well as the city, and that we should therefore take seriously – which is not the same as taking literally – Socrates' proposals.)

Secondly, and primarily, the *Republic* is about justice in each individual human being. The starting point of the dialogue is indeed the question of whether it is good (in various senses of good) to lead a just life, and what such a life consists in. Socrates holds – illustrated by the problems he and his interlocutors run into in book I (also known as the *Thrasymachus* dialogue) – that this search for justice in a human being is very difficult, an individual being so small that it is hard to detect justice within it in a proper way. Therefore, he suggests that they investigate justice on a larger scale – i.e., in the city – to make it easier to detect. (Whether that is actually the case – that it *is* easier to detect in a city – is another matter that we will not decide on here.) This parallelism, and the primary aim of investigating

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the *Laws* (and not least the way in which the nature of courage changes – and its importance is downgraded – when it is combined with wisdom and moderation) as an important part of Plato's attack on unbridled bellicosity.

what constitutes a just human being, should be kept in mind throughout the dialogue, both when we ask how Plato's political proposals are to be understood, and when we try to understand what the virtues in the city mean: *This is most basically meant to be an investigation into what constitutes a just human being.*<sup>10</sup> We may assume, therefore, that the claims made about the right education of the soldier do not merely tell us a story about the virtues needed to defend the city, and about the soldier's place within that city, but they also tell us about the right ordering of the soul as it encounters dangers, must deal with brutality, and attempts to conquer overwhelming desires.

Plato famously suggests a tripartite division of the city's working inhabitants (paralleled by what he sees as the three main parts of the soul), namely, the rulers (the philosopher-kings), the soldiers (or auxiliaries), and the rest of the population,<sup>11</sup> meaning mainly artisans, farmers, and merchants. The first two classes are first treated together under the name of guardians (Gr. *phulakes*), and many of the rules and regulations covering their education and conduct cover both classes together; indeed the rulers are taken from the larger class of guardians. The term "guardians" is certainly apt for both of them: they are to protect the city and therefore need to foster in themselves those qualities that a real protector or guardian needs. Protectors that lack the right virtues can do the worst harm imaginable, and having high stature and real talents to begin with is clearly no guarantee against fatal mistakes, which is shown by the example of Alcibiades.

The topic of war in the *Republic* is inextricably tied to Socrates' questioning about the origins of the just city. This linkage is established as Socrates and Glaucon in book II discuss the characteristics of what they come to call a "luxurious city" – a city that goes beyond the rudiments of that quite austere community which Socrates has just finished describing, and which he has called the "healthy" and "true" city (372e). It is here that the dialogue first introduces the topic of war

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<sup>10</sup> As Victorino Tejera has pointed out, the parallelism between individual and society is not an analogy, but a direct comparison, with the individual and the city being viewed as identical objects differing in scale and size (Tejera [1999] p. 44).

<sup>11</sup> It is somewhat unclear whether this should be taken as the rest of the *citizens*, or whether slaves and other non-citizens are to be included. It is indeed not entirely clear to what extent the ideal city would require slavery, or what would be the requirements of citizenship. At 469 b-c it is stated that Greeks should not be held as slaves, and although slaves are sporadically mentioned in order to illustrate points made by Socrates, it is unclear who they would actually be. The main (albeit not unequivocal) picture that emerges is one of a city where no one is actually a slave in the traditional sense (except, presumably, for barbarians captured in war), since all work together in harmony, and all – even the women – are fellow citizens contributing their particular part to the good of the whole. This is an obvious parallel to what happens in a just soul: the desires and the spirited part of the soul are not slaves to reason, but they obey willingly and give their rightful contributions to the harmonious whole.

(with the exception of a brief discussion of civil strife in book I, at 351c-e<sup>12</sup>). While the so-called luxurious city will include intellectual and cultural life, as well as many amenities that the citizens would not enjoy in Socrates' "healthy" city (which Glaucon has dismissed as a city for pigs!), this larger and more sophisticated city will also "be driven to make war on its neighbours to feed its excessive appetites".<sup>13</sup> According to this argument, war is an unavoidable consequence of the desire to have and own ever more – a desire that seems unavoidable once a taste for luxuries and the finer sides of life has started manifesting itself. It follows, however, that the enemies in such wars will not be enemies because of their transgressions of justice; they will merely be the possessors of land and property that the citizens of the luxurious city need in order to lead ever more luxurious lives.

With this description of the luxurious city and its striving for ever more goods, we have discovered, Socrates states boldly, "the origin of war – in those things whose presence in cities most of all produces evils both private and public" (373e).<sup>14</sup>

We could now rightly have expected a return to the "healthy" city – Socrates having shown that the quest for luxury leads to ever expanding desires that in turn lead to war. Or maybe, to go to the other extreme, we could have envisaged a rather bellicose Socrates extolling the virtues of fighting war and the honorable deeds that the fighters commit on the battlefield in order to protect the victories of the luxurious city. We find none of the above, although what we get arguably comes closer to the second than the first. No return to the "healthy" city is ventured upon. It is rather through a reform of the luxurious city that we are gradually led to the ideal city.

The fact that the healthy city is left behind remains something of a puzzle – we are left wondering whether being healthy is not desirable, or whether the kind of austere health aimed at in the first city precludes philosophizing, and thus precludes the life of Socratic dialectics. We are indeed reminded of John Stuart Mill's famous dictum: "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."<sup>15</sup>

Three explanations for leaving the "healthy" city behind can be imagined. The first has already been hinted at: there is no room for philosophy in the austere

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<sup>12</sup> "For surely, Thrasymachus, it's injustice that produces factions, hatreds, and quarrels among themselves, and justice that produces unanimity and friendship" (Socrates at 351d). The quotations from the *Republic* here and in the following are taken from Allan Bloom's translation (Plato [1991]).

<sup>13</sup> G. Ferrari, in Plato [2000] p. xxvi.

<sup>14</sup> Plato repeats much the same assertion about war in the *Phaedo*, 66c.

<sup>15</sup> Mill [1863] ch. 2.

atmosphere of the healthy city.<sup>16</sup> The second is suggested by Nicholas White: in order to reach our goal of saying something about justice in the individual, something akin to the bodily desires of the individual has to be introduced. It is not possible to envisage a portrait of justice in each human being without an account of bodily desires and the way they are tackled. Therefore, Socrates needs the “feverish” qualities of a “luxurious” city in order to create an image in speech whereby he can say something about real human justice.<sup>17</sup> The third is championed by Claudia Baracchi: The *Republic* is written in the shadow of Athens’ downfall. In such a political context, any philosophic vision of a good city needs to be a vision of a regenerated city: the “regenerative, founding articulation originates from out of the corrupted city ... [T]he inception of the just city is rooted in the unjust one” (Baracchi [2002] p. 40; emphases in original).

Whichever of these suggestions we find most plausible – and they can certainly be combined – it seems that Socrates finds it necessary to accept the premises of luxury and material wealth before he can continue his quest for justice in the city (and the individual). At no point, however, is the “healthy” city – Glaucon’s city of pigs – explicitly dismissed by Socrates, and one is inevitably left wondering why it disappears from the conversation. Maybe it does not: maybe it is there as a (barely articulated) reminder of the presumably more peaceful alternative that does after all exist to sophisticated and warlike cities such as real-life Athens and the ideal *politeia* of Socrates’ speeches. But since it could not produce the likes of Socrates or Glaucon, it is left without a champion.

### IS WAR GOOD OR BAD?

The puzzle about where the healthy city has gone is followed by another one equally worthy of reflection: Is war – now introduced as something unavoidable – good or bad for the city? Is war merely an unavoidable step in the life and growth of a city (just as conflicts of interest are an unavoidable facet of human life, even for someone struggling towards real justice)? It seems, from the way in which war has been introduced into the conversation, that war is indeed such an unavoidable part of civilized life. Once we leave the “healthy city” behind, we also say farewell to peaceful inter-city relations, both among Greeks and vis-à-vis bar-

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<sup>16</sup> This is the gist of Allan Bloom’s argument in Plato [1991] p. 344 ff. Bloom also holds that the simple, so-called healthy city is really an impossibility, since it relies on “an unfounded belief in nature's providential generosity, in a "hidden hand" which harmonizes private and public interest” (*ibidem*, p. 346).

<sup>17</sup> White [1979] pp. 88-89.

barians (the two forms of conflict not being distinguished explicitly at this point in the dialogue). This leaves us, however, with a challenge that we must carry with us into the discussion: If we are ultimately searching for the *truly* just city, we must ask whether the presence of war can be squared with complete justice, or whether war should eventually be done away with in order for the city, and the human being, to be just. The common-sense answer would be the following: As long as not all cities are just in the full sense, even (or especially) the fully just city must be prepared to fight wars, partly to defend itself, and partly to vindicate and spread justice. And while this answer comes close to the view we actually do find in the *Republic*, it is arrived at only through several twists and turns in the argument.

Now, Socrates prefaces the topic of war by saying that he will not yet say whether war works evil or good (373e). But that statement is immediately followed by the one quoted above – that war has its origin in those things that produce evil, namely, the desire always to have more. In other words, war arises from an evil impulse. And, indeed, of the healthy city it was said, immediately before the discussion of the origin of war, that it would keep “an eye out against poverty or war” (372b), indicating that avoiding war is an ideal for the kind of city intent on minimizing dependence on material wealth.

But as we remember, the healthy city has been left behind and we have entered the world of the feverish and luxurious. And we wonder: How can such a city become truly just? The problem is further underlined by Socrates’ reminder that it is not only “our” city that will attack others to satisfy its needs; the same will happen the other way around – presumably with the same motivation:

Then must we cut off a piece of our neighbors’ land, if we are going to have sufficient for pasture and tillage, and they in turn from ours, if they let themselves go to the unlimited acquisition of money, overstepping the boundary of the necessary? (373d).

Glaucon answers in the affirmative, and the presumption is left unchallenged. In other words, war becomes a necessity, and attacks are made upon neighboring territory without any wrongs necessarily having been committed by that neighbor or its people. Indeed, counter-attacks must be expected in the same vein. This is how the truly just city gets its start!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pangle, Ahrens Dorf [1999] make a point of the fact that a good city must presumably have its origin in war or conquest, since leisure – which is needed for the citizens to lead the life envisioned in the *Republic* – “is possible only on a strong economic base”, and it is unlikely that the fertile land needed “will be found unclaimed or isolated” (*ibidem*, p. 40).

One possible interpretation of this remarkable development in the conversation is, of course, that Plato sees no moral problem in waging war *per se*, at least not as long as it is waged against foreigners or enemy cities in a manner that does no harm to one's own city. However, such an interpretation provides us with no complete answer to the question of the relationship between war and justice. Indeed, if we accept it at face value, we would also move towards an uncomfortably relativistic view of justice, since any city could be justified in going to war, and so there would be nothing wrong, morally speaking, in "our" city ending up on the losing side. Whichever is better at fighting would become the dominant city in a given area, regardless of its other moral qualities. If, on the other hand, the strength and quality of the soldiers were determined by the overall justice of the city, the courage and moderation of the soldiers (which enable them to win battles) being a concomitant to the city's justice, then a different view emerges. In that case, the moral problem of a just cause to fight would not be the same sort of problem. "Our" city would be right in fighting and winning over its neighbors, since that would extend the territory of the just city, bringing other territories and their inhabitants under a better and more just rule. It would not simply be one city craving ever more luxuries gaining the upper hand over another city with the same aim. It would be a just city getting hold of the goods and land it naturally needs to remain a stable, just, and presumably philosophic city.

It is important to keep this larger picture, namely, the overall justice of the city created in the *Republic*, in mind, as a possible (yet far from straightforward) solution to the question of how war can find a rightful place in the life of the just city. We are, however, getting ahead of ourselves, and we need to return to the puzzles of book II.

If accumulation of material goods is not a good in itself, but rather a potential source of great evil – and about this there is little doubt, according to Socrates<sup>19</sup> – no action done in pursuit of that goal seems particularly laudable. And when the actions we speak of are not just any political actions, but military ones, which are costly and arguably endanger virtues and lives not merely on the enemy's side, but on one's own as well (even if it may also present a setting for the display and strengthening of virtues, most especially courage), it is hard to place the waging of war in a morally indifferent category. That would be the case even if we did not worry about the brutality and cruelty that may be visited upon the enemy, since

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, 421a-422b, 466b-c, 548a-c, 591d. The accumulation of wealth and lust for material goods are especially destructive for the guardians, although they should not live in poverty either.

the potential *internal* costs and dangers associated with war – material, political, and psychological – are considerable; this is a view we find throughout the *Republic*, and which explains to us why strong military training and discipline are so important. The morally problematic side of war becomes even more obvious once the status of the enemy as a real (unjust) enemy is called into question – which it surely is here, since it seems at this stage of the dialogue to be taken for granted that other cities can attack us with just as much justice (or lack thereof) as we can attack them.

The problem of just or unjust initiation of war, and just and unjust behavior towards other cities, is, however, left aside to begin with. Socrates seems to accept the outline of the city as it stands at this stage of the argument. And in this city the problem of creating a soldier class is not that the soldiers might be (unjustly) brutal towards other cities – quite the opposite: we *want* them to be brutal towards the enemy. The challenge is how to keep them from turning against their compatriots.

This brings us to the vexed problem of *thumos*, or spiritedness. It is first mentioned at 375a-b and later becomes the name of a part of the tripartite soul. The word is known from Homer, who uses it as “a general term for both the seat of feeling and thought and for the passions themselves, particularly anger”.<sup>20</sup> For Plato in the *Republic* it primarily stands for that part of the soul which enables a human being (or, for that matter, an animal) to act fiercely and decisively. It stands somehow between reason and desire, not containing in itself that element of reflection and wisdom that reason ideally has, yet not being purely self-regarding or satisfaction-seeking like the desires. We can surely discuss to what extent it makes psychological sense thus to demarcate “spirit” or “spiritedness” as a separate part of the soul; yet, as we shall see, for Plato it sets the stage for one of the most important political suggestions of the dialogue.

The guardians (a term which encompasses both the rulers and the soldiers) need to be spirited; their *thumos* needs to be strong. Yet, spirit can also be dangerous, since it can be turned against one's own kind. By drawing an analogy with dogs (375a-376a), Socrates paints a picture of the good guardian, who will be loyal to and obey his master and those he knows, yet will attack and be fierce towards strangers.<sup>21</sup> Presumably, in being gentle to his own, the dog can also obey a command from his own master(s) *not* to attack strangers, since one surely does not

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<sup>20</sup> Hobbs [2000] p. 8. Hobbs, particularly in chs. 2 and 8, gives an informative treatment of the psychology underlying *thumos* and its relationship to reason; see also Rabel [2001].

<sup>21</sup> Kleemeier highlights the tension, about which Plato was presumably quite aware, between this acceptance of brutality against the enemy and Socrates' claim in book I that the truly just man will not hurt his enemy (see Kleemeier [2002] p. 71 ff., with reference to the *Republic*, 334b-336a).

want one's dog to bite everyone invited into one's house. This is not said explicitly when the image of the spirited dog is discussed, yet, the likeness of the dog to a philosopher – namely, one who knows when to use his spirit, and when not to – naturally lends itself to an image of an animal that can obey rational and sensible commands.<sup>22</sup>

This leads us to a crucial point: *the transformation of the city from a luxurious, feverish city to one that is just, is premised upon right education.* Admittedly, the core of this insight has often been pointed out by commentators; indeed, it is obvious (as mentioned above) even from a superficial reading that the *Republic* is a dialogue about the centrality of education to justice. Yet, we need to take heed of the *kind* of education that stands at the fountainhead of the further development of the discussion, namely, the education of soldiers. And this is not primarily an education in soldiery *per se* (although this will play a part), but first and foremost an education in ethics. The moral quality of the guardians – which at this stage of the dialogue means both soldiers and rulers, the ruling element not yet having been defined and separated – is the key to the development from a luxurious city (we may surmise: the Athens that was thrown into the Peloponnesian War) to a just city (an Athens that could have earned the respect of its neighbors – and, if war had nevertheless been inevitable, would have had the necessary virtue to win). Even the ones who will be the rulers in the full sense, the philosopher-kings, will be encompassed by this: “their kings must be those among them who have proved best in philosophy *and with respect to war*” (543a; emphasis added).

In other and fewer words: the rightly ruled city builds on a foundation consisting in a thorough, ethically based military education.

## EDUCATING GOOD SOLDIERS

In describing the basic challenges of this education, Socrates leads us right into a problem that is as alive today as it was then: How do we educate soldiers so that they come to have the necessary prudence and moderation to function well in society, while simultaneously having the sort of manliness or courage (the virtue of *andreia*), spiritedness, and lack of fear that should characterize a soldier fit for battle? Are not the two sets of qualities exclusive of each other?

Socrates' starting-point is the following: *The good soldier knows when to fight and when not to fight, and remains gentle and considerate towards those with whom one*

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<sup>22</sup> We will come back to the parallel between dogs and soldiers below.

*should not fight*.<sup>23</sup> This can only become a reality if the right ideals are taught. That is, the right things must be honored, which in turn presupposes that children are presented with appropriate stories about the gods. This is where Socrates' famous attack on Hesiod and Homer occurs (377d-378e):<sup>24</sup> Their poetry portrays the gods as human, with human flaws and desires. This is wrong for two reasons: It contributes to a wrongful theology, and it holds up unhealthy ideals for the young. The first example of this – how the gods are portrayed in a wrong light – is truly interesting in our context: They are depicted as cruel and brutal, committing acts of violence and murder against each other. We do not want to have soldiers – and we should remember that it is the training of soldiers we are primarily concerned with here – who have learned to hold stories of cruelty and brutality in high esteem as laudable (even divine) examples.

Good soldiers are, in other words, trained from a young age in what we can reasonably call, with today's language, the humanities, with ethics and sound poetry at the center, in addition to gymnastics. This "humanistic" teaching (or "musical" teaching, as Socrates calls it) includes being inculcated with the right sorts of examples and ideals, and the aim is to create a soldiering class that is fierce and violent only when these qualities are truly called for. Within the confines of the luxurious city this would mean fighting fiercely and savagely against anyone from whom territory needs to be occupied. But once we have started the educational process, we have also left the luxurious city in its purest form, with its lack of moderation. In practice a decisive measure of austerity and "health" are being reintroduced, which becomes very obvious as the details of the lives of the guardians are enlarged upon, and generally as the whole disparaging attitude towards wealth among the guardians is presented (see 421a-422a, where both wealth, which creates idleness, and poverty, which leads to illiberality and wrongdoing, are warned against as dangerous for the guardians). We can therefore rightly assume that the task of the soldiers, and the whole aim of war, will now consist in

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<sup>23</sup> 375 b-c; cf. also *First Alcibiades* 107d-e and *Second Alcibiades* 145b, where much the same point is emphasized. (The "second" or "minor" *Alcibiades* dialogue is by most (although not all) scholars held to be spurious, probably written after Plato's death, but it nonetheless interestingly reflects on the view held of Alcibiades and his relationship to Socrates in Platonic philosophical circles, a topic with relevance for our discussion here. It should be noted that my own claim in Syse [2006] p. 291 that the *Second Alcibiades* does not deal with military matters is somewhat overstated. Military matters are admittedly not a central theme of the dialogue, nor do they play the crucial role in the argument that they do in the *First Alcibiades*; but military matters are several times used as illustrations.)

<sup>24</sup> This discussion also continues later on, in book III (see, for instance, 386c ff.).

something higher than simply savagely taking over land from others for the sake of material wealth.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, we should notice that the savageness and fierceness seemingly extolled as virtues of the soldier are further qualified, even if only indirectly, by Socrates' insistence on the love of learning – in good dogs as well as in soldiers (376b). Love of learning surely means that one becomes eager to make familiar what was once unknown or strange. Thus, the guardian that always acts angrily towards the unknown, never being willing to extend his horizon of friendship further than to his fellow citizens, cannot be a lover of learning, since the unknown is stubbornly assigned to constant oblivion, hardly the trait of a philosopher. By pointing this out, we do not deny the very real need, as Socrates sees it, for guardians to be spirited and if necessary brutal. But that brutality must be put to the service of a higher, more encompassing sort of virtue: the wisdom of the rulers and hence the common good.

The passage about the similarity between good dogs and good soldiers – also briefly discussed above – is not, admittedly, straightforward. Socrates clearly says that being kind to the known and fierce to the unknown is an attractive and even philosophic trait. But Socrates does not extol an unreflective and completely automated distinguishing between friend and enemy. Right behavior should be based on knowledge and love of learning, presumably indicating that the unknown and unfamiliar *can become known and familiar*, just as a dog rightly trained can come to love a new owner or its owner's previously unknown friends. This point is further emphasized in a passage in book I (334b-336a; see also note 21), where Socrates first points out that one may be mistaken about who is a friend and who is an enemy, and secondly that it might be best to avoid treating even one's enemies badly, since that could make them worse. Holding these passages together, we see that thoughtless brutality against one's enemies is certainly not advocated by Plato.

To summarize, the movement of book II (continuing into book III) from a feverish city to a just city consists in a philosophical education of the guardians, who are to learn that the gods do not take delight in internal fighting or excessive brutality, who must restrain their desires for material gain, who should be fierce only when it is called for in the service of the city, and who must never turn against their own or become dangerous due to lack of understanding or discipline.

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<sup>25</sup> I will not here go into the vexed question of whether the stories about the gods are "lies" or not, and whether it can be "noble" to tell lies willingly and knowingly. I believe a solution to this problem must center on how to define a "lie", and more deeply on the overall role of myths in education. See Pangle, Ahensdorf [1999], pp. 40-41, for more on the "noble lies" related to war.

To say that “military ethics” is crucial to the growth of the right city is thus no understatement.

### SPIRITEDNESS AND REASON

In the course of books III, IV, and V (see, for instance, 412c ff. and 441a), the class of guardians is split in two: rulers on the one hand and auxiliaries (or pure soldiers) on the other. Socrates makes it very clear, however, that *all* of the guardians must be trained in war from an early age – something we also touched on above. This means, among other things, that they must be spectators and observe military displays. Provisions should be made for their safe escape should the situation get too dangerous. Apart from that, the kinds of spectacles that the young guardians-to-be should be required to watch are not enlarged upon. Instead, rules for right military behavior are discussed. Presumably, the children should only watch soldiers who abide by these rules, or alternatively proceedings where those who do not are duly punished (467b-d).<sup>26</sup> This must also be set in the context of the proper dwellings and conditions for soldiers (415d-417b), which are to be of a kind that fosters friendship and concord with the city's inhabitants, and which inoculates against inadequate love of material gain and instead ensures attention to virtue and learning, under the guidance of the philosopher-king(s). This, we are entitled to presume as readers, makes plundering and mass brutality for the sake of riches or personal power unlikely.<sup>27</sup>

The tripartition of the initially bipartite soul raises some important questions about the quality of the soldiers. More explicitly *added* to rationality and the appetites, as the main divisions in (or of) the soul, is now *thumos* or spiritedness, which had already been introduced (as we saw above) in the general discussion of the guardians in book II.<sup>28</sup> This *thumos* is the anger or spirit that can control desires, pursue noble deeds in the face of adversities, and aid reason in defending the goods of the city and the soul. Can this spiritedness also be turned *against* reason? The answer should not surprise us: yes, it can, if it is corrupted by a bad up-

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<sup>26</sup> We will come back to these “rules” below.

<sup>27</sup> Kleemeier [2002] p. 78, underscores this idea by holding that the keeping out of pure money-makers and producers from the guardian classes is effectively a “Kriegsverhinderungsprogramm” (a program for hindering war!), since those who – according to the logic of book II – would have the most reason to initiate war will be excluded from the ranks of those making the decision to go to war or those actually waging it.

<sup>28</sup> See Dorter [2006] pp. 111-123 for an interesting discussion of whether the different parts of the soul are actually best understood as separate parts or as different motivations.

bringing (441a). Clearly, spirit is an auxiliary to philosophy if it is rightly trained, but it can do great damage if it is not.

Many examples are brought forward by Socrates to illustrate the relationship between the parts of the soul – and the parts of the city. One is especially intriguing, since it essentially discusses the qualities of the middle, spirited part of the soul:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus under the outside of the North Wall when he noticed corpses lying by the public executioner. He desired to look, but at the same time he was disgusted and made himself turn away; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran toward the corpses and said: “Look, you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.”<sup>29</sup>

The story is told by Socrates as he attempts to define the role of *thumos*, and hence the place of the soldier in the city. We may ask, what characterizes the activity of the soldier? Is it not a willingness to face death as well as inflict death upon others? From this could easily follow a fascination with death – like the fascination with executions, horror stories, and tragedies, possibly even strengthened by one's close proximity to death's actual occurrence. In Socrates' example, however, *spirit rejects the delight in death*. Spirit is angry at the appetites and tries – albeit in vain, in the given example – to calm them. No delight ought to be taken in seeing other people dead. The soldier, who must be trained to face death courageously and accept, even pursue, the death of others, should also have a spirit that piously revolts against pleasure in death. Introduced at this stage of the dialogue, just as we are trying to understand what the spiritedness of the soldiers should entail as an element distinct from both the appetites and reason, the example suggests that piety and restraint are a crucial part of the spirit to be displayed by soldiers.<sup>30</sup>

For Socrates, this is a central point: Spirit and anger first seemed to be associated with the desires. But now we see, at least in the nobler men (cf. 440c), that the spirited part of the soul revolts against the desires and tries to force the soul to refuse to take part in that which is without reason, which is guided by passion, and which is blinded by the love of sheer brutality, morbid delights, or material

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<sup>29</sup> 439e-440a.

<sup>30</sup> See also Craig [1994] p. 97 on the topic of the spirited part of the soul (*thumos*) getting angry because of a conflict with one's desires, illustrated by the story about Leontius. Craig adds, paraphrasing a passage at 440b, that “... we hardly ever have the opposite experience: getting angry at ourselves for being ruled by reason”.

gain. True soldiers act on the side of reason, taking delight neither in brutality nor in that which is unseemly or impious.

#### **RULES AND RESTRAINT IN WAR**

It is natural to move from this important observation to book V, where we find the brief but insistent exchange on the need for the young guardians to observe proper displays of armed combat (466e ff.), followed by a short discussion about the punishments for cowardice and rewards for bravery, and then an ethical discussion about warfare as such, directly applicable to the predicaments of the Peloponnesian War.

It could be objected here that it is problematic to put *too* much emphasis on the direct moral lessons we can draw from – or the concreteness of the criticism of Athens (and other Greeks) implied by – this particular section of the dialogue. After all, it appears right after the famous discussion of the equality of women and the commonality of property, easily the most utopian and some would even say ironic (albeit attractive and lively) part of the whole work. Yet, while the discussion of gender and property are staged far apart from the realities of Greek life as experienced by Socrates' companions or Plato's readers, the discussion of behavior in war is quite emphatically directed at the Greeks, with the ongoing conflict with Sparta (at the time of the dramatic date of the dialogue) as the most plausible backdrop to the statements. They also touch more directly on the actions of men and women in any city – not just in Socrates' city in speech – than most of the rest of book V. Thus, there is every reason to take this discussion as politically relevant to the “here and now” of Socrates' and Plato's audience.

Socrates asks whether it is just for Greeks to enslave other Greeks, and answers in the negative. Between Greeks there should be friendship, not war. And if conflict nonetheless does occur – and as long as not all cities are ideal cities, it will – we should call it “faction” (*stasis*), not “war” (*polemos*). While it seems not to have been uncommon at Socrates' time to view internal faction (civil war) as even worse and more devastating – and undoubtedly more tragic – than war against foreigners, Plato clearly wants this picture to be turned around: Greeks should not treat each other with brutality and hatred, and unrest between them should be moderate and guided by justice. Indeed, Socrates has stated not long before that both cities and human beings should maintain harmony between their respective parts. Both, likewise, should be moderate and just (442d). Now we see Plato extending this ideal (partially at least) to the companionship of Greek cities.

From the exchange between Socrates and Glaucon about the tempering of civil war (470c-471c) we can arguably glean four rules that provide the nodes of a code of military conduct applying in wars between the Greeks:

- Pillaging and ravaging of lands are to be avoided.
- Only those actually responsible for a dispute are to be seen and punished as enemies.
- There should be no enslavement or killing of the defeated population following war.
- The dispute must be conducted in a way that allows for a just and mutually acceptable peace, so that a state of war does not continue interminably.

Interestingly, Glaucon adds – after having accepted Socrates' admonitions – that Greeks should fight in this way, while barbarians should be fought in the way in which Greeks are fighting each other now. The latter can be read as prescribing pure license in such wars: Greeks now lay waste to each other's lands and show no restraint, and this is to be seen as acceptable when fighting barbarians. But it can also be read quite differently: as a prescription to limit the brutality even of "international" wars (i.e., wars against non-Greeks), since some custom-based restraint did after all apply in fighting between Greeks at the time, among these, the convention that ambassadors could be sent to discuss possible avoidance of armed action, and the presence of certain religious rituals common to both sides, in addition to the commonality of language and tradition.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, judging from, *inter alia*, the famous claims of the Melians during the Peloponnesian War, as reported by Thucydides – and as indicated above – there did exist a generally accepted "war convention" between Greeks, even if it at this time applied in theory more than in practice, as the Melians (and later the Athenians themselves) bitterly came to experience.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> It can indeed be argued that Socrates and Plato, as well as Aristotle, indirectly and more generally criticized the narrowness of Greek pride and self-centeredness in their own time, holding out for a more cosmopolitan view of human affairs; see Pangle, Ahrens Dorf [1999] pp. 46-50, with reference, *inter alia*, to Plato's *Laws* (713a-718c, 886a, 903b-905c) and Aristotle's *Politics* (1328a); see also Pappas [1995] pp. 109-110, with reference to, *inter alia*, Plato's implicit criticism of the Greek-barbarian distinction in the *Statesman* (262c-e).

<sup>32</sup> See Kleemeier [2002] pp. 79-81, for a good discussion of what kind of wars and warlike actions would be prohibited in Plato's ideal city. See also Ober [1994] for an overview of the custom-based regulation of war that did exist among Greeks until at least the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century BC, cf. also note 5 above. As Ober sees it, the main part of that custom-based regulation broke down during and in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, something for which Athenian democracy must accept considerable blame, although other cities, including Sparta, followed suit in disregarding the loose, yet relatively clear "laws" of war that did exist. In our context, the question is whether Glaucon, by referring to the way in which Greek cities currently fight each other, has in mind the elements

However much weight we want to put on the possible, implicit prescriptions drawn up for war against non-Greeks, it is at least clear that the dialogue admonishes restraint in armed conflict between Greeks. This is part and parcel of a teaching of harmony, where each of the city's constituent parts does its work, where reason rules supreme, and insight rather than desire guides all use of military force. The four cardinal virtues (as they came to be known later) of moderation, courage, prudence, and justice are seen to work in concert in such a city, not pulling in different directions, but coming together in such a way that the soul harmoniously becomes fully virtuous on an individual level, and in such a way that the city banishes or at least restrains internal strife and war on the communal level. This is an ideal presumably not compatible with a life dedicated to brutality and killing, nor with a life where military pursuits are divorced from moral virtue.

## CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the foregoing, Plato advocated a close relationship between ethics (or virtue, to use his preferred idiom) and military training in the *Republic*. The main point was that a just city can never be realized without the proper education of soldiers. They must be taught not to love material gain (thus striking a blow at the very reason why wars come to exist in the first place); they must be lovers of learning who understand properly against whom it is rightful to use armed force; they must let their spiritedness and anger serve reason rather than desire; and they must not let ideals of brutality and taking delight in death dominate their souls.

This conclusion may seem to go against the surface impression that the ancient Greeks (including Plato) were much more cavalier and accepting about war than were the Christians who later formulated the just war idea. Augustine, in particular, very clearly held that taking delight in killing and destruction should be condemned as a sign of spiritual sickness.<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, Plato seems willing to let quite a militaristic spirit permeate even his ideal city, and even more so the second-best city of the *Laws*. In that work, he does insist that war must serve peace, and that war thus is no goal in itself but merely a means to peace and complete moral virtue. Nonetheless, the city must be constantly *prepared* for war, and this helps create an austere and sometimes bellicose atmosphere, even in peace-

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of piety, brotherhood, and restraint that traditionally did prevail between Greeks – and may still have existed, at least in theory – or rather is referring only to a tragically broken-down state of license and brutality.

<sup>33</sup> See Reichberg et al. [2006] ch. 7.

time, something we also associate with several parts of the *Republic* (most especially the descriptions of the restraints placed on the lives of the guardians). Yet, upon closer examination, we see that this “militarism” is strongly restrained, not least in the *Republic*, and that it must always be made to serve justice. When we see this point being made in a dialogue that climaxes in a vision of the Good – that overarching idea which gives to the city its potential unity and goodness and serves as the standard of a rightly lived human life – we realize that the military training in virtue is part of a larger vision. This is a vision that does value politics and the political life, but it always makes politics relative to a higher ideal which transcends political life *per se*.<sup>34</sup> Hence, what we can fairly call ethics, in the sense of a philosophic vision of justice and the good life for and between human beings, always stands above the internal logic of military affairs, while also serving as its basis. By insisting on this, Plato lays an important groundwork for what we today would call the ethics of war and the just war idea.

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<sup>34</sup> Craig [1994] pp. 288-289 echoes this point, but holds that the higher kind of warfighting, employing dialectics rather than violence and being directed towards wisdom rather than material goods, is a realistically attainable ideal only for the few: the philosophers.

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