FYS 100 Sydney Watts

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Essay I: “The Guardians”

Through the gradual literary process that is Plato’s Socratic dialogue, the reader finds certain knowledge and realizations about the natures of justice and happiness in the text. This information flows most powerfully from the guardians of Kallipolis themselves; they serve as examples of how people with just natures can be happy in their unity and shared brotherhood. They are essentially blueprints for living a just life, and they naturally demonstrate how happiness emanates from such an existence. Plato explains that “the auxiliaries and guardians [should be compelled and persuaded] to ensure that they, and all others … are the best possible craftsmen at their own work” so that the city can reach its full potential, and from this uniform success of the citizens, happiness would naturally occur (Plato 421c1-3). Continuing into the image of justice, Plato shows that “meddling and exchange among [the] three classes is the greatest harm that can happen to a city” and even shows that such interference is unjust; at the same time, he demonstrates that “justice is doing one’s own work,” which is the theoretical model that Kallipolis is constructed for, and each citizen’s specialization yields justice (Plato 434b10-c1, 433a10). Through reflection and analysis on the lifestyles of the guardians, the purpose and function of justice and happiness can be uncovered.

After a lengthy period of literary prodding, Plato describes the guardians of Kallipolis. These guardians are, first of all, needed for their specific specialization in protecting the city, and only they are fit to do so because of their inherent nature. This nature is characterized as, “gentle as can be to those they are familiar with and know, but the opposite to those they do not know” (Plato 375e2-3). This description personifies the guardians almost as “gentle giants,” or as Plato writes, like sheepdogs and auxiliaries to help the shepherd with their flock (Plato 416a3-6). These guardians are meant to be honorable and brave defenders of the city, lovers of justice, and united in a bond of brotherhood. In order to ensure that each guardian is reared to be this way, he or she must be sheltered from “false” stories told by poets that “create a bad image of what the gods and heroes are like,” among others concerning the pain and horror of death (Plato 377e1-3). Through this sort of ignorance and unawareness of the existence of these poetic tales, the guardians are able to maintain their bravery and courage. Through this bravery and courage, they are able to provide justice to the people of Kallipolis.

Plato continues to assess the guardians as a unified people by explaining that “none of them should possess any property that is not wholly necessary” because leaving the guardians with nothing but bare necessities to each of their names will do away with greed and covet among them (Plato 416d4-5). “Second,” he says, “none should have living quarters or storerooms that are not open for all to enter at will” thereby eliminating the ability to keep secrets and forcing the guardians to be intimately known by one another (Plato 416d5-6). Plato finishes by explaining that the guardians will have “no need of human gold” since they already possess divine gold in their souls (Plato 416e6). He feels that if the guardians have any interaction with the precious metals, they will be corrupted, and that is why these guardians “are forbidden by divine law to handle or even touch gold and silver” (Plato 417a2-3). This is extremely wise of Plato to recommend, because the guardians will avoid the all-consuming human greed that could otherwise plague them and jeopardize the city’s happiness. Happiness is a quality that can only exist when a place is void of injustice and evil deeds, and because the main protectors of this city are free from these kinds of stimulants that cause such feelings as greed and power-hunger, the resulting city will also remain clean of these vices.

Although all these proposals may sound sensible, I have some reservations towards Plato’s recommendations. I do not agree with this notion that he is liberating the guardians from this fear of death, he is merely attempting to strike out all these passages and “the terrible and frightening names that occur in such passages” because he believes these will “make our guardians more emotional and soft” (Plato 387b7-c1, 387c4-5). That logic is akin to quarantining oneself for a lifetime in the hopes of not becoming infected with a disease, rather than receiving a vaccine in order to prepare antibodies. Such an endeavor is not only fruitless and impractical, but also counter effective towards the intended result. By simply trying to keep the young guardians from hearing and reading the dark stories of the poets, one will only succeed so long before the child encounters the concept, because that encounter is inevitable. Even if this method could somehow be maintained, it is still foolish because this system of omission essentially justifies the claim that ignorance is bliss. Happiness gained by such means is false; a far more wise method of approach is to teach the children how to be fearless and brave and to ensure that strong figures of bravery and courageousness are there to influence them and mold them. Consequently, the guardian youth can begin to establish a foundation of “antibodies” to repel the fear and make themselves emotionally fortitudinous.

I am not alone in my skepticism. Adeimantus argues that Socrates is “not making these men very happy” and “they derive no good from the city,” however he fails to understand this city’s purpose is a universal happiness, not just for the guardians (Plato 419a2, a5). Plato even specifically states “in establishing a city, [we are] not looking to make any one group in it outstandingly happy, but to make the whole city so as far as possible” demonstrating that the guardians derive goodness from Kallipolis through the uniform cooperation and success of the denizens which they have been appointed to tend over (Plato 420b6).

Despite these claims and findings, some, like Thrasymachus, would argue that “a just man must always get less than does an unjust one” because of a belief that the burden of maintaining a just nature would be useless and even counteract against the just man (Plato 343d2). But, if the meddling in others’ tasks is the “worst evil one could do to the [city],” then it must be defined as injustice, because this meddling results in a universal detraction from all citizens (Plato 434c2). Therefore, justice is the performance of only one designated job in addition to the lack of meddling in another’s job, and justice will provide the happiness and proper cooperative spirit for each citizen to perform their job and for the city to thrive. Furthermore, the justice of the guardians, which is inherent to their nature, will provide for an increased unity and happiness in the city because they are gentle men who have no greed or desire that is adverse to their function as defenders. The justice and happiness of the guardians is kept out of jeopardy and maintained by a painstaking set of upbringing and training rules. With these guardians as role models, it is clear to see that happiness and justice are the unified cooperation and shared success of a single, tight-knit community.

Peter Plotas

*I, Peter George Plotas, having a clear understanding of the basis, spirit and interpretation of the Honor System whereby our college community is governed, pledge my personal honor that I will uphold the standards of honesty and responsibility in all areas of college life, both academic and social. I will do all in my power to make the ideal of honor, in its highest sense, prevail among my fellow students. If at any time I should violate either the letter or the spirit of this pledge, I shall accept the full responsibility for myself.*

Works Cited

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003.