Essay I: “The Guardians”

Throughout the course of Plato’s mock-discussion-turned-world’s-first-socialist-manifesto, *The Republic*, Socrates’s character spends an inordinate amount of time laying out the parameters for his imaginary guardians. Through the example of the guardians, Plato hopes to teach the reader that a wholly just society breeds happiness. Furthermore, for justice to exist, happiness must be equally dispersed among all people, not just the rich and fortunate. His guardians are a living illustration of justice outmatching injustice in terms of happiness. The basic function of the guardians is to protect and rule their city, Kallipolis. Their existence is the result of Socrates’s belief in specialization, which he explains in Book II line 359a:

“Now nothing can be more important than that the work of a soldier should be well done. But is war an art so easily acquired that a man may be a warrior who is also a husbandman, or shoemaker, or other artisan; although no one in the world would be a good dice or draught player who merely took up the game as a recreation, and had not from his earliest years devoted himself to this and nothing else?”

Socrates believes it is not, and thus this class of ultra skilled warriors is created.

Having identified the need for the guardians, Socrates identifies the traits that one must possess. They “ought to be quick to see, and swift to overtake the enemy when they see him; and strong too if, when they have caught him, they have to fight with him.” In order to develop these acute characteristics, Socrates proposes a very regimented education system based on the traditional Athenian education of gymnastics and music. However, the system is tweaked to be very strict where Socrates sees fit. In Book II line 359a, he suggests strict regulation of the types of stories young guardians may read: “the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorised ones only.” Some restrictions on them seem ridiculous, such as being disallowed from eating sweet sauces due to the fact that “sweet sauces are nowhere mentioned in Homer.” (Book II line 365b) Guardians are not allowed to laugh, because “a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction.” (Book II line 362c)

Ultimately, the adult lives of the guardians are heavily regimented and many basic human desires are restricted.

In the first place, none of them should have any property of his own beyond what is absolutely necessary; neither should they have a private house or store closed against any one who has a mind to enter; their provisions should be only such as are required by trained warriors, who are men of temperance and courage; they should agree to receive from the citizens a fixed rate of pay, enough to meet the expenses of the year and no more; and they will go to mess and live together like soldiers in a camp. (Book III line 218c)

The obvious question that arises from this quote is ‘why should the guardians be happy with this lifestyle?’ After all, Socrates’s apparent purpose with Kallipolis is to make the happiest possible society.

At the outset of Book IV (Book IV, line 419a), Adeimantus lays out the obvious rebuttal of Socrates’s claims. “How would you answer, Socrates, said he, if a person were to say that you are making these people miserable, and that they are the cause of their own unhappiness; the city in fact belongs to them, but they are none the better for it…?” Adeimantus goes on to lay out his vision of a happy ruling class, adorned with gold and silver with which to build large houses and “all that is usual among the favourites of fortune.” In short, he is asking how Kallipolis’s guardians are supposed to be happy with their simple and arduous lifestyles. Although the counterargument that Adeimantus- known for his love of money- presents encourages a level of decadence is difficult to support, he succeeds in catching the most glaring flaw in Socrates’s plan. No aspect of the Guardians’ lives is what one would typically consider pleasurable. They work ceaselessly for no obvious reward. The only apparent aspect of their position from which to derive happiness is their social status and power. Socrates’s response to this, which seems to satisfy Adeimantus but does not satisfy me, revolves around the need no one social class to be happier than another, yet fails to directly address why he thinks the guardians will be happy.

A second counterargument is proposed in book V, once Socrates has completed his lengthy description of family life. Glaucon asks whether it is plausible for the citizens of Kallipolis to live without the prospect of family. This is not proposed directly as an argument but rather a question to Socrates- one which he postpones answering until the subsequent book. When he finally does come around to answering the question, his solution is that the scenario is only possible if the rulers of the city are philosophers. This response seems to follow a pattern in the way Socrates deals with counterarguments and objections in *The Republic.* He seems to delay responding to them while he continues to lay out more outlandish criteria for his city and when he does get around to responding, his answers are generally vague. It is unclear how the rulers of Kallipolis being philosophers would directly affect the plausibility of the citizens adhering to a life with strictly no family bonds, considering the ones living under this rule aren’t rulers but everyday citizens. Furthermore, the issue seems to exist on a deeper level than just the plausibility of life under the strict rules of the society; even if it is possible, can the citizens actually be happy in this scenario- the actual goal of the society?

Plato’s entire premise for his utopia relies on his assertion that his citizens will be happy in their restricted lifestyles. Because there is no way to prove this assertion, the entire argument is very flimsy. While the city he proposes will likely be just if it succeeds, happiness is an entirely different realm. It is difficult to believe that the people of today’s society would be happy living with no social mobility and few luxuries available.

Regardless of the efficiency of a system with defined social roles, history has shown that people eventually become unsatisfied with governments that heavily restrict their daily life. I believe it is human nature for people to want to make decisions and be free. All it would take in Kallipolis is one person to share this belief and it could spark revolution. How implausible is it for the working class to become dissatisfied with their lack of social mobility and resolve to do something? Are the guardians Socrates describes prepared to quell an uprising among their own people? Regardless of the answers, these questions must be asked of the society and Socrates fails to do that.

In addition, Socrates’s utopia hinges on lying to its people. As he states in Book III line 389b, “If any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good.” Without the lie about inner metal, the class system would fall apart. Without the lie about gold and silver handling gold and silver, corruption would shake the upper class. Thus, if these lies ever came to light, the city would crumble. Beyond that, building a “utopia” based on a foundation of lies seems perverse and bound for failure.

While Plato does make a compelling case for just action and equality of happiness being the keys to a happy society, he doesn’t present enough evidence to make his claims believable. In addition, many glaring holes exist in his philosophy that he fails to address, and those that he does address throughout the dialogue are vaguely answered or evaded. The example of the guardians may serve to illustrate his points about justice, but he fails to prove that they could be happy or effective in Kallipolis.

**Works Cited**

Plato, G. M. A. Grube, and C. D. C. Reeve. 1992. *Republic*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

“I pledge that I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

James David Steen.”