

9

Plato on War

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This chapter addresses two interconnected issues. The first is whether Plato regards war as an inevitable feature of human coexistence. Could there be a human society that avoided war altogether? If so, what would it be like? The second is whether Plato thinks the removal or avoidance of war *in toto* (as opposed to the avoidance of a particular threat) would in any case be desirable: even if it were possible, might the price be too high? Specifically, I shall be asking whether the development of civilized society in the *Republic* can only take place concurrently with the development of war. Does Plato think that humans can enjoy a life enriched by the arts and philosophy and certain material luxuries only if they are prepared to accept war? If one does have to choose between a peaceful life without philosophy and a war-prone life with it, which life should win? In trying to decide whether Plato thinks that such a choice really is unavoidable, we will have to examine his view of the roots of aggressiveness and warmongering in the human psyche,¹ and ask whether he believes aggressiveness itself to be innate, no matter what political and social conditions prevail, or what education and training are offered.

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For reasons of space, I shall focus on the *Republic*, especially the account of the origin of war in *Republic* II, though I shall also discuss passages from the *Politicus*, *Laws*, and elsewhere which illuminate that account. It is not my aim to give a comprehensive survey of every view expressed on war in Plato's dialogues. When I do discuss dialogues other than the *Republic*, I shall not assume that a unitarian

I am grateful to audiences in Cambridge, Sheffield, Warwick, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I gave earlier versions of this paper, and for comments and help received from Paul Cartledge, Stephen Houlgate, Stephen Makin, M. M. McCabe, Penelope Murray, Fabienne Peter, David Reeve, Malcolm Schofield, David Sedley, and Robert Stern; particular gratitude must go to Dominic Scott for his wise and astute editorial advice. Above all, I should like to express my profound thanks to Myles Burnyeat, whose lectures and doctoral supervision did so much to nurture my love of ancient philosophy, and to broaden and illuminate my philosophical horizons.

¹ Clearly, the majority of aggressive acts do not come under the heading of 'war', and wars may be undertaken for defensive as well as offensive purposes. For a definition of the cultural phenomenon termed 'war', see Dawson 1996: 13–14.

reading—or for that matter a developmentalist one—will apply to questions regarding war throughout the corpus. I certainly believe that it is worthwhile to reflect on whether the different passages tell a reasonably consistent story, but I do not assume in advance either that they do or that they do not.

By ‘Plato’, I mean the author of the Platonic corpus, as it has come down to us. In this paper, I do not suppose that Plato necessarily endorses the views of any of his characters, whether Socrates or the Eleatic or Athenian Strangers or anyone else. Plato’s views need to be reconstructed carefully, with due attention to what these characters say, but also with regard to the contribution of other interlocutors and the surrounding context.

PLATO’S VIEW OF WAR

Before the main issues can be explored, however, we first need to consider the critical question of Plato’s attitude to war itself—which is, we should note, a different question from whether he thinks that a community that lives without war is always preferable without qualification to a community that lives with it. In terms of the overt comments, the answer is clear: any careful scrutiny of the dialogues shows that most of his main characters’ explicit appraisals of war are negative.² Its origin in the *Republic* (which we shall be discussing in detail below) is said by Socrates at 373e to be the same as that of most evils (*kaka*): namely, acquisitiveness, a point also made bluntly at *Phaedo* 66c: ‘all wars are made to get money’. And at *Republic* 378b–c all stories of wars and battles amongst the gods are to be censored, because ‘quarrelsomeness is one of the worst of evils’.³ In *Republic* 8–9 the timocratic state is criticized for preferring spirited, ‘thumoeidic’ men who opt for war over peace (547e–548a), and the tyrant is condemned for stirring up one war after another, both to make his people feel the need for a strong ruler and to reduce them to poverty and hence powerlessness (566e–567a). In the *Politicus*, too, the undiluted brave and manly types (the *andreioi*) are chastised for being excessively warlike and leading their state to destruction or slavery,⁴ while in the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger criticizes states which focus exclusively on promoting courage and manliness (*andreia*), since they subordinate peace to war rather than war to peace (628c–e): it is peace, not war, that is unambiguously declared to be the highest good. The same point is made at 803d, where we are told: ‘in war there is neither play nor education

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² The most obvious possible exception that I can find is *Ti.* 23c–d, where Athens was originally established by a ‘war-loving’ (*philopolemos*) as well as ‘wisdom-loving’ (*philosophos*) Athena. See n. 32 below. For Plato’s use of *polemos* (‘war’) and cognates throughout the dialogues, see Brandwood 1976.

³ All translations from the *Republic* are those of Lee 1974, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ *Plt.* 308a; though one should note that the opposite, decorous (*sōphrones*) types are also said to put their state at risk by not being warlike enough and being unable to offer robust defence.

worthy of the name, nor will there ever be; it is the life of peace that everyone should pursue, as much and as well as he can'.⁵

FN:5

Such explicit appraisals, of course, are not the whole story. As we shall see, no main character advocates pacifism in the face of aggression,⁶ and Socrates consequently devotes painstaking attention in *Republic* II and III to the education of an Auxiliary class of Guardians whose chief function is military defence (this emphasis on defence rather than attack will be discussed below). The central characters also acknowledge that war can be an excellent training-ground, display case, and test for certain virtues, most notably *andreia*. Witness, for example, *Republic* 429e–430c, where civic (*politiké*) *andreia* is defined by Socrates as ‘the ability to retain safely in all circumstances a judgement about what is to be feared, which is correct and in accord with law’—an ability, in other words, which can clearly be well examined and displayed on a battlefield. And at 466e–467e provisions are made for allowing the children of Guardians to witness and assist in wars as part of their training; this training, furthermore, is not just in the skills of fighting but also in the development both of a sense of their future civic responsibilities and of the temperament to fulfil them (467a). Clearest of all, perhaps, is *Laws* 707c, where the Athenian Stranger unequivocally says that the land battles of Marathon and Plataea have ‘made the Greeks better (*belitious*)’.⁷ It is also worth noting in this context how both Socrates and the young mathematician Theaetetus are portrayed in military settings to advantageous effect in, respectively, *Symposium* 219a–221c, *Laches* 181a–b, and *Theaetetus* 142b.

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It is worth remembering, too, that in the *Republic* properly developed and controlled military courage (i.e. controlled by the reason of the Philosopher-Rulers) is to receive state-sanctioned social rewards: at 460b, for example, the state’s best young male defenders are to be honoured in various ways, including being offered more, and more enticing, sexual opportunities at the official mating festivals. This honour is of course also intended as a means of breeding a new generation of excellent warriors for the state (468c); but it is clear that it is in addition part of a general policy of encouraging the right kind of soldier and military *andreia*. In similar vein, 468b highlights how those who excel on the battlefield will receive a potent cocktail of honours, embraces, and food.⁸ It

FN:8

⁵ Trans. Bury 1926. It is worth emphasizing these passages, as a number of classical scholars have portrayed Plato in a considerably more militaristic light. A case in point is Craig (1994), who, though commendably challenging, is decidedly selective in his reading. In discussing *Rsp.* 373e, e.g., Craig simply reports (p. 6) that Socrates says that they are not currently concerned with whether the effects of war are good or bad; he does not mention Socrates’ telling claim in the same passage that the origin of war—acquisitiveness—is the same as that of ‘most evils’.

⁶ See also n. 4 above.

⁷ In contrast to sea battles such as Salamis which, despite its successful outcome, in the Stranger’s view made the Greeks worse: sailors, he claims, do not stick boldly at their posts, but escape without shame when the going gets tough (706b–d). He may also be hostile to Salamis because of its acknowledged role in strengthening Athenian democracy: see Arist. *Pol.* 1304^a18–29.

⁸ It would be intriguing to know whether Socrates envisages successful female warriors—and there are women in the state’s army (457a)—being rewarded in the same way.

FN:9 further appears that human warriors of the appropriate kind⁹ are to be fitting subjects for the heavily censored art-forms of books II and III: in 389e Socrates speaks approvingly of *Iliad* III. 8 and IV. 431 where ‘The Achaeans moved forward, breathing valour, in silent obedience to their officers’, and in 399a he asks for a musical mode that will represent a brave man on military service who faces injury or death with steadfast fortitude. Select warriors may even continue to be eulogized in book X: though by now almost all art is actually banished from the state, the fortunate citizens are still permitted ‘hymns to the gods and paeans to good men’ (607a), and the latter group can presumably include the state’s defenders.

Nevertheless, we need to be careful here. Such passages celebrate the courage, resolution, and obedience of a certain type of soldier, and acknowledge the role that war can play in forming and testing the corresponding type of courage; they do not overtly celebrate or foster war in itself (not even *Leg.* 707c). Overtly, Plato’s attitude to war is still that it is an evil, albeit an evil which can still allow for the display and nurture of certain goods. In this, if nothing else, his position on war bears some comparison with that of Hegel in *Philosophy of Right*, who maintains (1967: 330–40) that though war is not an absolute evil, it is an evil nevertheless. One cannot simply go around starting wars in order to purify the nation’s moral health. Apart from the initial land appropriation of 373d which introduces war into the *polis* (to be discussed in detail below), we do not hear of Plato’s Guardians making an unprovoked assault on another state;¹⁰ on the contrary, all the emphasis is on their ability to *defend* their country if attacked. To take just four examples: at 414d–e Socrates proposes that all the citizens be told that they are, in fact, descended from Mother Athens and must protect her, while at 415d–e the Guardians are enjoined to pick a site for the *polis* which will be easy to defend; 422–3 outlines ways of defending the republic against wealthier states, and in 421–3 we are told that the state must not grow beyond a certain size or exceed a certain measure of wealth, both clearly policies which will prevent aggressive expansionism.¹¹ In addition, as far as the Rulers are concerned, wars arguably divert time and energy away from working towards and contemplating the Forms of Justice, Beauty, and the Good.

FN:11 One could argue, in a slight concession to Craig,¹² that by devoting considerable attention to war and warriors Plato is *implicitly*—perhaps inadvertently—celebrating and even nurturing war. There may be something in this: consider, for example, *Republic* 521d, where it is said that all the higher studies undertaken by trainee Philosopher-Rulers must be relevant in war and

⁹ And perhaps divine ones too: the ban on portraying battling gods at 378b–c applies explicitly only to gods fighting amongst themselves and against ‘heroes and their friends and relations’.

¹⁰ It is not even clear that we are supposed to think of this first assault as being undertaken by Guardians—certainly not trained ones; the text is open to interpretation on this point.

¹¹ 460a also states that the *polis* must not be allowed to grow too large.

¹² See n. 5 above.

appropriate to soldiers. It may be thought that, instead of praising military courage, we should be working towards a world in which the virtue of military courage is no longer necessary. Yet there is, I believe, far more to be said for the undeniable fact that Plato makes a sustained effort throughout all his works to extend *andreia* into non-martial spheres, such as philosophy. In the *Republic* alone, we are told that the philosopher has to endure hostile attacks, and that philosophy requires boldness and courage; doing philosophy is also compared to waging battle for truth in the face of hostility, ridicule, and contempt.¹³

FN:13 Admittedly one could argue that such metaphors can work two ways: instead of being applauded for taking traditional agonistic activities and reworking them in a less aggressive fashion, Plato could be charged with promoting an agonistic culture by portraying philosophy as a contest in the first place, albeit one aimed at vanquishing falsehood rather than specific opponents (even if some of the opponents themselves continue to be motivated by personal animosity). As I

FN:14 have written on these matters extensively elsewhere, however,¹⁴ I shall not dwell on them here; the key point for my present thesis is that Plato believes that it is perfectly possible for all the virtues, including *andreia*, to flourish in peacetime. This is the vital move, irrespective of how one reads his depiction of the manliness of philosophy. The courage of the soldier is not the only kind of courage. War can certainly provide a backdrop for the exhibition of valour, but it is by no means the only field, or even necessarily the best field, for its display.

THE ORIGIN OF WAR

We are now in a position to turn to the question of whether Plato regards war as an inevitable feature of human existence. The first issue we need to explore is his analysis in *Republic* II of the origin of war. In the attempt to define justice, and consider whether it is helpful or harmful to the individual agent, Socrates proposes that they first consider justice on the larger canvas of the state, and that this can most clearly be achieved by constructing a community from scratch, to see precisely when, why, and how political justice emerges. So in 369b–372d he constructs a simple, classless community based on economic need and exchange.¹⁵ He and Adeimantus agree that rather than each person trying to supply all their own needs through their own labour, it is easier for each individual to specialize and devote their time and energies to one particular job, such as cobbling, and exchange the products of their craft with those of,

FN:15

¹³ e.g. 450b, 472a, 473e (enduring hostile attacks), 486b, 535a, 357a (need for boldness and courage), 534c (practice of philosophy compared to making an assault). See Hobbs 2000: 232–49, esp. 243–4 with n. 69–74.

¹⁴ Hobbs 2000.

¹⁵ This simple community is helpfully discussed in Barney 2001; Schofield 1993; and Cross and Woosley 1964: 75–93. The notes of Adam (1963) on this section remain illuminating.

example, the weaver or the farmer. Such a system also allows for the fact that in all crafts situations arise when certain tasks need to be carried out immediately: one must seize the *kairon*, the appropriate moment. Somewhat conveniently, Socrates appears to envisage (a) that each individual *is* naturally suited to one job and one alone and (b) that the distribution of natural skills amongst the population matches that population's requirements.

Such happy coincidences may well strike one as in need of justification, but fortunately they are not our present concern.¹⁶ Let us grant that in this classless society everyone is both a producer and a consumer of basic goods, living a simple bucolic existence of shared meals of bread and wine and uplifting community hymn singing. Crucially, it is a community at peace, both with itself and its neighbours: there is no poverty and no war. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the inhabitants are still aware of the possibility of both these things and are keen to avoid them (372b); hence their endeavours to keep their community small and to live within their means.

Glaucon, however, complains at this juncture that 'that's just the fodder you would provide if you were founding a community of pigs' (372d)—doubtless a reference to the inhabitants' permitted dessert of roasted acorns. In response, Socrates, despite emphasizing that this is the 'true' and healthy *polis*, allows the introduction of more sophisticated but explicitly 'unnecessary' (373a–b) goods and activities into what is now termed a 'luxurious' city suffering from feverish inflammation. The inhabitants are now to be granted furniture, expensive foodstuffs, courtesans, cosmetics, and the fine arts, including artefacts made from gold and ivory.¹⁷ Unnecessary desires, however, are also crucially unlimited, and so too are the goods they seek (373d10); their indulgence will thus lead to a great expansion of the *polis*. Artists, beauticians, hunters, cooks, and doctors, for instance, will all now be required, and their introduction in turn requires an expansion of the land needed to house and feed them. Before long, the community will start to appropriate some of its neighbours' territory, the neighbouring states will grow jealous of the community's increasing wealth and try to appropriate it in turn, and war will result. According to the one person, one job principle already established, this will entail the creation of a separate warrior Guardian class. And this is also the point where we are told, as we saw earlier, that the cause of war is 'the same as that of most evils' (namely, acquisitiveness).¹⁸

¹⁶ Annas (1981: 73–6) discusses the principle of specialization; see also White 1979: 85–7. Schofield (2000: 209) suggests that the idea is that the relevant specialists are to be *collected* to form the first society, thus avoiding the problem of unlikely coincidences.

¹⁷ Burnyeat (1999: 231–6) emphasizes the importance of couches and tables in particular in the Greek ideal of public dining as an essential component of civilized society.

¹⁸ It is interesting to compare Socrates' account in the *Republic* with modern archaeological theories which locate the origins of organized warfare during the first significant land settlements of the neolithic period, on the grounds that land settlements both offer possibilities for land disputes and provide a little more leisure for activities other than hunting and gathering. It is not coincidental that it is in the neolithic period that we start to see increasing craft specialization,

Do we now have at least possible answers to our opening questions? What can we learn from *Republic* 369–75 about whether Plato thinks humans can live together in any form of community without war, and, further, whether he thinks they can live without war in political structures embellished by the arts? At first glance it does seem that some form of very simple human association might be possible on peaceful terms; that is suggested by the first pre-political community. But, in answer to the second question, the price of peace will be high, and too high for some: war thus appears to be a feature (or at least a necessary possibility) of any reasonably developed constitution; war and civilization are part of the same process. This is what is suggested by the luxurious state that Socrates introduces at Glaucon's request.

It may help to illuminate this initial interpretation of *Republic* II if we contrast it with the position of Hobbes in *Leviathan*, *Elements of Law*, and *De cive*.¹⁹ For Hobbes, the natural state of man (that is, the state of man without political organization) will quickly degenerate into a state of war. Very briefly, the chief reason for this lies in his belief that ethical values are both relative and subjective. It is not simply that humans do differ widely, as a matter of fact, in their views about what constitutes good and bad, right and wrong; it is also the case that such differences cannot be resolved by simple appeal to an independent and natural criterion. In nature there is no such criterion. So discord and wars will naturally tend to arise, particularly over disagreements as to when it is appropriate to assert one's right to self-protection. The only way out of this impasse, Hobbes thinks, is for man to supply what nature has not: namely, objective standards of right and wrong in the shape of civil laws made by the sovereign ruler, or rulers. So, in Hobbes's eyes, we have a clear choice between war and law, which are presented as stark alternatives. Whereas in *Republic* II war appears at first sight to be depicted as an inevitable part of civilization in the sense of a politicized life informed by the arts, for Hobbes civil society or the commonwealth is the only conceivable solution to war.

IS WAR AVOIDABLE? THE EVIDENCE OF THE BUCOLIC COMMUNITY

To what extent, then, is *Republic* 369–75 to be taken at this initial face value? I shall take each component of this interpretation in turn, starting with the claim

including specialist weapons production. See O'Connell 1989: 30–44; Dawson 1996: 30; Ferrill 1985: 12, 18–31 (Ferrill also gives evidence for possible warlike activity in late palaeolithic times, but argues persuasively that most features of warfare ('true warfare' as he puts it, p. 19) arrived with the technological innovations of the neolithic period). For a judicious evaluation of the relation between war and the economy, and particularly on the war potential inherent in both staple and luxury goods, see Schofield 1993: 188–9.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Hobbes 1969: 11. 10. 8 and 1983: 1. 13.

that this first community shows how humans can live together without war (whether or not that is desirable). The crucial question to consider here is clearly whether Plato ever really does envisage the war-free pre-political community as a genuine possibility, and this, of course, depends on the vexed and intriguing issue of precisely how to interpret both the tone and the content of Socrates' description of it. Let us begin with the question of tone. Is Socrates' account supposed to be a serious analysis, either of the actual historical development of the *polis* (or a possible version of it), or at any rate of its economic and psychological origins? Or is it supposed to be simply some sort of joke, perhaps a satire on currently fashionable stories of a distant golden age or Age of Cronos?²⁰ Such legends of former easeful idylls had been popular in Greek literature at least from the time of Hesiod,²¹ and depending on both writer and immediate context, their tone can range from wistful nostalgia through critique of contemporary mores to absurdist parody.²² Or are both seriousness and satire in play? The two readings need not be mutually exclusive: Socrates could be genuinely attracted to this first, austere community while simultaneously being amused by certain literary treatments of similar pastoral scenes.²³ It has sometimes been assumed that Glaucon's derisive snort—that Socrates appears to be founding a community of pigs—is conclusive proof that this first community is intended solely as a parody; but this does not necessarily follow: if Socrates is no straightforward mouthpiece for Plato, then Glaucon most certainly is not. Whatever Glaucon's underlying stance, his explicit comments often challenge Socrates' proposals, and he is always portrayed as a forceful advocate of a sophisticated and urbane way of life.²⁴

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²⁰ In Hes. *Op.* 108–110, the men who lived in the blessed and easeful Age of Cronos are specifically called 'golden'. For a general discussion of the tradition of a Golden Age in Greek literature, see Baldry 1952 and Guthrie 1957: 69–79.

²¹ Hes. *Op.* 105–202. Empedocles may also have described a golden age in his *Purifications*: see Barnes 1987: 198–201.

²² For nostalgic uses, see Arist. *Ath. pol.* 16. 7; Ath. *Deipnosophists* VI, 267e–270a (although some of the texts that Athenaeus mentions are satirical). See also the vegetarian Peripatetic Dicaearchus appealing to the myth in support of his views in Guthrie 1957: 74 and Vidal-Naquet 1986: 285–7. Aristophanes mocks characters seeking to restore the Age of Cronos at *Clouds* 398 and 1070 and *Plutus* 581. Vidal-Naquet 1986: 285–301 contains a general discussion of ambivalent responses to the golden age; see too Brisson 1970 and Dillon 1992.

²³ Burnyeat (1999: 229–30), e.g., focuses on the 'teasing' tone of Socrates in this passage and his liberal use of irony, while Schofield (2000: 211) calls Socrates' account 'tongue-in-cheek' and 'a comic explosion'. Barney (2001: 216–17) also emphasizes the picture's 'parodic' nature, and Dillon (1992: 26) writes that 'Plato appears to go somewhat out of his way to make fun of the simple level of society he has postulated'. Yet all these writers hold that the passage has serious import as well, or at least fulfils a serious role within the structure of the dialogue as a whole (see also Schofield 1993). In contrast, Crombie (1962–3: 89–90) straightforwardly takes the first city to be the true ideal, with no irony in play.

²⁴ For overt criticism see, e.g., 473e–474a, where Glaucon exclaims that if Socrates is going to advocate that philosophers should become kings, or all kings become philosophers, then he must not be surprised if a crowd takes up arms and pursues him. For Glaucon's love of the arts, see 399e, where he is called *mousikos*, 'cultured'.

The strong probability that Socrates is gently mocking a tradition of golden age literature does not in itself, therefore, preclude the possibility that he is also offering us some sort of serious analysis. But if some kind of serious analysis is in operation here, the question now becomes: analysis of what? Is Socrates providing us with an account of what he considers to be a real possibility (whether set in the past or the future) of how empirical humans might live together in peace, or is he concocting a fantasy designed to explore the economic and psychological origins of society? It seems to me that the true challenge to the former, empirical option comes not from the teasing tone of the passage but from the question of what sort of psychological make-up is possessed by the inhabitants of this first community. Are they envisaged as having tripartite psyches comprising reason, spiritedness (*thumos*), and the appetites, anticipating the model of *Republic* IV? Or are their psyches supposed to consist only of appetites, and (initially at least) the necessary and limited appetites at that?²⁵ If the latter reading is preferred, then it does look as if 369–73 is not intended to be an account of recognizable, empirical humans, but is being put forward as a deliberately unrealizable fantasy, one of the functions of which is to clarify the complexity of actual humans and locate the origins of aggression and war more precisely. If, on the other hand, the book II producers and consumers are conceived by Plato as possessing tripartite psyches—*are* real, empirical humans, in other words—then this would strengthen the view that Socrates is offering the genuine possibility of a simple human community living without war (although always, we should remember, with an awareness of war and a desire to avoid it) (372b–c).

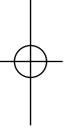
This interpretation, however, raises problems of its own. If this is supposed to be an empirical possibility, then (a) why is there no explicit reference to tripartition at this stage of the dialogue, and (b) why do the (implicit) rational, spirited, and appetitive parts of the psyche operate so differently in this first community from how they are said to operate after 373? Their rational abilities, for instance, appear to be confined to means–end reasoning: there is no suggestion that they ever practise philosophy or speculate on any subject in a general way. Their appetites—their *epithumiai*—are likewise confined to the necessary and limited desires, those desires aimed at securing physical survival and (very) modest comfort. And their spirited elements, their *thumoi*, are not explicitly mentioned at all. If the *thumos* is nevertheless still supposed to be present in them, why is it so far removed from the raw self-assertive drive that constitutes the untutored *thumos* immediately after this passage at 375 (the first mention of *thumos* as a psychic function in the text)? Their appetitive and spirited elements would appear to be ideally restrained and docile, even though they do not have the

²⁵ It is by no means clear whether the economic producers of 369–73 are supposed to be an exact match for the producers in the ideally just tripartite state. In any case, even from book IV onwards, the structure of the producers' psyches is not always easy to determine.

benefit of Philosopher-Rulers to guide them and the educational institutions of the republic to form them.

FN:26
 Taken together, these problems suggest strongly to me, far more than Glaucon's comment, that Socrates is not putting this community forward as a serious depiction of how fully realized, tripartite humans might once have lived at peace, or could live at peace in the future, but is rather offering it as a fantastical means both of clarifying the nature of actual human societies and the origin of war, and of commenting on the current state of affairs, in Athens and elsewhere.²⁶ It cannot therefore be taken as support for the view that empirical, psychologically tripartite humans can live without war in certain circumstances.

THE PRICE OF PEACE


 So far we have mostly been addressing the first of our main issues—namely, whether war is an inevitable feature of human coexistence—and we shall shortly be considering the evidence of the second, luxurious, war-prone *polis* in this regard. First, however, we need to reflect more carefully on how the bucolic community can assist with our second main question: that of whether the removal or avoidance of war *in toto* would in fact be desirable. Certainly the character of Socrates is not likely to care much about forgoing cosmetics, prostitutes, and fancy foodstuffs; and given the amount of artistic censorship he is soon to propose for the ideally just state, he may even be happy enough about forgoing all or most of the fine arts. Yet Plato the consummate artist-philosopher may well have more doubts. Does he view the bucolic community as any sort of ideal, however fantastical? To help answer this question, we shall make a brief excursus into other examples of associations which exist without war in the dialogues, before turning back to the bucolic community of *Republic II*.

Excursus: other war-free communities in Plato

There are three passages we need to consider: one from the *Politicus*, the other two from the *Laws*. At *Politicus* 271–2 the Eleatic Stranger recounts a golden-age-style myth concerning a previous Age of Cronos—as opposed to the current, more troubled Age of Zeus—when fruits grew plentifully without any need for agriculture and the climate was so mild that houses and most clothing were

²⁶ At the very most, the problems suggest that Socrates is implying that such a halcyon idyll could never have lasted very long, as its survival depends on certain key aspects of the human psyche remaining in abeyance. However, this interpretation seems to me far less plausible than supposing that Socrates does not intend to describe empirical humans in this passage. See also Barney 2001: 218–20.

unnecessary.²⁷ Animals were tame and could converse with humans, who were, partly in consequence, vegetarians. Above all, there were no political constitutions (*politeiai*), and no wars or strife of any kind. The Eleatic Stranger now asks his interlocutor, Young Socrates, whether life in this peaceful, leisured community would be happier (*eudaimonesteros*) than in contemporary war-prone human states. Perhaps surprisingly, Young Socrates is not sure, and the Stranger says it all depends on whether the beings²⁸ of the Age of Cronos used their leisure to engage in philosophical discussion, both amongst themselves and also to gain the viewpoints of the talking animals. The very strong implication is that if they did not, then even a society without war is not worth the price of forgoing philosophy.²⁹

The two other main passages in which Plato envisages a war-free society, *Laus* 677–80 and 713a–714b, are rather more difficult to interpret in respect of our central questions.³⁰ At 677a, the Athenian Stranger asks Megillus and Clinias whether they believe there to be any truth in the ‘ancient stories’ (*palaioi logoi*) which tell of the frequent devastation of human societies by floods, plagues, and other catastrophes. In particular, he asks them to consider the effects of a mighty flood which destroyed cities and most of their inhabitants, and which only a few herdsmen living in the hills were able to survive.³¹ The Stranger proceeds to describe the simple and mostly artless life of these scattered survivors—artless because the flood has swept away not only tools but also knowledge of skills and inventions, as well as statecraft and legislation. However, despite their fear and desolation, they are also free from the greed, rivalry, and corruption of cities, and,

²⁷ For thoughtful discussions of the *Politicus* myth see Brisson 1995; Lane 1998: 99–136; McCabe 2000: 141–9; Rowe 2000: 239–44.

²⁸ ‘Beings’, as they are not depicted by the Stranger as fully human: they are, e.g., earth-born (271a).

²⁹ Although the Stranger emphasizes that the myth is ‘child’s play’ (*paidia*, 268d–e) and that it is ‘over-long’ (277b), this description does not prevent it from raising profound questions about what is of real value in contemporary human life (as well as in life for the beings of the Age of Cronos). The seriousness of *paidia* is often emphasized by Plato (see e.g. *Resp.* 424e–425a and *Leg.* I, 643b–d and VII, 793e–794b, 797a–798d).

³⁰ Cambiano 2002 contains a fruitful discussion of *Leg.* 677–80. See also Barker 1918: 356–7.

³¹ *Ti.* 22a–23a and 25c–d also refer to periodic cataclysms, the worst caused by fire and flood, which destroy large numbers of mankind and all the arts, sciences, and records of the civilizations affected; there is mention of one great cataclysm in particular, the flood survived by Deucalion and Pyrrha, at 22a. The *Critias*, too, makes repeated references (109d–e, 111a–b, 112a, 112c–d) to the periodic destructions of *Ti.* 22–3, and *Criti.* 112a again specifically mentions the great flood endured by Deucalion. These passages, however, do not then go on to discuss how war in general arises in the consequent rebuilding of civilization, concentrating instead on the supposed war between an earlier, more illustrious version of Athens and the island of Atlantis. (The *Timaeus* and *Critias* passages do, however, assume that any well-ordered city will be thoroughly prepared for war and expert in its arts; more disturbingly, as we saw in n. 2 above, the *Timaeus* emphasizes (23c–d) that Athens was originally established by a ‘war-loving’ (*philopolēmos*) as well as ‘wisdom-loving’ (*philosophos*) Athena: it is arguably the most obvious exception to Plato’s generally negative stance towards war). Finally, the *Politicus* myth discusses periodic cosmic reversals (270b–d) which bring great destruction to humankind, but does not mention a flood or floods.

critically, civil strife and war are unknown to them (678e). This is for a number of reasons: on the one hand, the catastrophic situation that they face means that they need to stick together to survive; on the other, they possess sufficient resources in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and clay to prevent squabbling. It is also highly significant that all the mines were flooded: there is no gold or silver to fight over—no one is rich, and there is thus no cause for jealousy—and in any case there is no iron or (the copper and tin required for) bronze with which to make weapons.³²

FN:32

The interpretative challenges of this story fall into two main groups. First, although the Stranger and his interlocutors agree that the tale is ‘very credible’ (*panu . . . pithanon*, 677a), it is still hard to know the extent to which Plato intends the account to be read as historical. Is he really offering it as a plausible description of an empirical society which is genuinely—if temporarily—free from war? Or is he simply trying to illuminate the conditions which give rise to war and peace? The diction of the passage could support either reading: the Stranger uses ambivalent phrases such as ‘let us conjecture’ (*noēsōmen*, 677a) and ‘let us assume’ (*thōmen*, 677c) and his interlocutors reply that his conjectures and assumptions are ‘certainly probable’ (*eikos goun*, 677b)³³ and ‘most likely’ (*kai mala prepei touth’ houtos*, 678c). Such phrases could simply indicate that they are discussing a period of which there are no written records, or they could be taken to suggest that Plato wants us to see the account as a fiction.³⁴

FN:33

FN:34

Secondly, it is again hard to determine the precise tone of the passage and how we are supposed to view this society of survivors. It is true that all three speakers agree that such a society, neither rich nor poor, is the kind in which the noblest characters (*gennaiotata ēthē*) are formed, and they speak approvingly of the simplicity and moral innocence of their imagined (if not imaginary) community.³⁵ Unlike the *Republic* or *Politicus*, none of them expresses any particular concern that the absence of the art of war is concomitant with the absence of all the arts and sciences, including the art of writing. But this does not mean that Plato, a writer adept in a number of arts and sciences, is so unqualified in his approval, or intends us to be. Admittedly there is no such clear flagging of doubts as there is in both the *Republic* and *Politicus*, but there is surely a warning sign in the comparison (680b) made between the patriarchal customs of the clan-based hill-dwelling communities of *Laws* 677–80 and the patriarchy

FN:35

³² Although *Legs*. 677–80 does not purport to depict a golden age, it reminds us of the irony that gold itself does not, and cannot, feature in golden age literature, except metaphorically to describe the inhabitants of more plentiful and leisured times. All metals and metallurgy were seen as a source of strife.

³³ See also 681a.

³⁴ Guthrie (1957: 67–8) tends to the latter reading, though he adds that the text precludes certainty. I see no compelling evidence to sway one in either direction.

³⁵ ‘Imagined’ is not intended to rule out the possibility that such a community once existed, or could exist in the future; it simply denotes that the community so described does not currently exist, and has not recently existed.

FN:36 practised by the unlovely Cyclopes in the *Odyssey*.³⁶ Yet even here the message appears to be mixed: while Megillus talks of the Cyclopes' 'savagery' (*agriotēs*), the Stranger describes such patriarchy as 'of all kingships the most just' (680e). Nevertheless, it seems safe to suppose that Plato would hardly regard the brutal, man-eating Cyclopes, who live without philosophy, state laws, or reverence for the gods, as an ideal to which humans should aspire.³⁷ At the very least, Plato **FN:37** seems to be inviting us in this passage to consider whether a community without war is necessarily always preferable to a war-prone one.

The final, apparently war-free community, described in *Laws* 713a–714b, is hard to interpret chiefly because it is so brief, and because its main function is not to examine the development of the *polis* and the origin of war, but rather to emphasize how quickly human societies disintegrate when left in merely human control. As in the *Politicus*, we are returned to the blessed Age of Cronos, when human affairs were guided by wise and benevolent daimons, and humans lived a life of plenty and peace. Although this peaceful state is explicitly said to be a happy one, no mention is made of whether these peaceful, happy humans studied philosophy or not, or indeed practised any of the arts or sciences. However, we are told that both their homes and their states were directed by immortal reason, enshrined as law, and this suggests that the practice of philosophy would at least not have been out of place in such a society. Perhaps, then, these mythological beings did not have to choose between civilization and peace, although this does not necessarily help those of us living in the more challenging, human-misdirected, Age of Zeus.

Is the avoidance of war desirable? The evidence of the luxurious city

Beyond the *Republic*, then, there is some evidence that Plato would not see a war-free community which lacked philosophy (and the arts and sciences) as desirable. So if he were to see the bucolic community in *Republic* II as some sort of (fantastical) ideal, we should expect it to include philosophy, at the very least. But, as we have seen, this appears very implausible. Although we are not explicitly told that the acorn-munching hymn-singers do *not* engage in philosophy, there is absolutely nothing to suggest that they do or would, or perhaps even could: there is **FN:38** no evidence that they possess anything more than means–end reasoning powers.³⁸ It certainly appears that the practice of philosophy in the *Republic* does not come

³⁶ Hom. *Od.* IX. 105–566; their practice of patriarchy is cited as one of their distinguishing characteristics at 112–15.

³⁷ This is the only passage in the dialogues in which Plato mentions the Cyclopes, but there can be no doubt about his lack of sympathy with their way of life. For further discussion of their role in this passage, see Dillon 1992: 30–1.

³⁸ Barney (2001: 213) also holds that there is no philosophy or serious intellectual inquiry in the First City.

about until after the development of the fevered society and the emergence of war. The term *philosophos* first appears at 375e10, in a discussion of how to select the right children for training as future warrior Guardians: they must possess both spirited (thumoeidic) and wisdom-loving (philosophic) elements in their psyches, and the education of these young warriors is directed chiefly at achieving the correct balance between these thumoeidic and philosophic aspects through a judicious mixture of literature and music (*mousikē*) and physical training.

Let us now turn to the 'luxurious' city. As we have just noted, it is only at this point that philosophy and the other sciences are introduced. Does this mean that to pluck the fruits of philosophy one has to accept war as inevitable? This is the crux of the matter, and I believe that the answer is no, though assessing the evidence is far from straightforward. The main point to emphasize is that the introduction of war into the community at 373d–e is not necessarily final: there is, after all, most of the dialogue still to come, and there is plenty of time for the relationship between the *polis* and war to change. So let us consider what happens next, particularly to the newly demarcated Guardian class. After their early studies in *mousikē* and gymnastic, those amongst the tyro warriors who are found to be most suited to the study of philosophy will be siphoned off when they are about 21 and given an arduous higher education in mathematics, astronomy, harmonics, and dialectic as the core of their training to become Philosopher-Rulers, a process which culminates when they are 50 in a revelation of the Form of the Good.³⁹ Until they are 50, they must intersperse these studies with periods of military training and duties; after 50, it appears that they are now fully-fledged Philosopher-Rulers and absolved of military obligations, though clearly not political ones (540b). So the critical question now is: can a state actually ruled by philosophers ever be free from the greedy and feverish unnecessary desires which are said in 373d–e to lead to expansion, appropriation, and war? And can it also be free from the kind of misdirected and unchecked thumoeidic desires for status, victory, and power which at 547e–548a are criticized for encouraging a preference for war over peace? In short, can citizens ruled by the beneficent reason of philosophers be free from the desires which are the root cause of aggressive warmongering?

FN:39

A key quote at 399e suggests that perhaps they can: the fevered, land-appropriating, and somewhat bellicose state depicted in 372–5 is not, we learn, to be its final development.⁴⁰ In the intervening section Socrates has been outlining the rules by which literature and music are to be composed and performed—rules which we later learn are to be established and maintained by Philosopher-Rulers.⁴¹

FN:40

FN:41

³⁹ Early studies in *mousikē* and gymnastic: 376c–412a; higher education for selected Guardians: 521c–541b (selection at 537b and d); revelation of the Form of the Good: 532b and 540a.

⁴⁰ A point highlighted by Guthrie 1975: 448 and Burnyeat 1999: 231.

⁴¹ Guardians are not divided into Auxiliaries and Rulers until 412b; the concept of the Philosopher-Ruler first appears at 473c–e (though Guardians were said to require 'philosophic' qualities at 375e). That the Philosopher-Rulers are supposed to supervise the training of both mind

At 399e Socrates then claims that the proper implementation of these rules will have the effect of ‘thoroughly purging’ (*diakathairō*) the old swollen state. Perhaps one of the effects of such purging will be to remove those feverish acquisitive impulses and unchecked and perverted thumoeidic desires that lead to war. Such speculation is strengthened by the fact that at 431a–b bad desires are said to be the result of ‘bad upbringing or bad company’. If so, then we can at least say, in answer to our second main question, that offensive war is not necessary to civilization. This seems to be confirmed by a fact we have already noted: namely, that after the belligerent land appropriation of the fevered state at 373d, all the emphasis is on the Guardians’ ability to defend, not attack: witness 414d–e, 415d–e, 421–3.⁴² These passages, of course, underline an uncomfortable truth: the fact that even a purified, peace-loving state will always remain at risk from attack by neighbouring non-ideal states, and as long as these neighbouring states remain non-ideal, there will thus always remain the need for a highly trained army, whose soldiers (as we have also seen) are to be kept motivated by a number of state-bestowed honours⁴³ and honed by the correct balance between gymnastic and *mousikē*. At 543a we are still told that the ‘kings’ should be those who are best at philosophy and war. So it remains the case that however purely civilized a state may be, it will always be faced with the possibility of having to engage in defensive war.

Yet, even if this reading is broadly correct, 399e still poses a fundamental problem of interpretation, depending on how one understands Socrates’ claim that they have, without noticing it, been thoroughly purging their bloated and luxurious (*truphō*) state. Does the ‘purification’ refer simply to the cleansing modifications they have made to the original picture of the feverish *polis* (arguably the literal reading of the text), or does Socrates mean that their regulation of the arts (to be put into practice by the Guardians) will have the effect of cleansing the psyches of the state’s inhabitants, and purging them of their feverish desires? Or are both meanings in play? The issue matters, because if the second option is taken and Socrates is thought to be referring to the purificatory work of the Guardians, then this implies that the feverish, aggressive desires which lead to war are innate. On the first option, in which Socrates is simply discussing the purification of a picture, the psychological model that he is working with is left open, and we cannot necessarily infer that aggression is hard-wired into us: it may arise only from the wrong kind of culture and upbringing. On this first interpretation, unhealthy desires would not be innate in the citizens of the philosophic state and would have no chance to develop.

and body is made clear at 546d (though they are here called ‘Guardians’, 546b makes it plain that it is only the Rulers that are meant), and there is no reason to suppose that this training is intended to be very different from that outlined in 379–399.

⁴² See p. 000 above for a discussion of these references.

⁴³ See p. 000 above.

The decision between these two psychological options is fundamental to our whole discussion. For if aggressive desires are innate, then it is open to an opponent of Socrates to say that Socrates is wrong even to aim for the purification of feverish desires: on the contrary, perhaps the ideal state needs to engage in war, including offensive war, as some sort of outlet for the innately aggressive desires of its citizens. A weaker version of this criticism might hold that if aggression is innate, then we should just accept that war will always be a necessary possibility in even the ideal state.

One of the difficulties in deciding which psychological model Socrates has in mind is that in the event of there being only one ideally just state, war will still continue, as we have seen, and it is hard to determine the precise degree of freedom from aggressive tendencies in people who are actually fighting. The issue is considerably illuminated, however, if we consider what would happen if, hypothetically, all states on earth were to be ruled by philosophers: this is, after all, Socrates' aspiration in his visionary speech on how to cure the ills of mankind at 473c–e. If one hypothetically removes the threat of war, and hence the need for a defence force, does Plato still think that even ideally educated appetites and *thumoi* will, or could, retain the aggressive impulses which can lead to war? This would be tantamount to saying that such aggressive impulses are both innate and ineducable. The desire actually to wage war (as opposed to a desire for unspecified aggression) cannot *itself* be innate, as war is a cultural phenomenon, and the desire for it has to be learnt;⁴⁴ but we might be innately predisposed to form desires for unspecified aggression, which could *lead* to a desire for war. So the ultimate questions of our whole discussion are: first, does Plato think that the belligerent (in the literal sense of 'war-waging') aspects of human nature stem from innately aggressive impulses or not? And, secondly, if he does, does he think that such innately aggressive impulses are educable?

FN:44

I submit that on most of the evidence of the *Republic*, particularly books II–IV, VIII and IX, Plato thinks it possible that such aggressive, and potentially bellicose, tendencies are not necessarily innate, and hence would not come to exist at all in an ideal world in which all states are ruled by philosophers, and all citizens are raised and educated according to the intellectual, emotional, and physical training that these Philosopher-Rulers devise. The two most obvious possible exceptions are 571a–2b, where Socrates says that some of the unnecessary desires are lawless and that we may perhaps (*kinduneousi*, 571b) all be born with them (*eggignesthai*), and 588b–9d, where the *thumos* is described as a lion and the appetites as a many-headed monster. Yet in the latter passage it is not entirely clear whether the image is supposed to represent the *psychē* of a new-born babe, or that of an adult (or at least a child) already infected by a corrupt society; while in the former the '*kinduneousi*' shows that Socrates is not prepared to commit himself entirely to the notion that savage desires are innate in all of us, or indeed

⁴⁴ See Ferrill 1985: 11 and n. 1 above.

FN:45 in any of us.⁴⁵ Nor is it at all certain that ‘*eggignesthai*’ has to mean ‘innate’ in any case; it might just mean ‘occur naturally’ when certain conditions arise; and
 FN:46 in a philosophically ruled world, those conditions may never arise.⁴⁶ In addition, we are not told that these lawless desires, even the ones which lead to dreams of committing murder, are necessarily the kind of desires with the potential to impel us to go to war (though of course some murders might provoke others to go to war against us). In short, there is no incontrovertible evidence in the *Republic* that aggression is innate, and there is the evidence of 431a–b that bad
 FN:47 desires are the consequence of bad upbringing or bad company.⁴⁷

It is important to be precise here. My thesis that Plato does not think that aggression is necessarily innate (at least not in everyone) does not commit him to believing that one can ever eradicate, even in an ideal world, the basic self-assertive (thumoeidic) and acquisitive and pleasure-seeking (appetitive) impulses from the perversion and thwarting of which aggression and thence belligerence ultimately arise, when they do arise: as *Republic* 580d–581b makes very clear, the *epithumiai* (appetites) will always pursue physical satisfaction and material gain, and the *thumos* will always seek honour and (worldly) success, just as assuredly as reason will always desire truth and knowledge. And 611b–d makes it plain that so long as the *psychē* is embodied, the acquisitive appetites and status-regarding thumoeidic impulses will remain. Acquisitive, self-assertive, and hence *potentially* aggressive tendencies (‘aggressive’, but still not necessarily ‘belligerent’ in the strict sense) will always exist in embodied human nature, and will always be in need of careful and knowledgeable channelling and rechannelling, and, in the last resort, occasional suppression. But there is nothing, I maintain, in Plato’s theory of human nature as outlined in the *Republic*, especially books IV, VIII, and IX, which essentially and automatically precludes the possibility of such channelling, in the right global environment and with the right goals, role models, and rewards on offer: indeed, this is true even if one takes 571–2 as evidence for the existence of innate aggression, as Socrates says clearly in that passage that if reason rules us while we are awake, then such lawless desires will be quietened, even in our sleep. On my reading, according to which Plato believes that we are born not with innate aggression but with an innate potential for aggression, the consequence of his psychology is that this potentiality does not *necessarily* have to be realized, and

⁴⁵ A point highlighted by Deslauriers 2001: 234. In Deslauriers’s response to Barney’s (2001) paper, the question of whether Plato regards aggression as innate is one of the two main issues she raises. As will be clear from my discussion here, I am largely in agreement with Deslauriers on this matter.

⁴⁶ See Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1953: s.v. *eggignomai* (2): ‘of things, qualities, etc., *spring up, appear in or among* e.g. Plato *Rep.* 351d . . . *Gorgias* 526a’.

⁴⁷ Perhaps the strongest evidence in the Platonic corpus for innately fierce desires is *Ti.* 69c–d, where the ‘mortal soul’ is said to contain ‘terrible and necessary passions’ (*deina kai anagkaia . . . pathēmata*). Yet even here it is not obvious that these desires will inevitably include aggression, or even inevitably result in it, let alone result in war: Timaeus singles out pleasure, pain, rashness, fear, anger, hope, and lust.

in a cosmos run by philosophers, will not be realized. In our current imperfect world, of course, it almost certainly will be. The initial apparent contrast between Plato and Hobbes on the relation between civilization and war has thus turned out to be deceptive: Plato's message is that civilization and war develop together only if civilization is already in the wrong hands; under the guidance of wise and beneficent philosophers with the power to educate and temper the psychological wellsprings of aggression, it is at least conceivable that there could be a civilization without (at least) offensive war, and perhaps even a cosmopolis without war at all. Furthermore, it is worth attempting such channelling and rechannelling of the roots of aggression and war even if one is sceptical about the possibility of total success. For even if the education of appetitive and spirited desires only diminishes, rather than entirely removes, the impulses which can eventually lead to war, then it would still be possible for humans, even in our compromised and radically uncertain world, at any rate to improve our chances of living at peace in a reasonably sophisticated political constitution, a constitution which contains both the (admittedly censored) arts and philosophy itself. And this possibility should, I submit, be cause for at least a little hope.⁴⁸

FN:48

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⁴⁸ It is interesting that Jonathan Shay (2000), writing about the necessity or otherwise of aggression and war from a psychological perspective indebted to evolutionary biology, also reaches a conclusion of cautious optimism.

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