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The Prayer of Socrates: The Best Possible Government in the Republic

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In the *Republic*², Socrates uses the language of prayer to characterize a central argument of the dialogue: the argument for the communal arrangement of the best regime, that is, for the best government. I show how he does so by way of close reading, primarily with respect to Book V (section 1). Instances of prayer coincide with reference to the argument in the narrative because, it seems, both concern things that are apparently impossible (to actualize): the object of prayer and the best government, respectively.

That the best government is apparently impossible, according to the dialogue, is supported by consideration of one of the sub-arguments of the best government argument – what I refer to as “the woman’s law argument” (section 2). The reading suggests that the

² All quotations from Plato’s dialogues are taken from the Hackett Complete Works (Plato, 1997) translations of them, unless otherwise indicated. All emphasis is mine.

titular goals of the best government argument and the woman's law argument are characterized by Socrates as apparently impossible, yet actually possible – indeed, the best possible: the best possible government and the best (possible) curriculum for guardian education in that government. The use of “best possible” language – which is virtually ubiquitous throughout Plato's *œuvre* – in the dialogue to refer to the government Socrates has in mind, naturally suggests comparison of it with the concept of the best of all possible worlds, briefly considered in the final section of the paper.

In her preface to the *Philebus*, Dorothea Frede notes, [In the *Philebus*], however, Socrates is again fully in charge. Naturally enough: the topic is again one we readily associate with Socrates in Plato's ‘Socratic’ dialogues, as well as in *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*: what is ‘the human good’? how will a human being lead the best life possible? Yet this is a Socrates very sure of his ground, ready to expound at length difficult metaphysical doctrines, and possessed of a whole theory about the ingredients of the best life and their proper ordering. (Plato, 1997, p. 398)

This topic is broached in the *Gorgias* as well, as Donald Zeyl indicates in his preface to it when he states that “as Plato also makes clear, [*Gorgias*] praised so highly the speaking abilities that his own teaching imparted that one could pardon ambitious young Athenians like Callicles if they thought that, by learning oratory from him they would know everything a man needs in order to secure for himself *the best life possible*” (Plato, 1997, p. 791).

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates asks Callicles concerning rhetoric, “But as for this activity, which is concerned with how a person might be *as good as possible* and manage his own house or his city in *the best possible way*, it's considered shameful to refuse to give advice concerning it unless somebody pays you money. Right?” (520e).³ Socrates also dis-

³ Compare this to the notion of the statesman, elucidated this way by C. J. Rowe (in his preface to the *Statesman*):

The ‘statesman’—in Greek the *politikos*, whence the Latinized title *Politikus* by which the dialogue is alternatively known—is understood from the outset as the possessor of the specialist, expert knowledge of how to rule justly and well—to the citizens' best interests—in a ‘city’ or *polis*, directing all its public institutions and affairs. (It is assumed that such knowledge is not only *possible*, but that politics should be led by it—assumptions that could be questioned, of course) (294).

cusses the possibility of giving good advice in the *Demodocus*.⁴

Socrates mentions the best possible way to speak in the *Cratylus*: “For probably *the best possible way* to speak consists in using names all (or most) of which are like the things they name (that is, are appropriate to them), while the worst is to use the opposite kind of names” (435c).⁵

Returning to the *Gorgias*, a little later in the dialogue Socrates queries, “Now, please describe for me precisely the type of care for the city to which you are calling me. Is it that of striving valiantly with the Athenians to make them *as good as possible*, like a doctor, or is it like one ready to serve them and to associate with them for their gratification?” (521a) James Boyd White highlights the disjunction Socrates poses between making others as good as possible, ingratiating them, and becoming an autocrat:

Socrates says that the art of not suffering wrong requires either that one become an absolute dictator or that one seek to ingratiate oneself in every way with those who do have power, praising and blaming the same things, and thereby becoming like them. (510a) [. . .] The alternative to such ingratiation, which makes one like the object of one's flattery, is to have the aim not of pleasing the people but of making them *as good as possible* (most *agathos*) (513e). (White, 1983, p. 859, 860)⁶

4 Suppose, on the one hand, that it is impossible to give good and informed advice on the matters you are meeting to discuss: then surely it is ridiculous to meet to discuss matters on which it is impossible to give good advice. Suppose, on the other hand, that it is possible to give good and informed advice on such matters: then surely it would be absurd if there were no knowledge on the basis of which it is possible to give good and informed advice on these matters—and if there is some knowledge on the basis of which it is possible to give good advice about such matters, then there must be some people who in fact know how to give good advice on such matters; and if there are some people who know how to give good advice on the matters you are meeting to discuss, then necessarily in your own case either you know how to give advice on these matters, or you do not know how to do so, or else some of you know and others do not know. (380a–c, original emphasis removed).

5 One might be inclined to compare this claim to Wittgenstein's discussion of Augustine's account of language and language learning in the *Philosophical Investigations* (see Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 1), and to Kripke's project in *Naming and Necessity* (see, for instance, Kripke 1970, p. 254).

6 Compare Socrates's request (in 521a) for the type of care for the city Callicles is calling him to – one which the former takes to involve either making its citizens as good as possible or trying to gratify them – with this statement by Eryximachus in the *Symposium*: “In music, therefore, as well as in medicine and in

It is to be kept in mind, however, that in the *Symposium* 'best possible' is employed both ironically (if not sarcastically) and in earnest. An example of the former is when Alcibiades quips, "O Eryximachus, *best possible son to the best possible*, the most temperate father: Hi!" (214B). A possible example of the latter (if not one of the former) is when Alcibiades says to Socrates, "Nothing is more important to me than becoming *the best man I can be*, and no one can help me more than you to reach that aim" (218D). Andrea Nightingale glosses the quotation this way: "He tells Socrates that he wants to become 'the best possible' (*ὄτι βέλτιστον*) [. . .] (218cd)" (Nightingale, 1993, p. 125).

The second quoted statement by Alcibiades continues the aforementioned theme of making Athenian citizens as good as possible, while intimating the specification of young Athenian men, in particular, as the recipients of such "care". In *Euthydemus*, Socrates remarks,

The boy's situation is this: both I and all these people want him to become *as good as possible*. He is the son of Axiochus (son of the old Alcibiades) and is cousin to the present Alcibiades—his name is Clinias. He is young, and we are anxious about him, as one naturally is about a boy of his age, for fear that somebody might get in ahead of us and turn his mind to some other interest and ruin him. So you two have arrived at *the best possible moment*. (275a–b)

(Cf. to the following rhetorical question posed by Socrates, in Book IV of the *Republic*: "Well, then, Adeimantus, don't you think that one boxer who has had *the best possible training* could easily fight two rich and fat nonboxers?" (422b))⁷

Later, Socrates highlights the need for the best possible teacher for such an undertaking: "But as things are, see whether the suggestion I am about to make may not be a good one: what I say we ought

all the other domains, in matters divine as well as in human affairs, we must attend with *the greatest possible care* to these two species of Love, which are, indeed, to be found everywhere" (187e–188a). (This translation, by Nehamas and Woodruff, is identical to – and perhaps taken verbatim from – that in their 1989 edition of the dialogue. The following two quotations also are taken from this edition.)

⁷ The refrain is reiterated in the *Laches*, in which the following interchange takes place between Lysimachus and Socrates:

What do you say, Socrates? Will you comply with our request and take an active part with us in helping the young men to become *as good as possible*? (200d)

[. . .] Well, it would be a terrible thing, Lysimachus, to be unwilling to join in assisting any man to become *as good as possible* (200e).

to do, my friends—since this is just between ourselves—is to join in searching for *the best possible teacher*, first for ourselves—we really need on—and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else” (201a).

In the following statement, in the *Apology*, Socrates seems to furnish an example of such a teacher – namely, himself:

Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of *the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power*; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or *the best possible state of your soul?* (29d–e)

Later he elaborates, “For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for *the best possible state of your soul*, as I say to you: ‘Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively’” (30a–b).

Compare this point, finally, to the following statements by Socrates in the *Protagoras*:

- Interpreting an ode from Simonides against a maxim by Pittacus: “A few lines later he states (imagine he is making a speech): ‘To become good truly is hard, and although it may be possible for a short period of time, to persist in that state and to be a good man, as you put it, Pittacus, is not humanly possible. God alone can have this privilege [...]’” (344b–c).
- In reference to another poem: “You say, Pittacus, that it is hard to be good; in fact, to become good is hard, though possible, but to be good is impossible” (344e).
- In reference to yet another poem: “So the tenor of this part of the poem is that it is impossible to be a good man and continue to be good, but possible for one and same person to become good and also bad, and those are best for the longest time whom the gods love” (345c).

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Маргінальні філософські концепції як спосіб трансформації словників у філософії Річарда Рорті

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Р. Рорті – представник неопрагматизму, професор Принстонського університету, основним у концепції якого є можливість перепису усталених парадигм. Саме тому, в його історіографічній картині світу філософи-іроніки (ті, що пересмислюють реальність) відіграють таку ж важливу роль, як і філософи-ліберали (ті, хто створюють серйозні конструктивні проекти трансформації дійсності). Відповідно, історія філософії не може бути зведена до певного енциклопедичного канону центральних постатей, оскільки саме індивіди, чії практики ідуть врозріз із загальними уявленнями, здатні до креативної діяльності. «Увесь той час, коли історики філософії намагаються підвести усіх цих людей під старі рубрики, неслух-