The wandering ‘we’

DRAFT -- PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE

1. Introducing the wandering ‘we’

The Republic famously begins in the first person singular: ‘I went down’ said by the narrator of the dialogue, Socrates.

I went down yesterday to the Piraeus, with Glaucon the son of Aristo, to pray to the god, and at the same time wanting to watch the festival, how they were going to do it, now on its first celebration. The parade of the locals seemed to me to be a fine one, but the parade that the Thracians put on appeared no less suitable. When we had made our prayers and watched the festival, we went back towards town.

But the first person singular is regularly replaced by the plural: so in the third sentence of the work, ‘we’ describes Socrates and Glaucon, and then the other characters who are introduced over the next few pages – Polemarchus, Adeimantus, Niceratus and unspecified others; and then Cephalus and Thrasymachus too. (Why are there so many people in the dialogues of Plato?) Still, familiar enough; and I certainly don’t want to go back over the issue of the Piraeus and all of that – but, instead, to consider what happens to that ‘we’ as the dialogue continues. For ‘we’, as I shall put it, wanders. And it wanders, I shall suggest, at points in the text where the wandering itself is of significance to the philosophical goings-on.

At the outset ‘we’ is firmly attached to the carefully listed people who appear within Socrates’ narrative [the conversational ‘we’]: e.g. 327a1, 327b1, 344d, 344e5 and so on. Consider, for example, the complex relations among ‘us’ at the moment when

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1 All texts from the Republic unless otherwise indicated. Text and line numbers from Slings, 2003, unless where noted; my translations throughout.
Thrasyamachus seems to be about to leave the discussion: here ‘we’ are those he will leave behind, without giving the benefit of elaborating his thesis (344e5ff.). ‘We’, then, are the characters of the dialogue itself, introduced with ceremony from the outset.

But at times ‘we’ is used – as we might indeed expect – in a more generic way, to describe ‘us’ in general, the ‘we’ of some wider group. Here is the vernacular ‘we’ – where the first person plural is used to mark commonplace assumptions of human behaviour, or situation, or culture. In this role (as familiar in English as in Greek) ‘we’ collects the commonplace assumptions – or the phainomena and the endoxa – gathering information about the cultured world ‘we’ inhabit. So in the discussion of the goods at the start of Book 2:

‘Do you see a third type of good,’ he said, ‘in which are gym and being cured when sick, and medicine and other business? For we would say that these are laborious, but benefit us, and we would not accept to have them for their own sakes, but for the sake of rewards and the other things that become from them.’ (357d) ‘This too is a third. But so what?’ ‘In which would you place justice?’ (358a) ‘I would think in the finest, which because of itself and because of the things that become from it should be valued by the person who wishes to be blessed.’ ‘That is not what the many think, but in the class of the laboursome, which should be practised for the sake of rewards and the good repute from the opinions of others, but itself because of itself should be shunned as being hard.’ ‘I know that this is what they think, and that it has long been decried by Thrasyamachus as such, while injustice is praised. But I, as it seems, am some kind of ignoramus.’

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– Glaucor’s classification is based on what ‘we’ want to have, pursue, enjoy and accept (357b-c), where this ‘we’, still awaiting Socrates’ endorsement, is not the ‘we’
at the Piraeus. By the end of the classification, however, ‘we’ is distanced to ‘the many’ (358a4), as Socrates insists -- against the vernacular ‘we’ -- that justice is in the second class, of the things that are good in themselves and in the things that come from them, contrary to the ‘many’s’ view that justice is merely instrumental. So the vernacular ‘we’ records general attitudes and beliefs, in contrast with the more heavily theorized views the many offer about justice and its nature and in contrast, too, with the moments where ‘we’ may disagree. And this vernacular ‘we’ can reach across cultural divides: we may find ourselves endorsing what Glaucon suggests. Or, contrariwise, this ‘we’ may underline the possibility of distance between 

we the readers (we the recipients, of course, of Socrates first-person narrative) and some vaguer cultural ‘we’, whether specific to some time or more generically just ‘the human condition’. So, alerted by Socrates’ distancing himself from the vernacular we, this ‘we’ here may ask whether we find things good in the ways classified by Glaucon – ‘we’ gets our participation right away, whether or not it receives our endorsement. And it also, perhaps, gets us to ask what makes us a ‘we’ at all: what counts as our getting involved?

In the Republic, however, there is another ‘we’, when the speakers of the dialogue imagine themselves to be not merely founding the ideal state, Kallipolis, in words, but actually inhabiting it. This has been noticed before, of course - but perhaps not the provocation it offers. I shall call this marked Republic phenomenon the Kallipolis ‘we’. Consider:

’So should there be legislation for festivals, in which we shall bring together the brides and grooms, with feasts and songs composed by our poets proper for the weddings that are taking place? We shall leave the number of the marriages up to the rulers, so that they can best keep steady the number of men, thinking about the depredations of war and disease and suchlike, so that as far as possible our city does not grow or shrink.’

Οὐκοῦν δὴ ἐστὶν τινς νομοθετηθέντα ἐν αἷς συνάξομεν τάς τε νύμφας καὶ τοὺς νυμφίους καὶ θυσίας, καὶ ὑμνοὶ ποιητέοι τοῖς ἡμετέροις ποιηταῖς πρέποντες τοῖς γιγνομένοις γάμοις; τὸ δὲ πλήθος τῶν γάμων ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀρχουσι ποιήσομεν, ἵν’ ὑς μάλιστα διασώζωσι τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀριθμοῦ τῶν ἀνδρῶν, πρὸς πολέμους τε καὶ νόσους καὶ πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀποσκοποῦντες, καὶ μήτη μεγάλη ἡμῖν ἢ πόλις κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν μήτε σμικρά γίγνηται. (459e6-460a6)

Or:
‘...And we shall need more servants. Or don’t you think we shall need tutors, wet-nurses, nannies, hairdressers and barbers, and patissiers and cooks? And we shall need pig-keepers as well. We didn’t have those in our previous city, since there was no need, but in this one we shall need this too. And we shall need lots of other livestock, in case someone might want to eat them, don’t you think?’ ‘Definitely.’ ‘And we shall need doctors, much more than before, since we are living like this?’ ‘Very much so.’ ‘And our territory, sufficient then to support the previous people, will become small, instead of sufficient. Wouldn’t we say that?’ ‘That is so.’ ‘So we must annex some of our neighbours’ land, if we are going to have enough for pasture and crops; and they of ours, too, if they too give themselves up to the possession of unlimited wealth, going beyond the boundaries of need?’ ‘Absolutely necessary, Socrates.’ ‘So after that, shall we go to war, Glaucon? Or what?’

The tricky feature of these first person plurals is that they wander: their reference may be unclear or, more radically it may shift between one ‘we’ and another, without explicit signal, in the same context. I shall suggest that the shiftiness between these different uses of ‘we’ – this wandering ‘we’ – does some work in the economy of the dialogue. In particular, there are places – many of them at points of controversial legislation -- where the ‘we’ ostentatiously wanders, and in those places it marks a point that matters. I shall talk about three, in the following order:

- the discussion of poetry and mimēsis in Book 3;
- the cave, 514 ff.;
- the discussion of koina ta philôn at 458-69.

Each of these passages is famously vexed. I say they are deliberately made more vexatious by the wandering ‘we’. And I say that this is designed to focus on the first person pronoun, especially puzzling in its reflexive form.
Of course, that this feature of the everyday grammar of the Republic, the first person plural, might do some philosophical work should hardly surprise us. After all, the Republic is about justice, the virtue of the relations between groups which identify as such, which describe themselves as ‘we’ in speech. The Republic asks how we might understand the notion of community: how it may be held together and how communities may be distinct -- both when we think of the economy of states, and when we think of the structure of souls (or persons). But the first personal nature of the wandering ‘we’ allows the reader to reflect on both her membership of such communities, real or imagined, and on her being outside them or inside; this reflection, I shall suggest, is a central feature of the Republic account of the development of our sense of self and community, and with it, of virtue. And it works, I shall suggest further, by focusing on three aspects of ‘we’ – notably in these three contexts:

- the role of the subjects of these first-personal verbs (in the discussion of mimēsis);
- the perspective of the first person (in the cave);
- the membership of the first-personal group (in the discussion of koina ta philôn).

These aspects of ‘we’, in turn, allow us to think about both the epistemic and the moral content of virtue: since in all three contexts the discussion turns on just how virtue – considered from both its epistemic and its moral point of view – is to be developed and maintained.

2. Poetry and mimēsis

By book 3, Socrates, Glaucan and Adeimantus are already well advanced with Kallipolis, creating the city in words, but founded on ‘our’ need (conversational and vernacular ‘we’ closely juxtaposed, 369c9). At 369b8 the vernacular ‘we’ describes the human condition (we are none of us self-sufficient); but it starts to shift to what ‘we’ will need in the city (371a13), or what ‘we’ shall feed ‘our’ early citizens (372c8). At first, Socrates asks at arm's length about what is needed for a city that transcends the pigsty. But then the first person reappears, to describe what ‘we’ need for such a
city (373c). Is this about what we need for imagining this city in words? Perhaps – as 373c5 may suggest. But the passage may make us, rather, participants in the city, we who need workers and swineherds and so forth. By 373d1, the ‘we’ has wandered right into Kallipolis – ‘we’ shall need doctors if we live such a life, because of all the food – switches back to the conversation again right away, 373d5, and then firmly back into Kallipolis: ‘after that, shall we wage war?’, 373e3. This wandering structure runs throughout the following pages, engaging the interlocutors in the decisions made in Kallipolis itself (notably of selection of guardians, 374e, 375c). Does this matter? Is it anything more than the cleverness of the language Plato deploys here to make his readers feel somehow engaged on the project of imagining the city?

At 376d Adeimantus interrupts, and the conversation restarts, with a long discursus on education (376d). Socrates says:

Come then, as if telling a story and taking leisure at the same time, let us educate the men in speech.

‘Θι οὖν, ὃσπερ ὑπὸ μῦθω μυθολογούντες τε ἁμα καὶ σχολὴ ἄγοντες λόγῳ παιδεύωμεν τούς ἀνδρας.

(376d9-10)

He then describes how music and poetry will educate the souls of the citizens in Kallipolis, starting with the stories told to children when they are young.

‘There are two kinds of speech, one true and the other false?’ ‘I don’t understand, ‘ he said, what you are saying.’ ‘You don’t understand,’ I said, that we tell stories first of all to the young? These, I suppose, are pretty much all false, although there is some truth in them too. We use stories for the children before we provide gym.’ ‘That is so.’

(376e10-377a6)

Those stories are the first ways in which the souls of the young are moulded and take on a pattern (377a): and, notoriously, they are to be severely circumscribed. But notice where the wandering ‘we’ gets us here – and, if you like, the wandering ‘story’.... One story Socrates is telling us in the Republic. Another, he and his friends
are telling now to each other, about what should be said about yet other stories, the stories the city they imagine will tell its young. The wandering ‘we’ persists, amid some elaborate puns about poets and makers-of-cities-in-words:

Adeimantus, we are not poets, you and I at present, but the founders of a city...

Ὦ Ἀδείμαντε, οὐκ ἐσμὲν ποιηταὶ ἐγὼ τε καὶ σὺ ἐν τῷ παρόντι, ἀλλ’ ὀἰκισταὶ πόλεως;

(378e7-379a4)

But that is exactly when Socrates launches the notorious attack on the poets, under the general heading of some more about stories... stories that are, it seems, incomplete – about gods and heroes, but not humans yet (392d).

For humans we need to wait for the investigation of justice; and that begins with the discussion of mimēsis, which follows at 392c. The whole thing seems to be a hopeless tangle, betrayed by careless pronouns, dodgy terminology and a comprehensive blurring of the lines between the frame business (of constructing the city) and the framed object (the city as it is imagined); does that bring the whole project to immediate grief? Many have thought so. Is this indeed the record of an internecine struggle between poetry and philosophy, and Socrates’ infamous censorship of the poets? If it is, can we really think that philosophy is victorious, by such sleight of word?

At 392c Socrates declares that they have completed the discussion of stories, or (more generally) of what is said: logoi. Now they need to move on to talking about the connected question of ‘saying’, lexis. The contrast is repeated three times: they must consider ‘what is to be said and how it is to be said’ (392c8-9; 394b7-8; 398b7-8); they have done the ‘what’, now they attend to the ‘how’: and they do so in the account of mimēsis that follows.

I shall return to mimēsis shortly. But first consider the expression lexis, 'saying', so elaborately embedded here in cognate nouns and verbs:

‘So let that be the end to (our discussion of) what is said. The business of speaking, as I think, should be considered next, and we shall have completely
done the account of what should be said and how it is said.’ And Adeimantus said, ‘I do not understand what you are saying.’

Τά μὲν δὴ λόγων πέρι ἐχέτω τέλος· τὸ δὲ λέξεως, ὡς ἐγώ σφῶ, μετὰ τοῦτο σκεπέον, καὶ ἥμιν ἃ τε λεκτέον καὶ ὡς λεκτέον παντελῶς ἐσκέψεται. — Καὶ ὁ Ἀδείμαντος, Τούτο, ἥδ’ ὄς, οὐ μανθάνω ὅτι λέγεις. (392c7-10)

Lexis is the abstract noun from legein (‘speaking’ or ‘saying’). It is commonplace to take it as a term of art.² Lexis would thus describe some objective features of the stories discussed from the end of Book 2 — their style or their form, the features of this literary art work, out there, as it were, in the world. But even if this passage were the origin of lexis as a term of art for something like ‘style’,³ its role here is not to describe any features of what is said, but rather to tell us something about the activity of speaking itself. For here Plato focuses our attention on the saying subject, just as when he talks of doing or acting (praxis) he speaks of the doing or acting subject, rather than some outcome, or some property of what is in fact done (see 396c7). (This is a distinction with a difference. Think about painting a painting, playing some music, reciting a poem. In such cases both the saying and the doing are processes or activities, actualized and characterized in ways that are antecedent to, and even — especially in cases of aspiration or failure — independent of the epic finally completed, the watercolour at last hung, the last notes of the quintet fading in the auditorium.)

So, I suggest, it is as the grammatical subject that Socrates describes what the poet does, and how he goes about doing it. Thus:

[On Homer] ‘So it’s all narrative, both when he says the speeches on each occasion, and when he says the bits in between?’ ‘Yes, indeed.’ ‘But when he makes as speech as being someone else, shan’t we say that then he likens himself in his speaking as much as possible to the person whom he tells us is speaking?’ ‘Yes, we shall say that. So?’ ‘But making yourself like another person, either in voice or in appearance — isn’t that representing oneself [mimeisthai] as the person whom one seeks to resemble?’ ‘Well?’ ‘If there were nowhere where the poet hid himself, then all his work and his narrative would come to be without mimēsis. So that you don’t say again that you do not understand, I shall tell you how this comes about.’

² E.g. lexis as ‘style’ [Grube/Reeve], ‘form’ [Adam]: a feature of what is said.
³ Compare here Apology 17d: here the expression seems to refer to the practical business of talking in a court, rather than the style of what is said.
Oûkôûn diûghēsîs mên èstîn kai ètan tâs rîshêis ekástote légh kai ètan tâ metatêsiv ton rîshêw; -- Pîs gár ou; -- All' ètan gê tîna légh rîshîn wîs tîs állos wîn, âr' ou tôte omoiôun autôn fêsonem òti mûlîsta tîn autou lêxîn èkástw ón èn proeîpis òs èrosûnta; -- Phêsosunen- tî gár; -- Oûkôûn tô ne omoioun éauton állos ò kâta phwnîn ò kâta schêmà muuîsthai èstîn èkeînôn wîn tîs omoiôi; -- Tî mûn; -- E'n dê tî toioûntw, òwî eîkon, ouûtòs te kai òi álloi poAMPLhuai dia mûmhsèws tîn diûghshin pooiûnta. -- Pânû mên ouûn. -- Eî dê ge muûdâmou éautôn àpokrûpîotot ò poîntês, pása àn autûw ãneu mûmhsèws ò poîntês te kai diûghshis geûonûta eîp. Ïna dê mh eîphtê òti ouûk aû maûthâneis, òpws àn tóûto génoi ëgw frázsh. (393b6-d3)

Here Socrates distinguishes between cases of narrative, where ‘the poet himself is speaking’ (393a6), cases where ‘he makes a speech as being someone else’ and modifies his way of speaking (lexis) accordingly (393b9) and mixed cases, using both ways of speaking (394c4). This, the notorious introduction of mimêsis, is framed here in terms of how the poet represents himself — as himself, or, hiding himself, as another. The question of ‘how’ the poets speak, then, is here explained in terms of how — as who — the subject of the speaking appears.

But this analysis is neatly entangled with a reflection on just how this maker of words — Socrates or Plato himself — represents himself: the frame shocks us to attention (and we are set up for it by the remark about poets and makers at 378e, above). For this very story (lest we forget) is a narrative of the mixed sort, where the speaker

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4 I shall return below to what is involved in this ‘representation’. The expression òws tîs állos wîn does not distinguish clearly between cases where the speaker is in fact ‘as someone else’ and cases where the speaker is intending to be ‘as someone else’ (consider the grammar of the sentence: the verb has tîna rîshav as its object, so that the phrase òws tîs állos wîn may be de re, not de dicto). Likewise, in the sequel, we judge the speaker to be like the person who is said to be speaking; it is our judgement, made from the perspective of the audience, rather than the speaker’s explicit words, or even her explicit intention, that constitute that likeness. This is not, of course, to suggest that no such ‘representation’ is deliberate or explicit; but that it is not, at the outset, a condition on such ‘representation’ that the representer knows that representation is what she is doing. So when I say that ‘the poet represents himself as X’, I do not take that to imply that the poet has ‘I am representing myself as X’ in his mental content, although of course his activity may be both intentional and self-conscious. Conversely, however, I take the self-referential feature of this passage to be entirely deliberate on Plato’s part.

5 Gendered pronouns: I leave the masculine pronouns where Greek culture seems to demand it; but endeavour a balancing feminine elsewhere.
(Socrates) sometimes appears in plain view as the narrator, at other times as one of the other interlocutors, at other times as himself within the narrative. The allusion is located within a firmly vernacular culture (the discussion of opening of the *Iliad*, for example) as well as within the conversation itself (393c). But it is (thus) especially reflexive: it refers, that is to say, to itself. And this, in the context of the wandering ‘we’, is reflective too: it invites the reader to notice and to wonder: just who is ‘we’ here? After all, of the story that is the *Republic*, the conversational ‘we’ of 393c1 may be thought to include the reader, the only present recipient of this mixed narrative; and [the fictional] Socrates’ self-description (‘I shall speak in prose; for I am no poet’, 393d7) underlines the point. The effect of this complex set of allusions and cross-references makes us -- the readers of this text -- sit up and notice: the role of the frame is to provoke reflection, notably from our own point of view, outside the frame.

But notice, also, just what we reflect on: on the ways in which the subjects of verbs of saying, speaking, creating and even hearing, represent themselves. They may speak -- as we would say -- in their own voices -- or they may ventriloquise (speak with the voice of another): but in either case, the representation occurs in the subject. The personal pronoun, in that case, is fundamental. However one tackles the tricky question of the semantic field of the *mimēsis* group of words – is this imitation, copying, representation, mime, or something *sui generis*, untranslatably *mimēsis*? To this I shall return, leaving it untranslated for now – what is at issue here is the way in which someone takes on or resists the persona of another, where that is expressed in the first instance as the subject, ὡς τις ἄλλος ὤν.

This sort of *mimēsis* may be exemplified in particular ways of speaking, or ways of dressing, or more generally in action; but the central strategy is that of identifying with another, such that the actions follow from that. So: We imitate the tiger, and the actions follow, rather than imitating the actions of a tiger, so that the audience

6 Notice the negative at 393a7: here the poet ‘does not try’ to persuade the audience that anyone else is speaking; this does not imply that ‘he tries that not’, so does not imply that what he does is explicit to himself. It does not, of course, rule it out.

7 Thus at 393c8 the business of speech is accounted for more generally as ‘doing’.
thinks there may be a tiger in the vicinity (compare and contrast the exhortation of Henry V:

   In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man,  
   As modest stillness and humility;  
   But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
   Then imitate the action of the tiger:  
   Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,  
   Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage:  
   Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;  
   Let it pry through the portage of the head,  
   Like the brass cannon; let the brow o’erwhelm it  
   As fearfully as doth a galled rock  
   O’erhang and jutty his confounded base,  
   Swill’d with the wild and wasteful ocean.  
   Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide;  
   Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit  
   To his full height.

   (Shakespeare Henry V act 3.1)

One might think of this as the contrast between Method acting, perhaps, and the common-or-garden constructive kind. Or one might think of the very person who is represented, emerging from the portrayal. [I eschew thinking of Robert de Niro, in favour of this: Gérôme, Jean-Léon, Pygmalion and Galatea, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City] This contrast, I think, is central. In this discussion of mimêsis, as I shall say, the person comes first: to understand what is happening in the process, we need to think first of the person as whom the poet represents herself – even in those cases where the person, fully fledged, only emerges at the end – in this process, for example, of becoming Galatea.

But, as the trickiness of Plato’s frame makes clear, this kind of self-representation, self-representation as someone else, is complicated, or even paradoxical: and I think this is so whether or not we think that the act of so representing oneself is fully explicit, on the part of the subject.

To see some, at least, of the paradoxicality of self-representation consider an example from the visual, rather than the verbal, sphere: Rembrandt in somber mood, as the Apostle Paul (Rembrandt, Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul, 1661, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). This is a self-portrait as someone else. Or this –
Rembrandt hilarious as Zeuxis, (Rembrandt, Self-Portrait as Zeuxis Laughing, ca. 1663, oil on canvas, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne).

What does it mean to call these self-portraits? For sure, they are representations of the person who is doing the representing: so the ‘self’ is a reflexive pronoun for the painting subject. But of course, the portraits are not Rembrandt himself, but portraits of him, and, what is more, portraits of him as something else. There is, I think, a double alienation here from Rembrandt himself: self-portraits are more than a little bizarre. The same is true, I suggest, of the poets’ self-representation as Socrates describes them: and then, all the more so, of Plato’s own portrayal of Socrates, representing himself. But Plato’s portrayal emphasizes something we may miss in the Rembrandt (perhaps we should not): the sheer self-consciousness of Plato’s representation of Socrates, talking about his own role as the narrator of the dialogue itself.

3. ‘Our’ guardians

Well, so what? Are we to think this is just a muddle? Or is the tangle of self-reference doing some work here? Does it help us to understand either what is at stake in Plato’s Book 3 account of mimēsis or in his use of the first personal pronouns? Now, at a fracture point in the text, the Kallipolis ‘we’ returns (394d2, d5), and brings out the surprise of Socrates’ next question: he asks Adeimantus whether ‘our’ guardians should be mimētikoi, or not. What does he mean? The first stage of the discussion was about the content of civic poetry, so the next question is sometimes taken to be whether the guardians should listen to mimetic poetry. But the immediately preceding context suggests that the question is whether they should speak it. And what follows reinforces the point, once we understand that the focus of attention here is what it would be to occupy the role of another, or to occupy the role of ourselves, when we speak: what it would be to be the saying subject. Socrates offers two main concerns at this stage about this kind of self-representation. The first (394e-395c2) is about how the subject might fragment,

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8 In the case of Rembrandt, of course, there is a long story to be told about how these self-portraits are deliberately so.
9 See the debate between Burnyeat (1999) and Halliwell (2002), (2012) on this issue.
speaking like this as more than one person (and citing the ‘one person one job’
principle from book 2 369 ff.). The second (395c3-397c9) is about how those
engaging in this kind of self-representation may be habituated into the characters
they take on; he restricts the scope of mimêsis accordingly -- only self-representation
as good people is to be allowed – for this will start them on the way to being good
people themselves.

So the driving question is ‘who will you become?’ For the burden of Socrates’
objection to mimêsis here is to the effect on ‘our’ guardians of this kind of self-
representation as others. And his worry is not that they are pretending to be what
they are not; but rather that they will become the persons they are not, and should
not be. The subject, the person speaking, and the person whose identity the speaker
takes on are at the core of the explanation of mimêsis. So the taking on of identity,
as we might say, is explanatorily prior – the details (the nuances of being mimetic of
another) come after that. It is here that the central danger of mimêsis is thought to
lie – in the ways in which mimêsis directly engages with identity and with the unity of
the person.

It does not follow from this that any attempt at mimêsis is immediately successful,
nor that the taking on of another persona is chronologically prior to whatever
actions may be done under that description. Rather, here the verbs of saying and
doing, whose subjects are engaged in mimêsis, are treated as continuing processes
(lexis and praxis) which will produce individual actions or speech acts or utterances,
but which are not constituted by them. Think about the tigers again. If I imitate the
actions of a tiger, the actions may well come one-by-one, and my becoming a tiger
may only turn up later, if at all. If I imitate the tiger, on the other hand, my regular
actions will follow tigerwise, the symptoms of my new tigerish persona, or my

10 This is the explicit question that runs through the Protagoras.

11 Here consider Rubens, Peter Paul, The Battle of Anghiari, ca. 1603, chalk and ink
on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
aspirations towards it: for if I self-represent as a tiger, it is just as if I had the nature of a tiger -- and if the nature, then the characteristic features as well.  

Does this contrast make a difference? Well, natures can be inconvenient if not downright deadly -- Henry didn't want actual tigers at Agincourt... and remember Aesop's story of the scorpion and the frog. So why should the person be so important: the person who is the subject of mimêsis and the person who is its intentional object? In Kallipolis, do we need any more than people who do things that are in fact good, and thus (and only thus) represent themselves as good, consistently over time? What is the difference between having, as a ruler, someone who does good things and one who represents herself as a person who is good? And then what is the difference between having a ruler who represents herself as good and someone who just is good, if we can be sure that their actions come out the same? Indeed, do we need any more from our rulers than their actions, or their regular actions over time? Why should we care about who they are, or who they are seeking to become, or what persona they are occupying, just so long as they do what we need them to do? We might ask the same questions about ourselves: if we seek to become good by representing ourselves as good persons, is the object of the exercise that we become good persons? Or that we behave in the right sorts of way? Is Plato's insistence here on the priority of the subject misplaced, when it comes to thinking about virtue in the state, or, analogously, about the development of virtue in the individual?

Go back to the wandering 'we', here: why is this discussion of mimêsis so carefully embedded -- as I have suggested it to be -- in the wandering 'we'? It does, I think, at least two things. The first is to focus our critical attention on the role of the first

12 For tigers think of Rousseau, Henri, Surprised!, 1891, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.

13 A scorpion and a frog meet on the bank of a stream and the scorpion asks the frog to carry him across on its back. The frog asks, "How do I know you won't sting me?" The scorpion says, "Because if I do, I will die too." The frog is satisfied, and they set out, but in midstream, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog feels the onset of paralysis and starts to sink, knowing they both will drown, but has just enough time to gasp "Why?" Replies the scorpion: "Its my nature..." On Aesop, see Kurke (2011).
person pronoun, whether plural or singular: the slight sense of vertigo that we may have, as readers, when we notice the wandering ‘we’, may encourage us to notice just how far we ourselves may, or may not, identify either with the makers of the ideal state, or with those who are being described within it (the wandering ‘we’ itself encourages some kind of mimêsis on our own part). The second is to locate this discussion firmly within the dialogue’s central theme: the nature of education and how it works, the nature of moral development and how that works, both when we undergo it, and when we think about legislating for it in others. For this discussion of mimêsis that question is located in a worry about identity and how it may determine our character, our actions and our lives. So the guardians, in engaging in mimêsis, should identify with good people – the process may be automatic and unreflective, and it then works as habituation into virtue: we in representing ourselves as these people, we become habituated into their identity, and as a consequence into their attitudes, their characters and their lives. Aristotle, too, thinks that virtue begins with habituation.

Since virtue is of two kinds, one intellectual and the other ethical, intellectual virtue is mostly both produced and increased by teaching, and therefore needs both experience and time; but ethical virtue is the product of habit, and whence it gets its name, with a slight variation of form. And therefore it is clear that none of the ethical virtues comes in us by nature; for none of the things that are by nature can be habituated otherwise – for example, a stone, which by nature falls downwards, cannot be habituated to fall up, not even if someone tries to habituate it so by throwing it upwards ten thousand times, and likewise for fire moving downwards, or anything else that comes to be by nature – nothing that is one way by nature can become otherwise by habituation. The virtues therefore come to be in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature; by nature we are able to receive them, and they are completed by habit. Διττῆς δὴ τῆς ἁρετῆς οὐσῆς, τῆς μὲν διανοητικῆς τῆς δὲ ἡθικῆς, ή μὲν διανοητικὴ τὸ πλεῖον ἐκ διδασκαλίας ἔχει καὶ τὴν γένεσιν καὶ τὴν αὐξήσιν, διόπερ ἐμπειρίας δεῖται καὶ χρόνου, ή δ’ ἡθική ἡ ἐθος περιγίνεται, ὡς καὶ τούτων ἐσχῆκε μικρὸν παρεκκλίνων ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθους, μὲν ὡς δὲ δὴν ὅτι οὐδεμία τῶν ἡθικῶν ἁρετῶν φύσει ἤμην ἐγένεται· οὕθεν γὰρ τῶν φύσεων ὅτι οὐχὶ ἀλλως ἔθθεται, οἷον ὁ λίθος φύσει κάτω φερόμενος οὐκ ἢ ἐθισθεὶ ἢν φέρεσθαι, οὐδὲ ἢν μυριάκις αὐτῶν ἐθιζὴ τις ἢν ῥυμπτῶν, οὐδὲ τὸ πῦρ κάτω, οὐδὲ ἢμην οὐδὲν τῶν ἀλλως πεφυκότων ἀλλως ἢν ἐθισθεὶ, οὐτ’ ἄρα φύσει οὕτε παρὰ φύσιν ἐγένονται αἱ ἁρεται, ἀλλὰ πεφυκός μὲν ἢμην δέξασθαι αὐτάς, τελειουμένοις δὲ διὰ τοῦ ἔθους. (Aristotle EN 1103a14-26)
He supposes, however, that we should practise the actions of the virtuous person in order to become settled in the virtue itself. Plato – if I have him right – thinks that habituation takes a different form, as self-representation as the person whom I seek to become. In this, then, Plato and Aristotle may be at odds with each other. But both accounts of how virtue comes about face an obvious objection: habituation can be unconscious, automatic, never acknowledged at all – so that to think of this as the basis for virtue, and virtue as the basis for morality, is just misguided about morality: surely, to make moral progress, we must engage with the project itself, we must have some sense of what we are doing when we do it, if not at the outset, at least by the end? So where, in the process of habitual self-representation, does our own sense of who we are, or who we are becoming, develop? To have a sense of ‘we’ or of ‘I’, my being the subject of my verbs is not enough; and for being the virtuous subject of my verbs we might insist that my sense of myself is explicit, deliberate and responsible. There is an epistemic question here, too: if we are to become virtuous persons, is that something we can learn? If so, how? And what ‘we’?

4. The wandering ‘we’ again: and problems with the pronoun in the cave

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14 I am grateful to Margaret Hampson for discussion on this.

15 Does any of this help, one might here ask, with the old chestnut about just how we should translate mimêsis? There are, I suppose, three constraints on the translation. The first is that at this stage of the Republic we should be thinking about its subject, not its object: we are not here dealing with the metaphysical question about reproduced objects, prominent in book 10. The second is that the subject of mimeisthai may not so describe herself: the process itself may not be deliberate or self-conscious. The third is that, even so, the correct way of describing the process is in terms of the person as whom the subject is doing or saying what she does or says, rather than as individual actions which may be described, whether by the subject or by others, as being such as would be done by the person as whom… etc. So, for here at least: the translation ‘copy’ is militated against by the first two constraints; the translation ‘imitate’ by the second; and the third militates against ‘represent’. Halliwell (2002) rightly suggests that mimêsis is a ‘complex, variable concept’, and proposes that we should eschew translation in favour of marked transliteration. In part this is tricky to do, in order to explain the point of what Plato says; but on the whole I think he is right. I have sought to bring out the ways in which the question of identity and the notion of ‘identifying with’, anglice, may help us to understand the strangeness of Plato’s analysis here.
think now about the cave.¹⁶

‘Next compare our own natures to the following effect in respect of education and lack of education: See, human beings living in an underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, with chains on their legs and necks so that they stay still there, and can only see in front of them, unable, because of the chains, to turn their heads round. A fire is their light, burning above and behind them far away, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a road; and see, a low wall built along the road, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.’ ‘I see.’ ‘See, too, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall. Some of the men – as you might expect – are talking, others silent.’ ‘You are telling me a strange image, and the prisoners are strange.’ ‘Like ourselves,’ I replied; ‘for have such people, first of all, seen anything of themselves or each other, do you think, save the shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave in front of them?’ ‘How could they have, he said, if they have been compelled to hold their heads fixed throughout their lives?’ ‘And of the objects which are being carried they would likewise only see the shadows?’ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘So if they were able to have conversations with each other, don’t you think that they would think themselves to be naming these things passing by, the things they see, as being?’ ‘Very true.’ ‘What if the prison also had an echo in the facing wall? Then when one of the carriers said something, do you think the prison would think what sounded anything but the passing shadow?’ ‘Nothing but,’ he replied. ‘Altogether, then, I said, such men would think that the truth is nothing but the shadows of the artefacts.’ ‘That is necessary’.

Μετὰ ταύτα δὴ, ἔπει, ἀπείκασον τοιούτῳ πάθει τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν παιδείας τε πέρι καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας. ἱδὲ γὰρ ἀνθρώπους οἶον ἐν καταγείω σύκησι σπηλαίως, ἀναπεπταμένην πρὸς τὸ φῶς τῆς εἰσόδου ἔχοσθη μακρὰν παρὰ πάν τὸ σπήλαιον, ἐν ταύτῃ ἐκ παίδων ὡντας ἐν δεσμοῖς καὶ τὰ σκέλη καὶ τοὺς αὐχένας, ὡσεὶ μένειν τα αὐτού[...] εἰς τε τὸ πρόσθεν μὸνον ὅραν, κύκλῳ δὲ τὰς κεφαλὰς υπὸ τοῦ δεσμοῦ ἀδυνάτους περιάγειν· φῶς δὲ αὐτοὺς πυρὸς ἀνώθεν καὶ πάρρυθεν καὸμενον ὡπίσθεν αὐτῶν, μεταξὺ δὲ τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τῶν δεσμωτῶν ἐπάνω ὢδόν, παρ’ ἢν ἦν ἰδεί τειχίον παρωκοδομημένον, ὡσπερ τοῖς θαυματοποιοῖς πρὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρόκειται τὰ παραφράγματα, ὑπέρ ὄν τὰς θαυμάτα δεικνύασιν. -- Ὑπόθεσιν, ἐφη. -- Ὁρὰ τοινῦν παρὰ τοῦτο τὸ τειχίον φέροντας ἀνθρώπους σκεύη τε παντοδαπά ὑπερέχοντα τοῦ τειχίου καὶ ἀνδριάντας καὶ ἄλλα ζώα λιθινά τε καὶ ξύλινα καὶ παντοτικά εἰργαζόμενα, οἴον εἰκός τοὺς μὲν φθεγγομένους, τοὺς δὲ σιγώντας τῶν παραφερόντων. -- Ἀποτελεῖται, ἐφη, λέγεις εἰκόνα καὶ δεσμώτας ἀτόπους. -- ὁμοίως ἢμιν, ἢν δ’ ἐγὼ· τοὺς γὰρ τοιούτους πρῶτον μὲν ἑαυτῶν τε καὶ ἀλλήλων οἴει ἂν τι ἐγρακέναι ἄλλο πλὴν τὰς σκιὰς τὰς

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¹⁶ I return here to something I have discussed elsewhere, with apologies for relying on that discussion for the detail of my argument. McCabe (2015) ch.11.
Glauc and Socrates (here in the conversational ‘we’) construct the image of a cave, in which there are prisoners chained by the feet and the neck, facing a blank wall, on which are cast shadows of plaster objects carried before a fire behind them. Those shadows are the reality of the prisoners (‘the truth is nothing but the shadows’: it is on this basis that they are able to infer that it is the shadows which are producing the sounds); until one of them somehow escapes, turns around and journeys, slowly and painfully up and out of the cave, seeing on the way the fire, the plaster objects, and then the real things in the world outside, culminating in a view of the sun. Glauc remarks that both the image, and the prisoners themselves, are strange, ‘out of place’ 515a4. Socrates’ notorious response is that they are ‘like us’: like who? Like us? Like them? Which ‘us’ are we talking about here? (speak for yourself, Socrates?) At first, of course, Socrates seems to be using the vernacular ‘we’; but the plot thickens as the story goes on – for once the prisoner emerges from the cave, she is not allowed to sit around in the sunshine for long, but must go back inside, and make some kind of attempt to rule the state, however unpopular that may be among her erstwhile companions. But still, Socrates insists, it is ‘our task’ to compel her return:

‘So shall we be doing them an injustice, then, and making them live in a worse way, when it is possible for their life to be better?’ ‘You forget in your turn,’ I said, ‘that the law does not concern itself with this – how a single group in the city should live outstandingly well – but it contrives that this should happen in the city as a whole, harmonizing the citizens together with persuasion and compulsion, making them share with each other the benefit each can bring to the common weal. The law puts such people in the city, not so that each of them could go in whatever direction each might want, but so that it can use them for the binding together of the city.’ ‘True. I forgot.’ ‘So

17 Here reading the text argued for by Harte (2007).
consider,’ I said, ‘Glaucion, that we shall not do injustice to those who become philosophers amongst us, but we shall as just things of just people, compelling them in addition to take care for the others and guard them.’

‘Επειτ’, ἐφη, ἀδικήσομεν αὐτοὺς, καὶ ποιήσομεν χείρον ζῆν, δυνατὸν αὐτοῖς ὄν ἁμείνων; -- Ἐπελάθου, ὦ δ’ ἐγὼ, πάλιν, ὦ φίλε, ὅτι νόμῳ οὐ τούτο μέλει, ὅπως ἐν τι γένος ἐν πόλει διαφερόντως εὖ πράξει, ἀλλ’ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ πόλει τούτῳ μηχανᾶται ἐγγενέσθαι, συναρμόττων τοὺς πολίτας πειθοῦς καὶ ἀνάγκη, ποιῶν μεταδιδόναι ἀλλήλοις τῆς ψφελιᾶς ἢν ἂν ἐκαστοι τὸ κοινὸν δυνατοὶ ὤσε ὧφελεῖν καὶ αὐτοὺς ἐμποίησιν τοιοῦτος ἄνδρας ἐν τῇ πόλει, οὐχ ἢ ἄφι τρέπεσθαι ὅπη ἐκαστος βούλεται, ἀλλ’ ἢν καταρρίπται αὐτὸς αὐτοῖς ἐπὶ τὸν σύνδεσμον τῆς πόλεως. -- Ἀληθῆ, ἐφη· ἐπελαθόμην γάρ. -- Σκέψαι τοίνυς, εἶπον, ὦ Γλαύκων, ὅτι οὐδ’ ἀδικήσομεν τοὺς παρ’ ἡμῖν φιλοσόφους γιγνομένους, ἀλλὰ δίκαια πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἐρώμεν, προσαναγκάζοντες τῶν ἄλλων ἐπιμελεῖσθαίτε καὶ φυλάττειν. (519d8-520b1)

In doing so, ‘we’ will not do her any injustice, since the common good is what ‘we’ shall be preserving (520a1), and ‘we’ shall be asking just things of a just person. Is the common good ‘our’ common good, or theirs?

All of this has been chewed over endlessly, of course. But two oddities for now, in some answer to my earlier question about how we might start to learn, not just who we are, but who we may become. The first oddity is the wandering ‘we’: both its particular wander right here; and its frequent peregrinations at marked stages of the work as a whole. Here the puzzles about who ‘we’ are locate ‘us’ in some context of a common good, common requirements of justice: for they challenge just how ‘we’ should conceive of requirements of justice that may extend beyond the peculiar circumstances of the cave out into the conversational ‘we’ and beyond. The second – and on the back of worrying about ‘we’ we get to worry about the first person singular too, as I suggested for the case of mimēsis – is an oddity about how the prisoners view themselves: an oddity which is brought into relief, I propose, by the earlier description of mimēsis.

The prisoners are like us because of their strange view of themselves, only by means of the shadows cast on the wall opposite them as they sit chained and immobile. That view of themselves is accounted for, in the first place (and as the first move of the account to be given of the prisoners), in terms of what they see of themselves:
nothing but the shadows on the wall. For the chained prisoners, the shadows on the wall exhaust their experience [see 515c1-2]: so the shadow before them, on those terms, is, for each, ‘me’ (just as you may see yourself in a mirror and say ‘that’s me’). But how exactly are we, or they, to say, of the image or the shadow directly in front of them now: oh, that’s me? Of course it isn’t me: this is. When I look in the mirror, I have all sorts of other information to allow me to say that it is me, and to know the ways in which it is not. But if all there is to my experience is out there on the wall of the cave, that immediate sense of this here, outside the mirror or the shadow play, being me is not available to me. So when the prisoner, chained up before the shadow-play on the facing wall, uses that reflexive pronoun it is peculiarly alienated. ‘I’, said by the prisoner, should refer to the speaker of the pronoun; but instead, in the context of the speech of the prisoner, it refers to the shadow, which is other than her. How, then, might we think that this is comparable to us? Conversely, if we are like that, how on earth can we refer to ourselves, if ourselves are only projected out there onto some theoretical wall?

This kind of alienation is already familiar from the role of the pronoun in the discussion of mimêsis. For here the speakers speak ‘as others’ in the process of habituating themselves to be those others; and yet part of the problem in the puzzle of mimêsis is that the person imitated is exactly not the person who is doing the imitating. If, that is, I am right that the Book 3 discussion of lexis and mimêsis has a focus on the subject; and if we try to figure out what exactly the subject sees of themselves as they take on the identity of others, then the cave and mimêsis both have the same alienating character; so too, I suggest, does the oddly composed account of the mirror-carrier in Book 10.

‘But look at this craftsman, too, and consider what you would call him.’ ‘Which one?’ ‘The one who makes everything, everything which the individual craftsmen make.’ ‘Someone clever you describe, and a

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18 The claim that the shadows exhaust the experience of the prisoners underpins the inference the prisoners make from hearing the sounds of those carrying things behind the wall and to supposing that the shadows themselves speak.
19 Again, notice that this does not imply that she knows or notices the alienation; on the contrary, in the case of the chained prisoner the alienation is de re.
wonderful man.’ ‘I haven’t said that yet, but you will soon say what you say even more. For this same craftsman is not only able to make all furniture, but also he makes all the things that grow from the earth, all the animals and himself. And in addition to these things, he fashions the earth and the sky and the gods and everything in the heavens and in Hades beneath the earth.’ ‘You are talking, he said, of a quite wonderful sophist.’ ‘Are you not convinced?’ I said. ‘And tell me, do you think that there could not at all be such a craftsman, or do you think that there could be someone who makes everything—in one way, even if in some other way he does not? Or do you not perceive that you yourself would be able to make these things, in one way?’ ‘And what, he asked, would that way be?’ ‘Nothing difficult,’ I said, ‘but what is fashioned often and quickly—most quickly of all, I suppose, if you were to take a mirror and carry it around with you everywhere. For quickly you would make the sun and the things in the heavens, and quickly the earth, and yourself and all the other animals and furniture and plants and all the other things I mentioned right now.’ ‘Yes, indeed—I would make them appear, but not to be in truth.’

The wandering ‘we’ in the cave has the same vertiginous quality. The prisoners are like us because of their strange view of themselves. What is more, when Socrates says that the prisoners are like us, what he means is that this is an image for us—they are, within the constraints of the image, us. But of course, not so—we are not in fact tied up in a cave—it instead this is an imaginary scenario that Socrates and Glaucon have made up. And if we do come to think they are like us, then what we are doing is in part the identification which mimēsis renders so problematic. The
wandering ‘we’, what is more, has some of the alienating features of the reflexive pronouns that refer to the prisoners themselves. So the puzzle of what the prisoners see of themselves is echoed and repeated and held at arms’ length by the way the description of the cave is located in its context. And this, I suggest, is exactly what it is designed to do – to pose and insist upon the kinds of puzzles about identity – the puzzles of the first person, singular and plural, invited by the wandering ‘we’. Those puzzles, I suggest, are central to the ways in which this dialogue provokes philosophical reflection in its reader.  

For notice what happens in the return. As she comes back down into the cave, the prisoner sees that the shadows are shadows; and she sees that they are cast by ersatz objects. But she also sees – and pities – her own former self, imagining herself from behind sitting before the wall. So at this stage of the return, the most significant thing is not what she sees (not the objects in view) but her view of herself and her old perspective, and the way she evaluates her former self after enlightenment has so transformed her. For, recalling her previous existence, she delights in her present life, and pities her former one (516c). And then, coming back, she sits in her former seat, the way things once were. Among the other prisoners, she herself is alien; and sitting there she finds it hard to recognize the shadows – which include, of course, her own. So one of the things that happens to her, as she looks back and returns, is that she sees herself from afar; or sits in her own seat and feels alien.  

But most important for my present purposes -- for the returning prisoner, and for her alone, the reflexive pronoun does not go awry. That is because, returning she is able to take a long view, to think of herself as in her previous life, or, reinhabiting her previous life, to see herself from outside it. The long view is represented here as facing back down the cave, behind the fire, and taking in all the various contents of the lower reaches of the cave, but focused especially on the prisoner herself. Her

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20 Compare Magritte’s famous image, Magritte, René, Not to be Reproduced, 1937, oil on canvas, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.
previous life is itself alien just because she sees her former self from the outside, but that seeing attends to the viewing subject, herself returning. And somehow this view is the privileged one; there is no suggestion that the returning philosopher makes any mistake in identifying her former self, or her former life, any more than she gets it right about herself returning. On the contrary, what the accuracy of her reference ensures is that she is able to be properly reflective upon her life before – in contrast to her imprisoned self who had no perspective on her life at all, so much so that she falsely identifies herself with her shadow. But this perspective is itself what she has learned in the return: and this is something that is quite different from unthinking habituation. On the contrary it is thoughtful, intelligent and reflective: and that is borne out by the ways in which her pronoun now fits correctly in place.

And all of a sudden the wandering ‘we’ comes back into view. When we look at the cave, or imagine it, or think about it, and when in these cognitive attitudes we assess our own position within the story (the prisoners are ‘like us’), the question of our own identity itself comes into our reflective grasp. In this way – if only in this one – we share the cognitive advance of the philosopher. Suddenly, then, the frame, so far from being on the outside, comes into the focus of the dialogue itself: the role of the people in the frame and outside it is itself at issue within the dialogue that is framed.

5. **Common among friends: membership and the wandering ‘we’**

Return, for my third example, to the puzzling ways of the reflexive pronoun. For ordinary verbs, the subject and the object are non-identical: ‘I throw the thesaurus’. In cases of reflexivity, the object is also the subject: ‘I throw myself into checking the thesaurus’: where the oddity of throwing myself (Baron Munchausen) is mitigated by its metaphorical role. But in the special cases that Plato describes in the *Republic* (*mimêsis*, the cave and the mirror-carrier), the reflexive verb seems to be non-metaphorical and not to invite partition either; this puts (and, I say, is designed to put) real pressure on our understanding of the reflexive itself. In the singular case – illustrated by the prisoner in the cave and the mirror-carrier of Book 10 -- the subject of the verb is also the object, where the literalness of the ‘seeing’ engenders a paradox of reference (who counts as ‘me’ here?). That paradox of reference, in turn,
as I have been arguing, can be the cause of reflection; and itself a part of the process of learning: this is the more general role of the wandering ‘we’.

But things may be trickier, after all. A focus on the subject of the verbs of speech, of cognition and of value, I suggest, is a regular feature of these contexts in the Republic where the ‘we’ locutions are marked by Plato’s wandering ‘we’ (indeed, the wandering ‘we’ does its wandering especially in places where what ‘we’ say shifts between vernacular speech and thought and the conversational ‘we’ of the dramatic dialogue itself, and then makes the stranger move into the Kallipolis ‘we’). In the first place, the focus on the subject in the discussion of mimēsis is brought into our own reflective view by the wandering ‘we’. In the second place – notably in the cave – it draws attention to the perspective of the subject (notably here ‘we’ are not – or not yet – endorsing the view that we are in a cave tied up, nor that our view of things is thus restricted: that the prisoners are ‘like us’ is strange, placeless, not obvious). But in both of those contexts the effect of the wandering ‘we’ goes hand in hand with a series of puzzling uses of the first person singular. In those cases, I have suggested, the alienation of the first person singular is mirrored in the puzzling reference of the wandering ‘we’; and in those cases the puzzles of that alienation are there to provoke the reader to think (the puzzles, that is to say, have a philosophical purpose).

But there is a bit more to ‘we’ than that. The Republic speaks regularly about communities, about what is in common and about how the city, or the soul, is held together. Indeed, one of the most notorious places where the wandering ‘we’ turns up is in the provisions for the true community of Kallipolis (compare e.g. 373c, 459e, quoted above). And so it should be -- as I remarked earlier, there is a deep connection between the topic of the Republic – ‘justice’ and the reasons for its practice – and ‘us’, whether conversational or vernacular or Kallipolis. Justice is after all, even in some of the formulations offered by Thrasymachus, a collective enterprise, one which invites an account of the relations between individual ‘I’s, and the collective ‘we’. That collectiveness is of course a formal theme in the dialogue – from the community of Kallipolis itself to the discussions of how we should manage
‘what is in common among friends’ (including women and children), and it marks a crude version of the original egoism of Thrasymachus finessed into some kind of community of constraints. But then there is a further question itself mounted as a challenge in the dialogue: just what does it mean to be a member of some ‘we’?

What kind of group will count as one that deserves the first person plural?

Some cases are easy enough. We can watch a horse-race together. We can build a bridge together. We can feast and eat and even sleep together. But just how much is common between friends? Socrates notoriously suggests, wives and children: but his most extreme suggestion, I think, may come in his discussion of the role of pleasure in Kallipolis, and in the ways in which the experience of pleasure and pain are what keep the city together.

Is it, then, the community of pleasure and pain that ties the city together, when most of all the citizens enjoy or are pained by the same things as they occur or cease? ‘Absolutely,’ he said. ‘And the private enjoyment of such things pulls (the city) apart — when some are appalled and others overjoyed by the same events in the city or to the citizens?’ ‘So?’ ‘Doesn’t this happen because in the city these words are not used at the same time: ‘mine’, ‘not mine’, and likewise with ‘another’s’?’ ‘Certainly.’ So in the city where most people use ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ for the same things in the same respect, that city will be the best ordered? ‘Very much so’. ‘And is this one most like a single person? For example, when one of us hurts a finger, the whole community, extending through the body to the soul and making it a single system under the ruling part, it perceives, and all of it is in pain together at once as a whole, and that is why we say that the man has a pain in his finger? And the same account goes for anything else in the individual, when a part is in pain from hurt, or in pleasure from relief.’ ‘Yes, it is the same account,’ he said. ‘And in response to your question the best constituted city is organized closest to this.’ ‘So, I think, when one of the citizens suffers anything — whether good or bad — such a city will most of all say what suffers is of itself; and all of it will feel pleasure or pain accordingly.’

Οὐκοῦν ἡ μὲν ἡδονὴς τε καὶ λύπης κοινωνία συνδέεται, ὅταν ὁ διὰ ἀλλάζοντα πάντες οἱ πολίται τῶν αὐτῶν γιγνομένων τε καὶ ἀπολλυμένων παραπλησιώς χαιροῦσι καὶ λυπῶνται; -- Παντάπασι μὲν οὖν, ἐφε. -- Ἡ δὲ γε τῶν τοιούτων ἱδίως διαλύεται, ὅταν οἱ μὲν περιαλληγείς, οἱ δὲ περιχαρεῖς γίγνωσται ἐπὶ τοῖς αὐτοῖς παθήμασι τῆς πόλεως τε καὶ τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει; -- Τί δ’ οὖν; -- Ἀρ’ οὖν ἐκ τοῦ τοιοῦτο τοῦ τοιοῦτο γίγνεται, ὅταν μὴ ἀμα φθέγγωνται ἐν τῇ πόλει τὰ τοιάδε ρήματα, τὸ τὲ ἐμόν καὶ τὸ οὐκ ἐμόν; καὶ περὶ τοῦ ἀλλοτρίου κατὰ ταύτα: -- Κομιδὴ μὲν οὖν. -- Ἐν ἦτιν δὴ πόλει πλείστοι ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κατὰ ταύτα τοῦτο λέγουσι τὸ ἐμόν καὶ τὸ οὐκ ἐμόν, αὐτὴ ἡριστα διοικεῖται; -- Πολὺ γε. -- Καὶ ἦτις δὴ
The argument here is, I think, more peculiar, and more elaborate, than is commonly acknowledged. Socrates proposes that a commonality of pleasure and pain tie things together, where private differences pull things apart (fair enough, we might think: think about how much one might enjoy going to the opera with another enthusiast; or how much the experience can be ruined by going with someone who finds Verdi vulgar). We might think of this in terms of something like sympathy – where the fellow-feeling is joint, collective, together – but still divisible, person by person: we enjoy the same things, but we are not the same subject of enjoyment. But Socrates proposes to revise the pronominal ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ in Kallipolis, so that we all have the same reference for ‘mine’ and not mine’: things are common among friends. In changing the possessive for the objects of pleasure and pain, he then seeks to change how we think about what it is to enjoy things together. In so doing, he shifts the notion of the community away from the joint objects of our pleasure and pain, towards the joint subjects. When my finger feels pain, I feel pain – not by analogy, or by extension, but directly. Equally, when the whole community has objects of pain or pleasure that are, for each, ‘mine’, then the pain of one member of the community will be the pain of the whole. This gives Socrates a strong, and strange conclusion: that the community is so tight knit that when one part is hurt, the whole

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21 The language of perception at 462c10 ff. makes the same point: what it is to perceive is for the affection of the sense-organ to reach the soul (I defend a reading of Plato’s Republic account of perception as richly cognitive at McCabe (2016) and pleasure likewise in McCabe (2018)); likewise, what it is to feel pain is for the pain at the fingertip to be felt throughout. That Socrates feels the need to mount a complex argument here shows that he is moving beyond the loose idea of sympathy within a community to a non-metaphorical account of how the whole community feels the pain of one member.
feels pain, when there is pleasure somewhere, there is pleasure throughout. This position is a different one from the starting point that we should enjoy things together; now, in enjoying the same things, we are the same enjoyer. So the ‘we’ that wanders right into Kallipolis in fact feels together, in a fully subjective sense.

Conclusion
The wandering ‘we’, I have suggested, is a feature of the frame language of the Republic which calls attention to (at least) three passages where questions of identity are at issue in the argument. In the context of the discussion of justice, Plato’s interest here in ‘we’ is hardly surprising; but its vagaries serve to generate puzzles about the first person pronoun, both in the singular and the plural, which are a part of the dialogue’s overall argumentative strategy. In focusing on three aspects of how the first person pronoun works – to indicate the subject of the verb; to represent the perspective of that subject; and to consider how the subject of the verb may include others, or how ‘I’ may work as ‘we’ – the Republic raises a series of problems and questions about identity and subjecthood which are both grammatically intractable and metaphysically challenging. That these problems turn up in such an elaborate way suggests, I propose, that they are themselves a part of the philosophical strategy of the dialogue – one which uses all of the dimensions of the dialogue to make philosophy matter.

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Works cited