The Possibility of the Callipolis and the Political Significance of Plato’s Republic

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1 Introduction

Questions about political philosophy first arise in Plato’s Republic as if they were a mere means to answering a question about ethics. The question about ethics is, roughly, whether a person’s being just (or unjust) contributes to or detracts from their happiness. Famously, Socrates announces a strategy for answering this question that involves a consideration of the justice and injustice of cities. His stated reason, in the immediate context, is merely that we will be able to discern justice and injustice more easily in a city and thereby come to know whether just or unjust people are happier.

As the text unfolds, the role of political questions turns out to be more complicated and interesting than Socrates initially indicated. This is clearest in Book 5, which introduces the most radical political proposals and asks directly about their possibility and goodness. The title Republic (or Constitution) further emphasizes the importance of political questions. At a crucial structural juncture—the final words of Book IX—Socrates tells us something about a just person’s relationship to political activity. Glaucon says that a just person “won’t be willing to take part in politics” (592a5-6). Socrates disagrees, saying, “Yes, by the dog, he certainly will, at least in his own kind of city” (IX 592a7-8). Glaucon takes the point and replies, “I understand. You mean that he’ll be willing to take part in the politics of the city we were founding and describing, the

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1 This is not a perfectly adequate reformulation, since the question is also whether a perfectly just person would necessarily be happy and a perfectly unjust one unhappy.

2 It is often said that titles of ancient works do not have the same status as titles of modern works. They sometimes play the role of “mere tags,” rather than being parts of the authored text. Even if that is sometimes so, it does not always seem to be so. Consider Plato’s Philebus, in which the character Philebus plays almost no role. It seems exceedingly unlikely that anyone but the original author gave the work this title. The situation with the Republic is similar, albeit not quite so clear. It would seem surprising if someone other than the author had given that title to this work. Moreover, as Stephen Menn has argued, Plato’s Republic is in a tradition of writing about constitutions, politeiai, and this further supports the authenticity of the title.

3 Ὁκ ἄρα, ἔφη, τά γε πολιτικά ἐθελήσει πράττειν, ἐάνπερ τούτου κήδηται. Translations throughout are based on Reeve in Cooper, with (sometimes very liberal) modifications. I have also made frequent use of Shorey, Griffiths, and Bloom as well as Rowe’s translation of Republic V.

4 Νὴ τὸν κύνα, ἢν δ’ ἐγὼ, ἐν γε τῇ ἑαυτοῦ πόλει καὶ μάλα.
one located in speeches, since it isn’t, I think, anywhere on earth” (IX 592a9-10). While the precise meaning of this passage may not be clear, it does show that Socrates has been addressing political questions as well as purely ethical ones.

This has led to controversy about the status of political philosophy in the Republic. Why does Plato make Socrates describe an ideal city? Is the description merely theoretical (whatever that means)? Or is Plato offering a political theory in order to address practical political questions?

I will argue that Socrates’ description of an ideal city is intended be used as a picture that guides political judgment and action. It is because the picture of the ideal is to play this role that Socrates is concerned about the question of its possibility. Plato presents the question of possibility in a much more nuanced and complicated way than has been appreciated. The question provides an excellent instance of the way in which Plato interweaves human drama and philosophical exposition. Both sides of the story are richly detailed and neither can be understood without the other.

The upshot is neither of two political messages that readers have most often found in the Republic. These messages are, on the one hand, the instruction to establish, here and now, the policies and practices of the ideal city described in the Republic, or, on the other hand, the recommendation to withdraw from political activity and to philosophize instead. Neither is the practical political message of the Republic. The practical political message of the Republic is that we should engage in philosophy as a form of political activity. The project of my interpretation is to explain what that means—what conceptions of politics and of philosophy it invokes and what presuppositions about cities and about human psychology justify it.

My argument, in outline, is this. Plato signals that the question of the possibility of the best city is of great importance. Yet Plato makes Socrates say different things about the possibility of two different political prescriptions: the community of women and children and the philosopher-king. Two different criteria for possibility are used. One is possibility for us in our actual situation. The other is possibility for human nature. Plato never has Socrates make an explicit statement about the possibility of the community of women and children. But there are signs in the text that the community of women and children is not possible for us in our actual situation. And we should infer from Socrates’ silence that Plato is agnostic about whether the community of women and children is possible for human nature.

Socrates does, however, repeatedly and clearly insist on the possibility of the philosopher-king for us in our actual situation. At the same time, he thinks that it is vanishingly unlikely that the kingship of philosophy will come about. Why then does Plato make such a fuss over the question of possibility? Well, he tells us that the philosopher-king would be an approximation of the community of women and children. This is deeply perplexing and almost entirely overlooked. Yet no interpretation of the political philosophy of the Republic can ignore this claim. My answer will be that Plato’s discussion of the philosopher-king is supposed (1) to establish that the description of the ideal city can be used as a picture that guides judgment and action and (2) to show how to use that picture. Engaging in philosophy as a political activity is, for Plato,
philosophizing in the light of a picture of the ideal city. The relevant aspects of that picture include both philosophy itself and also family relations.

2 The Interruption

As a first step, I would like to highlight the strangeness of the way in which Socrates raises the question of the possibility of the best city. Often, readers have not appreciated just how strangely Socrates behaves. Once we see how Plato brings up the question, we see both that no interpreter can ignore it but also that its precise relevance is far from clear.

The question of possibility first comes up at the beginning of Book V, when the listeners interrupt and change the direction of the conversation for the first time since Book II. Plato stages the interruption in a complex and significant way, with several stages.

The first stage is the initial interruption. Socrates’ listeners ask for further details about one of his earlier prescriptions. Plato might have made Socrates give those details on his own. Instead, Plato chooses to stage an interruption. Moreover, Plato’s choice of the person to interrupt is significant: Polemarchus (V 449b1). If Glaucon or Adeimantus had interrupted, this would have created a much weaker break in the text, since Glaucon and Adeimantus have been Socrates’ exclusive interlocutors since Book II. Since then, no one has spoken except them and Socrates. Plato’s choice of Polemarchus shows the reader that Polemarchus is still there and indeed listening carefully and thinking enough about the conversation to raise a major question. And of course the other major speaker from Book I, Thrasymachus, is also still present, very much interested in the conversation, and also wants to hear the elucidation that Polemarchus asked for (V 450a5-6).

Plato describes the interruption with physical details:

Polemarchus, who was sitting a little further away than Adeimantus⁷, extended his hand and took hold of the latter’s cloak by the shoulder from above. He drew Adeimantus towards him, while he himself leaned forward and said something to him. (449b1-5)⁸

There have been no comparable descriptions of the interlocutors’ bodily behavior since Book I. Also, this is not the first time that someone has taken hold of someone’s shoulder from behind. In the opening lines, Polemarchus sends his slave to tell Socrates and Glaucon to wait for him and the slave takes hold of Socrates’ cloak from behind (I 327b4-5). This echo of the opening further emphasizes that the interruption at the beginning of Book V has structural significance.

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⁶ The last time that an interlocutor shifted the direction of the conversation was when Glaucon complained that Socrates has described a city fit for pigs (II 372d).
⁷ The fact that Polemarchus is sitting behind Adeimantus, i.e., farther away from Socrates, presumably reflects the fact that Adeimantus has been active participant whereas Polemarchus has not. And their different degrees of distance from Socrates correlate with their different status.
⁸ ὁ δὲ Πολέμαρχος—σμικρὸν γὰρ ἀπωτέρω τοῦ Ἀδειμάντου καθήστο—ἔκτεινας τὴν χεῖρα καὶ λαβόμενος τοῦ ἰματίου ἀνώθεν αὐτοῦ παρὰ τὸν ώμον, ἐκεῖνόν τε προσηγάγετο καὶ προτείνας ἑαυτὸν ἐλεγεν ἂτα προσκεκυφώς.
The drama of the interruption is heightened by Polemarchus’ whispering to Adeimantus, rather than addressing the group directly and audibly. One reason, presumably, why he whispers is that he is undecided whether to raise his question at all. Socrates does not hear his question: “We heard nothing of what he said except the words, ‘Shall we let it go or what?’” (449b6). It is Adeimantus who decides to put the question to Socrates. The question turns out to be a demand that Socrates explain what he meant by saying “that, as regards women and children, anyone could see that the possessions of friends should be held in common” (449c4-5). Adeimantus and Polemarchus are accurately referring to a much earlier remark of Socrates’ (423e4-424a2) and demanding that Socrates go back and explain what he was saying. This way of introducing the question not only draws attention to it but also specifically draws attention to the question of whether this question needs to be raised.

On the one hand, there seems to be an implicit suggestion that Socrates and his interlocutors might well have proceeded without addressing the question of women and children. This is implicit in the fact that Polemarchus raises a question about whether to ask his question. And it is implicit in Socrates’ behavior, at two junctures. The first is the earlier passage, where Socrates made the statement that he is now supposed to elucidate. This passage occurred many pages earlier and the conversation has moved on to other topics since then. More than that: Plato has made Socrates emphatically and explicitly conclude the first major stretch of argument without reference to the proposals in Book V: the announcement that the city is finished and the transition to the question of justice (427c6-d7); the analysis of the soul (434d1-441c6), the definitions of the four virtues (427e7-434c11 & 441c8-444a6), and the conclusion that justice is a kind of health (444c6-444e4). This conclusion already fulfills a major part of Glacon’s and Adeimantus’s request to praise justice for its own sake. Socrates makes clear that he is ready to go on to the next stage, comparing justice and injustice (444e6 ff.). Socrates does not respond to Polemarchus’ interruption by saying, “It was a terrible mistake to omit those details,” but rather by saying that he would have been content to leave out those details and that Polemarchus and the others have no idea what vast complications they getting into (450a7-b2). Thus Plato

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9 One reason to think that Polemarchus is whispering is the word προσκεκυφώς at 449b5, from προσκύπτω, an uncommon word which strictly means only “bend over,” but is sometimes using for leaning close to someone and whispering, especially with a further phrase meaning “at someone’s ear” (πρὸς τὸ οὖς; e.g., Euthydemus 275e3-4). Socrates, narrating, says that they were able to understand nothing except Polemarchus’s concluding question and describes Adeimantus as “now speaking aloud” (μέγα νῦν λέγων; 449b7; my emphasis).

10 ῥῶν ἀλλο μὲν οὐδὲν κατηκούσαμεν, τόδε δὲ· Αφήσομεν οὖν, ἔφη, ἢ τί δράσομεν; For the antecedent of ῥῶν, see the Greek for the last quotation.

11 It has sometimes been thought that they are asking for a justification, not a clarification and elaboration. But this is clearly not correct. First, it is entirely reasonable to ask for an explanation of what was meant by the proposal, which was completely unclear. Second, Socrates, not his interlocutors, raises the question of justification, when he says that that what they are asking will raise questions about whether his proposals are good.

12 It does not, however, fulfill their request completely. They asked Socrates to show that the just person is happier than the unjust person. This is the comparative claim that Socrates says remains to be investigated (444e6-445a4). It is conceivable that justice is health of the soul, as explained in Republic IV, but nevertheless the unjust person is better off. This would be surprising, as Glacon say (445a5-b4), but it does in principle require a justification, which Socrates gives in Republic VIII and IX.
wrote these pages so as to emphasize that the answer to Glaucon and Adeimantus could stand without the excursus of Books V through VII.

On the other hand, it is Plato who makes Polemarchus interrupt and it is Plato who makes Socrates acquiesce to his interlocutors’ demand. Furthermore, while Socrates shows some reluctance to address the topic, he does not refuse—or does he say that Polemarchus and the others are wrong to lay so much weight on it. He seems implicitly to agree with them that the specifics of the arrangements about women and children are crucially important for the flourishing of the best city. And the subsequent course of Book V will bear this out.

The upshot is this: Plato presents the argument that he puts in Socrates’ mouth in such a way that (1) the answer to Glaucon and Adeimantus would have been complete without the proposals of Books V through VII but (2) if you thought that the description of the best city in Books II through IV gave you a full explanation of the political arrangements that make the city good, you would be wrong. Plato wants to give us a full explanation of the political arrangements that make the city good, but also wants to make clear that this would not have been necessary to answer Glaucon and Adeimantus.

3 The Question of Possibility: Introduction

Socrates is the one who raises the question of the goodness and possibility of the Book V prescriptions. This fact is important for the interpretation the political significance of the Republic as a whole. By placing these words in Socrates’ mouth, Plato shows us that the question of possibility matters by Socrates’ lights. Later, we will consider passages that might tempt a reasonable reader to deny that the possibility of the best city matters. It will be important then to bear in mind that Socrates himself raises this question, as if it were one that matters.

He does so when he presents reasons for being reluctant to address the topic at all. His remark is simply that it will be a great deal of work (450a7-b3). What does this work consist in? Not in the simple statement of the proposals themselves. Rather, the work will consist in the justification of the possibility and goodness of the proposals. In Socrates’ words:

It isn’t easy to go through it, my good man, I said. For it has many unbelievable [aspects], even more than what we went through before. For one might not believe that the things said are possible, and someone will also not believe that, even if they did come about to a maximum degree, they would be best.13 (450c6-9)

The entirety of Books V through VII are devoted to the project specified here: prescribing certain political arrangements and arguing for their possibility and goodness. The end of this interruption of the main line of discussion is clearly marked at the beginning of Book VIII, when Socrates says

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13 Οὐ ρᾴδιον, ὦ εὔδαιμον, ἢν δ᾽ ἐγώ, διελθεῖν· πολλὰς γὰρ ἀπιστίας ἔχει ἔτι μᾶλλον τῶν ἐμπροσθεν ὅν δυῆλθομεν. καὶ γὰρ ὡς δυνατά λέγεται, ἀπιστοῖτ᾿ ἂν, καὶ εἰ ὅτι μᾶλιστα γένοιτο, ὡς ἀριστ´ ἂν εἴη ταῦτα, καὶ ταύτῃ ἀπιστήσεται. The translation here is my own. I have avoided using the word “possible” in translation ὅτι μᾶλιστα. Also, I think that the word “doubt” is too weak as a translation of ἀπιστεῖν in this passage. Note the contrast between the optative ἀπιστοῖτ´ ἂν and the indicative ἀπιστήσεται.
that they have “finished this” (ἀπετελέσαμεν) and asks Glaucon to recall at what point they “digressed” (ἐξετραπόμεθα) (543c4-6).

Plato is entirely serious about how provocative his proposals in Book V are. He repeatedly characterizes them as laughable or even liable to provoke a challenge to fight.14 This shows itself in the different character of the text. When Socrates is founding the city in Books II through IV, he gives very little in the way of argument. He simply presents proposals, which almost invariably meet with his interlocutors’ approval. The exceptions prove the rule. For instance, when Glaucon objects to the “city of pigs” (II 372d-373c), Socrates accepts the objection and modifies the city, rather than defending and justifying it. When Adeimantus objects that the guardians are not being made happy (IV 419a1-420a2), Socrates replies to the objection. This requires about a page (IV 420a3-421c5). In short, before Book V, in the founding of the city, Socrates had relied on Glauccon’s and Adeimantus’s antecedent political views.15 When he turns in Book IV to analyzing the virtues of the city, the structure of the soul, and the virtues of the individual human being, this changes. In that context, Socrates presents sophisticated arguments from carefully articulated first principles. But these arguments do not address questions about how cities should be structured or about who should rule. Rather, these arguments presuppose that the political structures previously described were in fact good.

The political proposals of Book V have a very different standing. They are liable to provoke great resistance. This is one reason why Socrates had avoided bringing them up. And it is also a reason why Plato wants to highlight the fact that the argument for understanding justice as health of the soul is independent of them. Furthermore, it is a reason why Socrates undertakes to justify them in a way that he had not undertaken to justify the prescriptions of Books II through IV.

Book V thus also displays a concern with politics for its own sake, unlike the previous books. Socrates’ thoughts about politics, in Books II through IV, however interesting and persuasive, can all be seen as mere means to the end of arguing for an ethical claim about justice. This is no

14 E.g., 451a1, 452a7-e2, 452e4-5, φιλοπαίσμων, 457a6-b5, 473c6-9.
15 How is this an effective and legitimate argumentative strategy? Well, Socrates is arguing for a claim about individual human happiness by relying on his interlocutors’ antecedent views about politics. When I say “antecedent views,” I do not mean to suggest that, if you had asked Glaucon and Adeimantus what they think about politics, they would have said more or less the things that Socrates gets them to assent to. I just mean that, in the dialogue, they display a disposition to assent to what Socrates invites them to assent to, rather than skepticism. The dialogue presents this as if it were effective and legitimate. Is that credible? I think it is. One might have objected that Socrates cannot infer anything about the individual human being from his claims about cities. But Socrates himself takes care to develop this part of the argument with precision, in Book IV. One might, alternatively, object that the claims about political structure tacitly presuppose the very claims about human virtue that are argued for in Book IV. It is not clear to me whether or not this is so but I doubt it. The strongest reason I see to think that it is so is the thought that Socrates and his interlocutors, in determining who is qualified to rule, are implicitly relying on assumptions about what virtue is. (The simplest version would be the assumption to be virtuous is one and the same as being qualified to rule.) Even if there is a connection between being virtuous and being qualified to rule, I doubt that Socrates implicitly relies on it. (But I do think that this merits closer consideration, along with Socrates’ argumentative / rhetorical strategy in the city-founding in Books II through IV overall.) Even if Socrates were relying on assumptions about virtue, then the text would, at worst, yield an argument from certain antecedent views about virtue to the affirmation of some not antecedently-held views about virtue (most especially the view of justice as health of the soul). I see no reason think that this would be ineffective or illegitimate.
longer true in Book V. Of course, Books V through VII shed very important light on individual virtue (especially what wisdom is). I am not denying this. Rather, I am insisting that we take seriously the clear signals, both in the dramatic presentation and in Socrates’ statements, that Book V is not part of the main line of argument but rather deals with questions about ideal political arrangements. Since Plato here shows interest in politics for its own sake, we should ask ourselves what he wants to say about it. I think we cannot answer this question unless we understand what he wants to say about the possibility of the best city. Plato comes close to telling us precisely this, by making Socrates articulate his concern about the possibility of the best city at this crucial structural juncture.

The passage just quoted (450c6-9) gives the strong impression that Socrates will argue for the possibility and for the goodness of his proposals. But the dialogue as Plato actually wrote it is much more complicated than that. These complications are essential to a clear account of the possibility of the best city and thus to Plato’s political philosophy in the Republic. I will begin by sketching the complications in the overall structure.

Socrates makes three proposals in Book V. They are:

1. Equality in the education of men and women
2. The community of women and children
3. The philosopher-king

After proposing equality in the education of men and women (451d4-452a5), Socrates proceeds precisely as we would have expected. Following the structure implicit in the quotation from 450c6-9, he first raises argues for the possibility of the proposal (452e3): “However, mustn’t we first agree about these things, whether they are possible [δυνατὰ] or not?” Concluding this argument, Socrates says:

Socrates: Now, weren’t we inquiring whether our proposals were both possible and best?
Glaucon: Yes, we were.
And haven’t we now agreed that they’re possible?
Yes.
Then mustn’t we next reach agreement about whether or not they’re best?
Clearly. (456c4-10)

This clearly marks the conclusion of the argument about possibility and the transition to the argument about goodness. The argument for goodness is brief, but also clearly marked (456c12-457a5). It concludes with Socrates saying, “Then the custom we’ve established isn’t only possible but is also best for a city?” and Glaucon replying simply, “Yes.”

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16 The structure is implicit in the words “even if,” which suggest that the question of possibility is to be decided first.
17 Οὐκοῦν ἢ ἐπίσκεψις ἡμῖν ἢν εἰ δυνατά γε καὶ βέλτιστα λέγοιμεν; — Ἡν γάρ. — Καὶ δι οἱ μὲν δὴ δυνατά, διωμο- λόγηται; — Ναι. —Ότι δὲ δὴ βέλτιστα, τό μετά τούτο δεῖ διαμολογηθῆναι; — Δήλον.
18 Οὐ μόνον ἀρα δυνατόν ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄριστον πόλει νόμιμον ἐτίθεμεν.
This is precisely the structure that we expect. As Socrates proceeds, it does not occur again.

First, Socrates describes the next measure, the community of women and children (457c10-d3). There follows a noteworthy exchange with Glaucon, who says that there is a lot of incredulity (ἀπιστίαν) both concerning whether this is possible and whether it’s beneficial19 (457d4-5). Socrates says he doesn’t think that there would be much controversy about whether it is the greatest good (i.e., not merely beneficial), assuming it is possible, but that there is enormous controversy about whether it’s possible.20 Glaucon firmly disagrees, saying that both matters are equally contentious: “Both things might well be disputed about” (457e1).

What are we to make of this unusual exchange? It is unusual in that Socrates clearly expresses a mere opinion (οἶμαι, twice), his interlocutor clearly and directly disagrees, and this disagreement is simply allowed to stand. The exchange presses on us the question whether Glaucon or Socrates is right. Are the questions of possibility and of goodness equally controversial or not?21

I suggest that Plato wants us to think that, from the perspective of this moment in the discussion, Glaucon is right that both the possibility and the goodness of Socrates’ proposal are liable to be questioned. This seems to be confirmed by the next lines, in which Socrates says (disingenuously?) that he had hoped to omit any arguments for the goodness of the community of women and children but now accepts that he will have to give such an argument (457e2-4).

However, in the end, Socrates is correct: Socrates is about to give an argument for the goodness of the community of women and children and once he has done so, you have reasons to believe that the community of women and children would be good. But, as we will see, Socrates does not have an argument for the possibility of the community of women and children. Thus the question of whether it is good does get resolved in the dialogue, but not the question of whether it is possible. But this is to anticipate claims for which I have not yet argued. For the moment, the important thing is simply that Socrates and Glaucon have the two questions—possibility and goodness—firmly in mind and that Plato has raised doubt about whether these two questions are, in the end, on a par.

Yet again, Plato inserts dramatic details that draw our attention to the problematic status of the very question about the possibility of the community of women and children. For Plato makes Socrates proceed differently than we expect and draws attention to this. We would have expected Socrates to address first the possibility and then the goodness of the community of women and children. (This expectation is based on Socrates’ initial presentation of the questions

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19 The word “beneficial [ὦφέλιμος]” obviously picks up on the question whether this arrangement is best. Glaucon means something by switching from one term to the other: the question is not only whether this is best, but whether it is even beneficial.
20 See 457d6-9: Ὡκ οἶμαι, ἢν δ’ ἐγώ, περὶ γε τοῦ ὦφελίμου ἀμφισβητεῖσθαι ἂν, ἓς οὐ μέγιστον ἄγαθὸν κοινὰς μὲν τὰς γυναῖκας εἶναι, κοινοὺς δὲ τοὺς παῖδας, εἴπερ οἶδον τε· ἀλλ’ οἶμαι περίτοι ἐι δυνατὸν ἢ μὴ πλείστην ἂν ἀμφισβήτησιν γενέσθαι. One might have wondered whether οἶδον τε is truly synonymous with δυνατὸν, which was up to now the word for “possible,” but the return to δυνατὸν in the second part of the sentence shows that it is.
21 The question of what is “controversial” here does not concern what most people think (or would think) but rather what there are good reasons for. Socrates is saying that there are good reasons to doubt the possibility of the community of women and children, but not its goodness, whereas Glaucon is saying that there are good reasons to doubt both.
in 450c6-9 and on the way he proceeded in connection with equal education for women.) In a lengthy speech—which I will analyze more carefully below—Socrates compares himself to a day dreamer and says, “I want to postpone [the question] how those things are possible and examine it later. Right now, if you would allow me, assuming that these things are possible, I will examine how the rulers will arrange them when they come to pass and that this would be the most beneficial of all things for the city and the guardians” (458b1-5).22

Glaucon agrees and Socrates argues that the community of women and children is good. To be precise, he first elaborates in some detail on the basic proposal (458b9-461e6) and then announces again that he will argue that this is “by far best” (461e7). He does so (462a2-466d3). Then he announces, as promised in the day-dreamer speech, “it remains to determine whether it’s possible to bring about this association among human beings, as it is among animals, and in what way it is possible?”23 Glaucon expects, and the reader expects, that Socrates will now take up this question, as he had promised. And yet, strangely, Socrates does not. Without a word of excuse, he abruptly changes the subject, saying, “As far as war is concerned, I think it is clear how they will wage it” (466e1-2). Socrates expatiates on war for almost five Stephanus pages, until Glaucon interrupts: “I think, Socrates, that if we let you go on speaking about this subject, you’ll never remember the one you set aside in order to say all this, namely, whether it’s possible for this constitution to come into being and in what way it could be brought about . . . But rather let’s now try to convince ourselves that it is possible and how it is possible, and let the rest go” (471c4-e4).

At this point, Socrates finally does turn to the question of the possibility of the community of women and children. But instead of saying whether or not it is possible, he says something rather complicated. We will need to consider this passage carefully but for the moment, the upshot is roughly that they need not say whether the community of women and children is possible. However, as a favor to Glaucon, he will say specify some minimal changes are by which a city might “come into this type of constitution” (473b6-9). As it turns out, he names a single change, namely the instituting of philosopher-kings.

Thus Socrates never argues for the possibility the community of women and children is possible. Nor does he even assert it.

To sum up: It is Socrates who first mentions doubts about the possibility of his prescriptions. Socrates addresses those doubts concerning equality of education. Socrates (and Glaucon) remind the reader several times of those doubts concerning the community of women and

22 καὶ ἐκεῖνα μὲν ἐπιθυμῶ ἀναβαλέσθαι καὶ ὃστερον ἐπισκέψασθαι, ἢ δυνατά, νῦν δὲ ὡς δυνατῶν ὄντων θεῖς σκέψομαι, ἢ μοι παρίης, πῶς διατάξουσιν αὐτά οἱ ἁρχοντες γιγνόμενα, καὶ ὅτι πάντων συμφορώτατ’ ἂν εἰθ’ πραχθέντα τῇ τε πόλει καὶ τοῖς φύλαξιν. The μὲν / δὲ opposition, hard to capture in English, highlights the contrast between what Socrates postpones until later and what he actually examines now. The awkward parallel of “how” and “that” in my English corresponds to the Greek.

23 Οὐκοῦν, ἢ δ’ ἐγώ, ἐκείνο λοιπόν διελέσθαι, εἰ ἄρα καὶ ἐν ἀνθρώποις δυνατόν, ὡσπερ ἐν ἀλλοις ζώοις, ταύτην τὴν κοινωνίαν ἐγγενέσθαι, καὶ ὅτι δυνατόν; It is significant that Socrates does not say he will argue that these arrangements are possible (which would have been the straightforward parallel to arguing that these arrangements are best). Rather, he merely considers how they might come about. Thus he does not commit himself to the possibility of the community of women and children. It is also significant that the question is not only whether the community is possible but in what way. I will return to this below.
children. Plato then goes out of his way to create dramatic tension surrounding the question, by making Socrates postpone it twice: first asking permission to do so, then raising and immediately dropping the question. When Glaucon finally insists that Socrates address the question, Socrates answers that they need not address the question that Socrates himself had raised. This is a strange, even bizarre, way to proceed. It simultaneously highlights the question of the possibility of the community of women and children and avoids that question. What is Plato trying to tell us?

To answer that question, we will have to read a number of different passages carefully and bring them together. The answer that will emerge is this: Plato is trying to tell us that the description of the community of women and children has to be possible in a certain sense, in order to fulfill its function. Its function is to picture an ideal community, so as to guide both political action and the evaluation of political arrangements. This contrasts with being a mere prayer. However, it also contrasts with another sense of possibility, namely being the outcome of a change that could occur in communities as they actually are. In order to show that the community of women and children is possible in that sense, Socrates introduces the philosopher-king.

In the next section, I discuss what Socrates means by “possible” in the light of the contrast he draws between being possible and being a mere prayer. Then I give a close reading of the passage in which Socrates explains in what sense we do and do not need to consider the possibility of the community of women and children. In conclusion, I raise a number of question that arise from my interpretation, which will require further consideration. I offer answers to them, but the development and justification of those answers is beyond the scope of his paper.

4 Possibilities and Prayers

Far too little attention has been paid to the question what Socrates means by “possible” when he asks whether the community of women and children is possible. We should bear in mind that, when Plato was writing, there had been essentially no reflection on the complexity of the use of “can” and “possible” or on the different senses in which they are used. We find such reflection for the first time in Aristotle and there seems to have been an explosion of philosophical theorizing about possibility in his generation and afterwards (Diodorus Cronus, the Megarics, and Zeno, the founder of Stoicism). For this reason, it would not be surprising for Plato, if he wanted to say something that involved different senses of “possible,” to express himself in ways that are not entirely clear. This is precisely what I think happens in the Republic. Plato is working with different senses of “possible,” and while he does not explicitly say so, the evidence is clear. This comes out from the connection between two distinct features of the text. I focus in this section on one of them: the contrast between being possible and being a mere prayer.

Socrates draws the contrast between being possible and being a mere prayer at several important junctures. It occurs already in the very first speech in which Socrates raises the question of possibility:
Hence my reluctance to get involved with [the question of women and children], lest the argument seem to be a prayer, my friend. (450c9-d2) 

Socrates does not further elaborate on the contrast here. But this initial formulation turns out to be Plato’s primary way of making Socrates articulate the issue concerning possibility.

The contrast between possibility and prayer becomes a refrain in Books V through VII. It occurs next when Socrates concludes his argument for the equal education of women, saying, “Therefore we were not legislating impossible things, nor things like prayers, since we established the law in accordance with nature” (456c1-2). This confirms that being possible contrasts with being a mere prayer. But it sheds little light on what precisely that contrast amounts to. Our next passage, however, is more illuminating.

When Socrates asks Glaucon to allow him to consider the goodness of the community of women and children before considering its possibility, he gives a crucial speech about the dangers of considering goodness in independence of possibility. It is the danger of indulging in unrealistic fantasies. He says:

But do me this favor. Let me, as if on a holiday, do what lazy people do who feast on their own thoughts when out for a solitary walk. Before finding out how something they desire might come about, these people pass that over, so as to avoid wearing themselves out deliberating about what’s possible and what isn’t. They assume that what they desire is available and proceed to arrange the rest, taking pleasure in thinking through everything they’ll do when they have what they want, thereby making their lazy souls even lazier. I’m getting soft myself already, so I want to delay consideration of how these things are possible until later. With your permission, I’ll assume that they’re possible and examine how the rulers will arrange these matters when they come to pass. And I’ll try to show that nothing could be more beneficial to the city and its guardians than those arrangements. These are the things I’ll examine with you first, and I’ll deal with the other question later, if you permit. (457e7-458b7)

This speech concerns a genuine danger for Plato in the Republic. It is the danger that the political proposals that he puts into Socrates’ mouth are mere daydreams, which have no practical bearing on questions of what we should do or how our cities should be governed. Note that I do
not say: “mere daydreams that cannot be implemented.” For I do not think that Socrates takes a clear stand on whether the daydreams can or cannot be implemented. His point, rather, is that we should consider the question whether and how the daydreams can be implemented. But Socrates does not make any statement about what would follow if they could not be implemented. Plato goes out of his way to make Socrates describe such daydreaming in disparaging terms, not only as typical of lazy daydreamers, but as having bad consequences for them (“making their souls even lazier”).

There is a peculiar tension in the speech. For Socrates describes the dangers of daydreaming and then asks Glaucon’s permission to indulge in daydreaming.

For the moment, I leave that tension unresolved and focus on the question of what Socrates means by the possibility of the best city. The figure of the daydreamer, invoked here by Socrates, can help illuminate the contrast between the best city’s being possible and the best city’s being like a mere prayer. Let’s consider what such a mere prayer might be like. In fact, such prayers are familiar to us. John Lennon’s song “Imagine,” while it is not a prayer, is an expression of a prayer-like wish. The Bible contains the famous lines, “And he [God] shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). On a simplistic reading of these lines, they are saying that we cannot bring about universal peace, but God could.\(^{27}\) It would then be natural to pray that God does so. But, of course, this presupposes that universal peace is possible. Universal peace would certainly be counted as metaphysically possible by contemporary metaphysicians.

In short, prayers are for states of affairs that are possible at least in some sense. Otherwise, there would be no point in praying for them. Thus, while someone might well pray for peace on earth, it would be surprising if someone prayed to find the rational number whose square is 2. The very coherence of the act of praying seems to require that the state of affairs prayed for be in some sense possible.\(^{28}\) This shows that Socrates is using the word “possible” in a different sense than we might have expected. For prayers—which Socrates implicitly counts as not possible in his sense—are possible in another sense. Thus, if it turned out that the best city is not, in Socrates’ sense, possible, the best city might well be possible in some other sense.

The daydreamer passage contains two important clues about how to understand the relevant, more restricted sense of possibility. The first clue is that Socrates raises not only the question whether the things described are possible but also how they are possible. The second clue is that Socrates emphasizes that such daydreams not only express but also increase the dreamer’s softness and laziness. These two aspects of the speech are closely connected. Both are

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\(^{27}\) This would be a simplistic reading because the context strongly suggests a more complex view of our agency in relationship to God’s agency and God’s legal role. The context suggests that Israel (that is, the ancient nation) can in fact, by living in accordance with God’s law, take significant steps towards bringing about justice and peace.

\(^{28}\) I do not make any claim about what the relevant sense of possibility is. Suppose, for instance, a person believes that God’s omnipotence includes God’s being able to make 2 have a rational square root. Then a person might pray that God do so and that they find it. But I think it would be incoherent both to believe that it is in no sense possible that God make 2 have a rational square root and to pray that God do so. If someone thought that every truth-apt thought is in some sense possible (e.g., logically possible), then perhaps every truth-apt thought is a proposition for whose truth someone could coherently pray.
connected with the effect of daydreaming about things that you cannot take any significant steps toward bringing about. These are also the sorts of things that people typically pray for. That is, people often pray precisely in those cases in which they are in no position to bring about the result they want. In ancient Greece, this would have frequently pertained to severe illness or to shipwreck. In our society, it might be winning the lottery or surviving an untreatable illness. The issue about such events is not only whether they are possible in their own right, but also how they might come about—where the question “how” is specifically focused on what, if anything, the person in question might do to bring them about.

Suppose that there were a lottery in the United States that had a jackpot of $100 million and for which every registered voter received a ticket and a single person would win the entire jackpot. In such a case, winning the lottery is possible. And it is not only possible in the theoretically laden senses of possibility much beloved of philosophers, but by any ordinary standard. For it is something that not only might happen, but that will happen to some person or other. Nevertheless, a description of winning this lottery would, in Socrates’ sense, be a mere prayer. It would be a prayer because there would be nothing a person could do to bring it about. A daydream might or might not be a suitable object of prayer. This depends on whether the daydreamer can do something to bring about the daydream. In daydreaming, a person imagines a situation that they desire and simply omits consideration of whether they can bring it about. In the case of prayer, Socrates presupposes that the person praying cannot take significant steps to bring about the relevant result. Thus when you daydream, you might be daydreaming something that you could only pray for, but could not do anything to bring about. If there are are things a person can do to bring about a good result, it is reasonable to think that it is not only unhelpful but downright bad to indulge in daydreaming about that result. For it is urgently necessary to think about what it is that can be done. This is presumably why Socrates connects the daydreamer with softness and laziness.

For the sake of completeness, let me note the two remaining passages in which possibility is contrasted with prayer. They occur in the two main discussions of the possibility of the best city.

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29 I have constructed the example so that the probability of winning is low. This heightens the practical irrelevance of the case. What about a similar case in which the probability of winning is higher? For instance, suppose each registered voter had a 50% chance of winning $10,000. This would be relevant to such practical questions as whether it would be a good idea to borrow $10,000 from a bank. Obviously, Socrates does not consider such cases. He is focused on outcomes that are both exceptionally good and exceptionally rare. It would surely not be laziness or softness to develop a plan about what to do if a certain event were to occur, an event that you can do nothing to bring about but which is reasonably likely. But this is now not an activity that we would call daydreaming, but rather planning for various eventualities. The point is merely that this is not the sort of case Socrates is considering. Nor need he consider it.

30 There is a question lurking in the background about whether a given proposition or event might be something that a certain person can pray for (but not decide on) whereas another person might decide on. This would seem to be so. A parent might pray that their child passes the math test, in circumstances in which it is in the child’s power to decide to pass the math test. Examples with a different form also occur: shooting a basketball into a basket under certain circumstances is something that I can only pray to succeed in, whereas LeBron James can perhaps simply decide to do so.

31 I think that a person might pray for a result that they can take significant steps to bring about. Socrates is not here developing a theory of prayer, but using the term to draw a contrast with possible.
First, in Book VI, Socrates says, “Now, I say that no one has an argument that either, or both, of these things cannot come to be. But if someone did, we’d be justly ridiculed, especially for saying things that are like prayers. Isn’t that so?”32 (499c1-5) (Glaucen answers, “It is.”) The final occurrence is at the end of Book VII, in the final discussion of possibility, just before Socrates resumes in Books VIII and IX the main line of argument, about the degenerate psychologies (and constitutions). He says, “Then, do you agree that the things we’ve said about the city and its constitution aren’t altogether prayers, that they are difficult to bring about, but not impossible?”33 (540d1-3)

Thus the contrast between being possible and being a mere prayer occurs at all of the structural junctures in the discussion of possibility. It is one of the most important indications in the text about what Socrates means by “possible” and why he is concerned about the possibility of the best city. He is concerned that his description of the best city not be a mere prayer. That is, he is concerned that it be relevant to the question what we should do—otherwise, his way of speaking would be ridiculous.34 Socrates does not, however, further specify in what way the description of the best city must be relevant to the question what we should do. The most straightforward kind of relevance would be this: the description of the best city is an immediately feasible practical legislative program, which the reader should set about implementing immediately. But there might well be other kinds of practical relevance. Socrates has ruled out complete practical irrelevance, but he has not ruled out anything else—in particular, in the passages considered so far, he has not given us any guidance about what practical relevance might amount to. In the passage we are about to consider, Socrates does precisely that.

5 A Picture of the Best City

In sections 3 and 4, I argued that Socrates considers the possibility in some sense of the best city to be necessary for the success of his arguments in Books V through VII.35 I also pointed out that it is far from clear what the relevant criteria for possibility are. Against this background, we might well be astonished at what Socrates says when Glaucen finally insists that he take up the question of possibility. First, Socrates reminds Glaucen that the original question was not about the best city (or indeed about cities at all), but rather about justice:

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32 τούτων δὲ πότερα γενέσθαι ἢ ἀμφότερα ως ἢ ἀρα ἑστὶν ἀδύνατον, ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδένα φημὶ ἔχειν λόγον. οὔτω γάρ ἂν ἡμεῖς δικαίως καταγελῴμεθα, ὡς ἄλλως εὐχαῖς ὅμοια λέγοντες, ἢ οὔς οὔτως;

33 Τί οὖν; ἐφεξ- συγχωρεῖτε περὶ τῆς πόλεως τε καὶ πολιτείας μὴ παντάπασιν ἡμᾶς εὐχὰς εἰρηκέναι, άλλα χαλεπά μὲν, δυνατὰ δὲ πη. Socrates goes in such a way that Glaucen ends up making no direct response to this question. But the flow of the text strongly suggests it is a rhetorical question, i.e., that the answer is obviously yes.

34 The word translated “would be ridiculed” could also be translated “would be laughed at.” This is perhaps a reference (one among many in Books V through VII) to Aristophanes. Aristophanes’ portrayal of something like the community of women and children in the Ekklesiazusæ is supposed to be laughable. Yet it is not supposed to be possible.

35 Note that I deny that the possibility of the best city is necessary for the success of the framing argument, in Books II through IV and VIII through IX, answering Glaucen and Adeimantus’ challenge.
SOCRATES: Well, then, we must first remember that we got to this point while trying to discover what justice and injustice are like.
GLAUCON: We must. But what of it? (V 472b3-6)36

To answer Glaucon’s question, “What of it?” Socrates raises (for the first time) a question about the standards for success of that original project. It is a question about the way in which justice serves as a standard for counting a human being as just—in particular, whether, in order to count as just, a human being must conform to the standard in every way, or rather a human being might fail to conform entirely to justice and yet nevertheless count as just:

SOCRATES: Nothing. But if we discover what justice is like, will we also maintain that the just man is in no way different from the just itself, so that he is like justice in every respect? Or will we be satisfied if he comes as close to it as possible and participates in it far more than anyone else?
GLAUCON: We’ll be satisfied with that. (V 472b7-c3)37

Glaucon and Socrates have now agreed that, assuming they have discovered what justice is, a person who is not “like justice in every respect” might nevertheless count as a just. Socrates now infers from the fact that these are their standards that they were seeking a model:

SOCRATES: Then it was in order to have a model that we were trying to discover what justice itself is like and what the completely just man would be like, if he came into being, and what kind of man he’d be if he did, and likewise with regard to injustice and the most unjust man. We thought that, by looking at how their relationship to happiness and its opposite seemed to us, we’d also be compelled to agree about ourselves as well, that the one who was most like them would have a portion of happiness most like theirs. But we weren’t trying to discover these things in order to prove that they are able to come into being.
GLAUCON: That’s true. (V 472c4-d3; my emphasis)38

Thus Socrates did not assume from the beginning that they were seeking a model. Rather, he argues retrospectively that they were seeking a model. The argument goes like this.

36 Οὐκοῦν, ἢν δ’ ἐγώ, πρῶτον μὲν τόδε χρή ἀναμνησθῆναι, ὅτι ἡμεῖς ζητοῦντες δικαιοσύνην οἷόν ἐστι καὶ ἀδικίαν δεύρο ἦκομεν. Χρή: ἀλλὰ τί τοῦτο; ἐφη.
37 Οὐδέν· ἀλλ’ ἐὰν εὑρώμεθα οἷόν ἐστι δικαιοσύνη, ἃρα καὶ ἄνδρα τὸν δίκαιον ἀξιώσομεν μηδὲν δεῖν αὐτῆς ἑκείνης διαφέρειν, ἀλλὰ πανταχῇ τοιοῦτον εἶναι οἷον δικαιοσύνη ἑστίν; ἢ ἀγαπήσομεν ἐάν ὅτι ἐγνύτατα αὐτῆς ἢ καὶ πλεῖότα τῶν ἄλλων ἑκείνης μετέχῃ; — Οὕτως, ἐφη· ἀγαπήσομεν.
38 Παραδείγματος ἄρα ἓνεκα, ἢν δ’ ἐγώ, ἐξητούμεν αὐτὸ τε δικαιοσύνην οἷόν ἐστι καὶ ἄνδρα τὸν τελέως δίκαιον εἰ γένοιτο, καὶ οίς ἄν εἰπε γενόμενος, καὶ ἀδικίαν αὐ καὶ τὸν ἀδικώτατον, ἴνα εἰς ἑκείνους ἀποβλέποντες, οἴοι ἄν ἦμιν φαίνονται εὐδαιμονίας τοῦ πέρι καὶ τοῦ ἐναντίου, ἀναγκαζόμεθα καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ὁμολογεῖν, ὅς ἂν ἑκείνους ὃς ὑμῖν ὁμοιότατος ἦ, τὴν ἑκείνης μοίραν ὑμοιότατην ἔξειν, ἀλλ’ οἷ τούτου ἓνεκα, ἰν’ ἀποδείξωμεν ὡς δυνατά ταῦτα γίνεσθαι. — Τοῦτο μὲν, ἐφη, ἄλθες λέγεις.
They were seeking justice and the completely just human being and also injustice and the completely unjust human being.

The connection between justice and the completely just human being is presumably that the completely just human being completely exemplifies justice. A completely just person is a person who is just in every respect, without any qualification or restriction. A not-completely just person is someone who is just to a certain degree (but not completely), or in certain respects (but not others), or in certain contexts (but not others). And the same goes for injustice and the completely unjust person, *mutatis mutandis*.

The question was not whether a completely just human being could come into being, but rather what a completely just human being would be like, if they did come into being.

In particular, they were interested in the question whether the completely just person is happier or unhappier than the completely unjust person.

They took themselves to be able to infer (ἀναγκαζόμεθα . . . ὁμολογεῖν) that if the completely just person is happier (or unhappier) than the completely unjust person, then (particular) incompletely just people are happier (or unhappier) than (particular) incompletely unjust people. In particular, *we* (Socrates is explicit about this) will be happier to the extent that we are just, unhappier to the extent that we are unjust.

The last step is the one in which the completely just person and the completely unjust person function as models. How so? They are models because they are used as standard for making judgments about us on the basis of similarity or dissimilarity, rather than on the basis of complete or perfect exemplification. To be model is not merely to serve as a standard, but to serve as a standard *on the basis of (imperfect) similarity or dissimilarity*. This contrasts with the relationship between justice and the completely just human being. Justice sets the standard for complete justice; the completely just human being is the human being who completely exemplifies justice. But justice is apparently not a model for the completely just human being, not because it is not a standard, but because the completely just human being completely exemplifies justice, rather than standing a relation of imperfect, more-or-less similarity to it.

Here, the explicit function of the models of justice and injustice is not to ascertain which people are just and unjust (albeit incompletely), but rather to ascertain which people are happier, the imperfectly just or the imperfectly unjust. But surely justice and injustice, or the completely just and the completely unjust person, will also serve as standards for judging who is just or unjust (cf. 472b). However, it is important to see that what the text says *here* is something else.
completely just and unjust people function in an argument for figuring out who is happy and who is unhappy.\textsuperscript{39}

It might be reasonable to think that a model that is to serve as a standard for things that come into being must itself be able to come into being. More strongly, one might think that anyone who is going to use a picture as a model for generated things, must show that the thing pictured can come into being. In our case, this would require that Socrates show that a person can come into being who is perfectly just and also that a person can come into being who is perfectly unjust—that is, people who fully exemplify the models. Whether this is required, is the very question that Socrates next puts to Glaucon:

Socrates: Do you think that someone is a worse painter if, having painted a model of what the finest and most beautiful human being would be like and having rendered every detail of his picture adequately, he could not prove that such a man could come into being?

Glaucon: No, by god, I don’t. (V 472d3-8)\textsuperscript{40}

Note that Glaucon’s response is particularly emphatic. He has no doubt that the relevant requirement does not apply. And Socrates evidently agrees.

What precisely is the relevant requirement? To follow the text closely, Glaucon merely insists that it is not required that a person who gives a model be able to prove that the model can come into being. In other words, someone might have required that the model be able to come into being and that it be proved that it can come into being. Glaucon denies that these two things are required. The lack of such a proof does not count against the model.

This statement might seem to be in tension with Socrates’ arguments, as Plato made them unfold. For Socrates himself raised the question about possibility and he spent several Stephanus pages arguing for the possibility of the equal education of men and women (V 452e-456c). And this might seem to suggest that Socrates does think that he has to prove that the model can come into being. However, the claim that Socrates argued for was not (explicitly) the claim that the equal education of men and women is able to come into being. Rather, he argued that the equal education of men and women is not incompatible with the natures of men and women. This is, perhaps, necessary but not sufficient for its being possible that the equal education of men and women come into being.

Note that, strictly speaking, Glaucon has said nothing here about the case in which someone can prove that the model in question cannot come into being. Glaucon’s statement was merely that someone might be fully successful in providing a model, even if the model cannot be proved

\textsuperscript{39} The text thus requires that not only that the model of $F$ is an adequate basis for determining which of the perceptibles are $F$ to what degree, but also something along the lines of: if the model of $F$ is $G$, then the perceptibles $Fs$ are also $G$. (Perhaps it requires something slightly weaker, such as, if the model of $F$ is $G$ in virtue of being $F$, then the perceptibles $Fs$ are also $G$.)

\textsuperscript{40} Οἴει ἂν οὖν ἦτον τι ἄγαθὸν ἴσωραφόν εἶναι ὡς ἂν γράφας παράδειγμα οἶν ἂν εἶη ὁ κάλλιστος ἀνθρώπως καὶ πάντα εἰς τὸ γράμμα ἱκανῶς ἀποδοὺς μὴ ἔχῃ ἀποδείξαι ὡς καὶ δυνατὸν γενέσθαι τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα; — Μά Δί’ οὐκ ἔγωγ’, ἔφη.
able to come into being. But it may be that, if you can prove that something cannot come into being, then it is not a very good model, or perhaps is not a model at all.

There will, I think, turn out to be some truth in that thought, but it is still too crudely formulated. For Socrates adds, just a few lines below, that, quite generally, it is not possible for actions (πράξεις) to correspond fully and without qualification to true speech (ἀληθεία λέξις) (V 473a1-3). Thus, in a sense, nothing that is described in a true speech is able to come into being. But this, agree Socrates and Glaucon, poses no problem. Thus not only is it possible that a model not be able to come into being, it is always the case when the model is a description in true speech.

From this, one might infer that whether a model is possible or not, is just irrelevant. But this would be hasty. This is the moment to keep in mind the hand of Plato, shaping and steering the conversation at every moment. If Plato had thought that the question of possibility were just irrelevant, he surely would not have presented the question in the way that he does. Below, I will bring together these various aspects of the text, but first we need to consider what Socrates says next.

Up to this point, in his remarks about possibility, Socrates has implicitly invoked the challenge issued by Glaucon and Adeimantus at the beginning of Book II—the challenge to praise justice in its own right, not for its consequences, and to show that the just person is happier than the unjust person. This challenge does not pertain immediately to questions of politics. But of course, Socrates had proposed to answer the question by taking a detour into politics. The rough idea was to describe a perfectly just person by first describing a perfectly just city. At 472a-d Socrates has entirely elided this argumentative strategy and has not mentioned a word about politics. But now he mentions politics:

SOCRATES: What then? Weren’t we too, as we said, making in speech a model of a good city?
GLAUCON: Certainly.
So do you think that we have spoken less well to that end, if we can’t prove that it’s possible to found a city in the way that was said?
Not at all, he said.
Then that’s the truth of the matter. (472d9-e6)

Plato is telling us clearly that the role played by the best city in the argument to answer Glaucon and Adeimantus’s challenge up to this point does not require that the best city described be able to come into being. What is the answer to Glaucon and Adeimantus’s challenge up to this point? Socrates has given a partial answer. He has argued that justice is harmony of the soul, much like health. This is already praise of justice in its own right rather than for its consequences. Moreover, it constitutes a powerful argument that justice in its own right—indeed of the appearance of justice or the consequences of being just—contributes to the happiness of the just person. And correlative, it follows that injustice, the unhealth of the soul, detracts from the happiness

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41 Τί οὖν; οὐ καὶ ἡμεῖς, φαμέν, παράδειγμα ἐποιούμεν λόγῳ ἀγαθῆς πόλεως; — Πάνυ γε. — Ἡττόν τι οὖν οἰεὶ ἡμᾶς εὖ λέγειν τούτου ἕνεκα, ἐὰν μὴ ἐχωμεν ἀποδείξαι ὡς δυνατὸν οὕτω πόλιν οἰκήσαι ὡς ἔλεγετο; — Οὔ δῆτα, ἔφη. — Τὸ μὲν τοῖνυν ἄληθές, ἢν δ’ ἐγώ, οὖτω.
of the unjust person. Socrates and Glauкон had explicitly drawn these conclusions already at the end of Book IV (443c-445a).

Socrates does not stop there, however. Plato might have made him let the matter drop, but instead he has Socrates address the question of possibility after all, as a sort of favor to Glauкон:

SOCRATES: But if, in order to please you, I must also be willing to show how and under what conditions it would most be possible to found such a city, then you should agree to make the same concessions to me, in turn, for the purposes of this demonstration.
GLAUCON: Which ones? (V 472e6-10)

Plato makes Socrates address the question of possibility, after making Socrates protest that this is not strictly necessary for certain purposes. Why does Plato do this? Plato must think that it somehow or other matters whether the best city is possible or a mere prayer. But to say what is at stake, we will need to see how Socrates address the question.

First, he asks for the concession mentioned above: nothing can come about in action just as in speech. For this reason, he wants Glauкон to accept a lower standard for possibility—for the possibility, that is, of the community of women and children. Socrates will say how a city could come to be ruled in a way that is very like the community of women and children:

SOCRATES: Is it possible to do anything just as it was said? Or is it in the nature of action to grasp truth less well than speaking does, even if some people don’t think so? Will you first agree to this or not?
GLAUCON: I agree.

Then don’t compel me to show that what we’ve described in speech can come into being in deed exactly as we’ve described it. Rather, if we’re able to discover how a city could be run in a way that is very near to our description, let’s say that we’ve found out what you ordered us to, namely, that these things are possible. Or wouldn’t you be satisfied with that? I would be satisfied with it.
So would I. (V 473a1-b3)

Socrates then spells out what this means in a twofold way. It requires identifying the main obstacle to the implementation of his proposals and what the smallest change is that could overcome that obstacle. Most importantly, Socrates commits himself to claiming that the change in question is a change that could come about in actual cities:

42 εἰ δὲ δὴ καὶ τοῦτο προθυμηθῆναι δεῖ σὴν χάριν, ἀποδείξει πὴ μάλιστα καὶ κατὰ τί δυνατώτατ’ ἂν εἴη, πάλιν μοι πρὸς τὴν τοιαύτην ἀποδείξειν τά αὐτά διομολόγησαι. — Τὰ ποία;
43 Ἀρ’ οἶδ᾽ τι τὸ πραξῆται ὡς λέγεται, ἢ φύσιν ἔχει πράξειν λέξεσις ἢ ἄλλον ἀληθείας ἐφάπτεσθαι, κάνει ἢ μὴ τῷ δοκεῖ; ἀλλὰ σὺ πότερον ὀμολογεῖς ὡς ἢ ὃ; — Ὀμολογῶ, ἐφη. — Τούτῳ μὲν δὴ μὴ ἀνάγκαζε με, σοὶ τῷ λόγῳ διήλθομεν, τοιάντα παντάπασι καὶ τῷ ἔργῳ δεῖν γινόμενα ἢ δεῦ, ἀποφαίνειν· ἀλλ’, ἐὰν οἶοι τε γενώμεθα εὑρείν ὡς ἂν ἐγγύτατα τῶν εἰρήμενων πόλις οἰκήσειν, φᾶναι ἡμᾶς ἐξημερικέναι ἡς δυνατὰ ταύτα γίγνεσθαι ἂν ἐπιστάτης, ἢ οὐκ ἀναφήσεις τούτων τυχάνως; ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ ἄγαπην. — Καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ, ἐφη. I translate οἰκήσειν by “could be governed” because I think the optative verb form is picking up on the question whether the arrangements in question are possible. (The passive “be governed” is a standard meaning of οἰκέω.)
SOCRATES: Then next, it seems, we should try to discover and point out what’s now badly done in cities, because of which they are not run in that way, and what’s the smallest thing such that, if it were changed, our city would reach this sort of constitution—one change, preferably, or if not one, two, and if not two, then the fewest in number and the least extensive.

GLAUCON: That’s absolutely right.

Well then, I said, with one thing changed, we seem to me to be able to show that it would be transformed. It’s certainly neither small nor easy, but it is possible. (V 473b4-c4)

This is a crucial juncture, whose complexity is even greater than it may seem. As I will argue, the correct understanding of the political significance of the Republic as a whole hinges on this passage.

Remember that Book V started out “merely” as an elaboration of the proposal that, as far as women and children go, friends will share in common. This led to the question whether Socrates’ proposals are possible. Socrates answered that question directly concerning the common education of men and women. But Socrates has made a fuss of postponing the question about the community of women and children. Now, instead of saying whether the community of women and children is possible, he addresses another, connected pair of questions. First, what is it about cities as they are now governed that prevents the institution of the community of women and children? Second, what would be the least change in existing cities that would make them very like the city with the community of women and children?

This constitutes a major shift in the criteria for possibility. In considering the question whether the common education of men and women was possible, Socrates had considered whether the common education of men and women is compatible with the nature of men and women. The men and women make up the city. The laws governing the city require something of the men and, in particular, the women. The question is whether the nature of the women is such that they can do what is required of them.

It is glaringly obvious that the very same question should be asked about the community of women and children. The community of women and children is, as Socrates has admitted and as the text has repeatedly emphasized, vastly different from anything familiar. It is far from clear that it would be possible to get human beings to follow such laws—that is, it is far from clear that human beings can follow such laws. This is the very question that Socrates first raises, then repeatedly defers, and finally here sets aside. The question whether the community of women and children is possible is never answered.

Instead, in the lines just quoted, Socrates announces that he will answer a different question—the question whether there is a change, such that, if that change took place in an

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44 Τὸ δὲ δὴ μετὰ τούτο, ὡς ἔοικε, πειρώμεθα ζητεῖν τε καὶ ἀποδεικνύναι τί ποτε νῦν κακῶς ἐν ταῖς πόλεις πράττεται δι’ ὧν οὐχ οὕτως οἰκοῦνται, καὶ τίνος ἀν σμικροτάτου μεταβαλόντος ἐξήκοιτο εἰς τούτον τὸν τρόπον τῆς πολιτείας πόλις, μάλιστα μὲν ἐνός, εἰ δὲ μή, δυοῖν, εἰ δὲ μή, ὅτι ὁ λόγος τού πρῶτον καὶ σμικροτάτων τῆς δύναμιν. — Παντάπασι μὲν οὖν, ἐφη. — Ἑνὸς μὲν τούτοις, ἢν δ’ ἐγὼ, μεταβαλόντος δοκοῦμεν μοι ἔχειν δεῖξαι ὅτι μεταπέσοι ἂν, οὐ μέντοι σμικροῦ γε ὁδὸς ῥαδίου, δύνατον δὲ.
existing city, the city would become very like the best city with the community of women and children. This is supposed to be a sort of answer to the question whether the community of women and children is possible, in the qualified sense that Socrates specified. The question whether the community of women and children is possible, is the question whether the community of women and children can be approximated by existing cities.

When Socrates raises this question, he uses the word “possible” again, but he uses it in a different way from the way in which he had used it up to now. This is clear from the fact that the question of possibility no longer pertains only to the city in its own right, but to the change from current political circumstances. It matters that Socrates is asking about changes in existing cities. The question is not only whether some city or other might come to have the proposed constitution but whether existing cities might change so as to have the proposed constitution. This formulation of the question allows constraints that derive from the state of existing cities. It might be, for instance, that it would be possible to raise some children in such a way that, as adults, they would happily accept the community of women and children, but it might not be possible to raise children who have themselves grown up in more traditional family structures that way. As adults, they may be too attached to their blood-relatives and also too attached to the prospect of having a similar family of their own. (One might compare a similar but simpler case: it might be possible to dye some fabric indigo, but it may not be possible to dye fabric that already has a certain color indigo.)

In short, Socrates has now set forth the following criterion:

**Possibility of Picture**: The best city, including the community of women and children and everything that led up to it, is possible if there is a change that is possible in existing cities and that would result in a constitution that is very like the best city.

One might wonder whether it is really right to say that the best city is thus shown to be possible, rather than merely approximatable. But the lines at 473a8-b1 (quoted just above) show clearly that Socrates does think of approximatability as a kind of possibility. All in all, Socrates has shifted from the question whether the best city (above all the community of women and children) is

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45 I think that this is suggested by 540e-541a, where Socrates envisages taking over a city and sending away everyone who is older than ten.

46 One might think of the issue in terms of quantifying into a modal operator. One question is whether it is possible that there exist a city that has the community of women and children. Another question is whether there exists a city such that it is possible that that city (come to) have the community of women and children.

47 The word that I translate “very like”, ἐγγύτατα, is sometimes translated “as like as possible” or “as near as possible.” But there is no word for “possible” explicitly in the phrase. And if we took seriously the doubling of possibility, then we would seem to get a pointless expression: “a change in existing cities that would them be as much like the best city as possible, and that is possible.” It would seem to be trivially true that there is some change that would make existing cities be as much like the best city as possible, even if, after that change, existing cities remained utterly unlike the best city. Socrates obviously considers it necessary that, after the change, the city is like the best city, and indeed very like it. The superlative merely captures this strong degree. (“Most similar” would also miss the point. There need not be any comparison with other changes. The point is just that the city should turn out very similar.)
possible (presumably meaning whether it is compatible with human nature) to the question whether the change from existing cities to a constitution that is like the best city is possible.

This yields a clear and well-motivated explanation of what has been at stake all along for Socrates in the question of possibility. For his goal was to provide a model, and not just any picture of a good city can be used as a model. I would even suggest that we have encountered a description that cannot be used as a model here in the Republic: the so-called city of pigs. Plato makes Socrates provoke Glaucon into objecting to it and Socrates goes on to introduce political arrangements that are so dramatically different from anything in the city of pigs that one might think of it as a different city altogether. Yet why does Plato include a description of it all? We might find an answer if we take seriously Socrates’ assertion that the city of pigs (in Glaucon’s phrase) is a healthy city (372e6-7). My suggestion (which I will defend in a fuller version of this paper) is that Plato includes the description because it is one in which the fundamental political problems are not solved but rather idealized away. For there is no struggle over scarce resources and correspondingly no rule. The city of pigs thus shows why rule is necessary in cities, by showing a case in which rule is not necessary. (In particular, it shows that the reasons why we live together at all are not simply the same as the reasons why we have rule.) If it seems attractive, then one might pray for it. But there is no change that is possible in existing cities that would result in a constitution that is very like the city of pigs. Thus the description of the city of pigs is a picture of a city, but it is not a model, because existing cities cannot be made very like it. (In this, it is like other descriptions of irect harmony, such as Biblical descriptions or Lennon’s “Imagine” or perhaps Hesiod’s similar descriptions of simple primeval human coexistence.)

The shift to a question about the possibility of a change goes along with a significant textual detail, which is the growing emphasis not on whether the best city is possible but on how it is possible.48 This is also tied directly to the way in which the description of the best city serves as a model. If we have no answers whatsoever to the question how it, or something like it, could come about, then it cannot serve as a model that guides our political actions. But we do know how it, or something like it, could come about through our actions under actual circumstances, then we can consider whether, all in all, it would be good to carry out those actions.

This provides a satisfying overall explanation for the peculiar way in which Plato has made Socrates deal with the question of the possibility of the community of women and children. Plato wishes to say:

1. The possibility of the best city is not necessary for answering Glaucon and Adeimantus’s challenge.
2. The possibility of the best city, in the sense of compatibility with human nature, is not necessary for using the picture of the best city as a model.
3. The possibility of the best city, in the sense of approximatability, is necessary for using the best picture as a model.

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48 458a3, 458b3, 466d-8, 471c-8, 471e4, 472b1, 472b6, 472e4, 473a6, 502c10 (about rulers, not the city itself), 540d2-3, 541a8.
Socrates’ answer to Glaucon and Adeimantus does not require the description of the best city to be usable as a model. Nevertheless, it would be philosophically (and practically) of great value, if we could use the description of the best city as a model.

This harmonizes perfectly with the arguments of the Republic and provides Plato with a straightforward motivation for his complex presentation of the question of possibility. He makes Socrates raise the question of the possibility of the best city because he wants to do more than merely answer Glaucon and Adeimantus: he wants to provide a model of the best city, which can be used to make judgments about the goodness and badness both of constitutions and of politically significant actions taken by individuals. But he does not think of this as a step in the argument to answer Glaucon and Adeimantus. At the same time, he is straining against the limitations of his vocabulary for possibility. He thinks that there is just no telling whether the best city—in particular, the community of women and children—is possible in the sense of (2) but he does think that it matters in the sense of (3). This is why Plato makes Socrates first explain to Glaucon why he need not argue for the possibility of the community of women and children and then makes Socrates argue for it “as a favor to Glaucon.” The favor to Glaucon is also a favor to us: Plato is doing us the favor of explaining how, in answering Glaucon and Adeimantus, he has provided a model of the best city, even though this fact does not play a role in answering them.

This might seem to saddle Plato with an unsatisfying duality of purpose, which is at odds with the fabulous unity, both argumentative and literary, of the Republic. But this is not so. The unity of the Republic is not undermined by my interpretation. This is because Glaucon and Adeimantus challenged Socrates to explain the relationship between happiness and justice, rather than any other virtue. And justice is the most political of the canonical virtues. One might think that justice is the basis for political life. Or, as Thrasymachus argued, that justice is a consequence of political life. Now, Plato’s account of justice in Book IV makes no reference to the city of which the just person is a part, but only to the community that the just person is. But Plato intends to shed light on the way in which fully just people relate to their political communities and, more than that, to help the reader think about how to act in specifically political contexts. In order to do that, he thinks he needs to give the reader a model of the best city. For, as he makes Socrates say at the end of Book IX, the just person will not eschew political activity as such. The just person will engage vigorously in political activity—not in traditional political activity, but in the political business of the best city. In order to emulate that political activity, the reader will need a clear vision of the picture of the best city.

6 The Philosopher-King as Second Best

According to the reading I have developed and defended, Socrates has set himself the task of specifying a change that is possible in existing cities and that would result in a constitution that is very like the best city. As I have explained, this requires that the change is not only compatible with human nature, but also with the political circumstances that obtain in existing cities. If those circumstances rule out the occurrence of some proposed change, then that change does not fulfill the condition and does not succeed in establishing the possibility of the best city, even if the outcome of the change would be a city that is very like the best city.
The text could not be clearer about the change that Socrates proposes: the establishment of philosopher-kings. This is the proposal that Socrates introduces immediately after the last passage quoted above, in some of the most famous lines in all of Greek philosophy:

Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race. And, until this happens, the constitution we’ve been describing in speech will never be born to the fullest extent possible or see the light of the sun. (473c11-e2)\(^{49}\)

This proposal is not introduced as a further aspect of the best city—although it will turn out to be an aspect of the best city—but rather as the change that fulfills the criterion POSSIBILITY OF PICTURE. That entails that the establishing of philosopher-kings is a change that is possible in existing cities and that would bring about a constitution that is very like the best city.

I expect that, for quite a few readers, this will seem a surprising claim. Isn’t the philosopher-king the most astonishing of Socrates’ proposals and the one whose possibility receives the most elaborate defense? Doesn’t this show that it is the one whose possibility is most doubtful? Even Glaucon expresses his profound astonishment at the proposal and in much stronger terms than he had responded to either of the first two proposals.\(^{50}\) But Glaucon’s astonishment presumably derives partly from the very fact that he realizes that Socrates has proposed the philosopher-king as a change that could be brought about in existing cities. Moreover, Plato makes Socrates express real doubt about the possibility of the community of women and children (457d), but he nowhere expresses any doubt of his own about the possibility of philosopher-kings.

I would like to observe that it seems simply true that the possibility of the philosopher-king is much less doubtful than the possibility of the community of women and children. The audacity of supposing that a fairly substantial group of human beings could be brought to refrain from the pretty much universal form of couple-based exclusive sexual-romantic relations, and to regard a substantial number of people as their own parents and children, quite independently of blood ties, and to love those people sincerely—this is truly incredible. It would require a radical restructuring of the desires and emotions of human beings. It is far from clear that this is possible. By contrast, assuming that there are philosophers in the relevant sense, it seems comparatively simple and straightforward for one of them to be installed as the king of a city.

\(^{49}\) Εὰν μὴ, ἢ δὲ ἐγὼ, ἢ οἱ φιλόσοφοι βασιλεύσωσιν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἢ οἱ βασιλῆς τε νῦν λεγόμενοι καὶ δυνάσται φιλοσοφήσωσι γνησίως τε καὶ ἱκανῶς, καὶ τοῦτο εἰς ταύτων συμπέσῃ, δύναμίς τε πολιτικὴ καὶ φιλοσοφία, τῶν δὲ νῦν πορευομένων χωρὶς ἑφ’ ἐκάτερον αἱ πολλαὶ φύσεις ἔξεσθε ἀνάγκης ἀποκλεισθῶσιν, οὐκ ἔστι κακῶν παῦλα, ὦ φίλε Γλαύκων, ταῖς πόλεσι, δοκῶ δ’ οὐδὲ τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ γένει, οὔδὲ αὕτη ἡ πολιτεία μὴ ποτὲ πρότερον φημί τε εἰς τὸ δυνατόν καὶ φῶς ἡλίου ἱδη, ἢ νῦν λόγω διελθήθαμεν.

\(^{50}\) Compare his response to the philosopher-king at 473e-474a with his response to the equal education of men and women (452a-b) and the community of women and children (457c-d). Cf. also Glaucon’s representation of the group’s skepticism about philosopher-kings at 498c-d.
To sum up: Plato gives different answers to the question of the possibility of each of the three measures proposed in Book V.

(1) The equal education of men and women is straightforwardly claimed to be possible, in the sense of compatible with the natures of men and women.

(2) The community of women and children is never claimed to be possible in this sense. It is only claimed to be possible in the sense that it can be approximated. However, even this claim is not taken to be obvious, and Socrates argues for it.

(3) The philosopher-king is presented, in the first instance, as the outcome of a possible change in existing cities. (a) This is intended to establish the possibility of the community of women and children in the sense of being able to be approximated. (b) The criteria for the possibility of the philosopher-king are much more demanding than those for the first two measures. It is not enough that it be possible to approximate philosopher-kinship and it is not enough for philosopher-kinship to be compatible with human nature. Actual political circumstances must be compatible with the establishing of philosopher-kings. (c) Of course, the philosopher-king is not only a proposed changed in existing cities that would lead to an approximation of the best city. It would also be prescribed by the constitution of the best city itself.\(^{51}\)

Thus the idea that the Republic only pursues an ideal political theory is not correct. The proposal of the philosopher-king is itself presented as an approximation to an ideal, an approximation that is “genuinely” possible in existing cities. If the community of women and children is possible for a city ruled by a philosopher-king, then presumably the philosopher-king would know this and would establish it. If the community of women and children is not possible for a city ruled by a philosopher-king, then the philosopher-king would know that and would not attempt to establish it, but would rather be content with some kind of approximation. In that case, the institution of the philosopher-king would be a second-best to the ideal but impossible community of women and children.\(^{52}\)

\(^{51}\) If this last claim needs any justification, see the opening lines of Book VIII (543a).

\(^{52}\) André Laks’ paper, “Legislation and Demiurgy: On the Relationship between Plato’s Republic and Laws” (Classical Antiquity, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1990, pp. 209-229) shows a clear recognition that the philosopher-king, without the community of women and children, constitutes a step towards the realization of the full-fledged best city and is thus part of the argument for its possibility. In a fuller version of this paper, I will discuss his nuanced paper more fully. For the moment, I restrict myself to noting a number of differences between his reading and mine. (1) He does not discuss the strange drama surrounding the question of possibility. (2) He does not recognize that Plato works with more than one sense of possible. (See, for instance, “the Politeia resorts to a specific concept of possibility” (my emphasis, p. 214. Or his characterization of 473a1-b1 as “the new definition” of possibility (p. 215). In my view, it is not a definition at all, nor is it a general characterization of possibility.) (3) Because he does not recognize more than one sense of possible, he does not recognize the claim that I have called POSSIBILITY OF PICTURE. (That claim states that being possible in one sense establishes possibility in another sense.) For this reason, he thinks, “[T]he demonstration that the philosopher-king is possible is part of the demonstration that the paradigmatic city is possible. But the demonstration is incomplete. It only establishes the possibility the condition of possibility of the just city, in other words its precondition” (p. 215). I disagree. The point of 473a-c, as I have painstakingly argued, is precisely that showing the possibility of the philosopher-king would be enough to show the possibility of the community of women
If this interpretation is correct, it raises a number of questions about the Republic. I cannot address these questions properly within the framework of this paper, but I would like at least to state the questions and indicate my answers.

(1) Does the Republic argue for the possibility of philosopher-kings in the sense specified? That is, does the Republic argue that existing cities could undergo a change whose outcome would be rule by philosopher-kings? Yes, it does. For instance, at 485a-487a, Socrates argues that it is possible for a human being to combine philosophical qualities with the other qualities that are necessary to be qualified to rule. At 487a-489d, Socrates explains why philosophers are useless in existing cities. This answers the objection that philosophers do not seem to be qualified to rule, but it also gives a diagnosis of what would have to change in existing cities so that a philosopher could rule. In 489d-499a, Socrates gives an extensive account of the relationship between cities and philosophers (both genuine philosophers and merely apparent ones). Near that end (497d-499a), Socrates addresses the question whether cities are necessarily endangered by philosophical activity, which would pose a serious problem for the possibility of philosopher-kings, but Socrates argues that this is not so. This argument culminates, in 499b-502c, with the reaffirmation of the possibility of philosopher-kings. The argument does not pertain to human nature or cities in general, but to the citizens of actually existing cities. And it pertains to the possibility that those cities could undergo the relevant kind of change. This is one reason why the argument treats the question whether the citizens could be persuaded to accept philosophic rule. In and children (assuming that the city ruled by the philosopher-king is very like the city with the community of women and children). (4) This leads to further differences between Laks and me. Laks concludes, “Nor does the discussion draw a picture of what the approximate city, as opposed to the city, would be like” (p. 215). This seems to me in a way right and in a way wrong. On my reading, the political result of setting up a philosopher-king in any existing city is an approximation to the best city. To the extent that the Republic describes what a philosopher-king would be like and what model the philosopher-king would look to, the Republic does describe what the approximation would be like. Thus the Republic already contains a second-best city and not, as Laks would have it, merely the precondition for a second-best city. (Also, the Republic has quite a lot to say about the features of existing cities that preclude philosophical rule. These features too would change. This is further descriptive information about the approximation.) This description is rather unspecific and vague. But the reason for this, I have suggested, is that there will be a great deal of variation in the results that a philosopher-king could bring about, depending on the starting conditions. Thus there just is no universal characterization of what the second-best city would be like, except for the kingship of philosophy and whatever is immediately associated with it. (This is perhaps the main difference between the Republic and the Laws: whether there is such a universal characterization of a second-best approximation to the best city with the community of women and children.] (5) A last difference is in Laks’ claim that, “In other words, in the Republic Plato does not describe praxis, that is, under what conditions the paradigmatic city is to be realized” (p. 215-16). Again, I think we need a distinction between senses of possible, which Laks does not have. On my reading, Plato does describe praxis, in the sense of the conditions under which the best city would be approximated. In this sense, Laks is wrong. But it is true—in the spirit of Laks’ claim—that the Republic never argues that the best city, with the community of women and children, is possible for human nature or for existing cities. (6) Although Laks does not quite say so explicitly, he seems to think that Plato in the Republic clearly presupposes the impossibility of the community of women and children for embodied human beings (with the appetitive part of the soul). I think the text simply takes no stand on this matter. To the extent that Laks gives arguments, I am not persuaded.
the concluding paragraphs of Books V-VII, Socrates resumes the theme of possibility, now with an additional twist: he specifies the quickest and easiest way that the philosopher-king might come into being, namely by sending away everyone over the age of 10. This implicitly suggests that there is a problem not only about whether the transition to philosopher-kings is politically possible (people can be persuaded to cooperate) but also whether it is morally possible (whether the transition to philosopher-kings could occur without intolerable injustice).

(2) How is it that the establishing of philosopher-kings constitutes an approximation to the community of women and children? One way is that the philosopher-kings would presumably work to institute the community of women and children, to the extent possible under the given circumstances. However, the establishing of philosopher-kings in its own right, i.e., independent of further measures the philosopher-kings might take, was supposed to constitute an approximation to the community of women and children. (Otherwise, the philosopher-king provide any independent justification for the possibility of approximating the community of women and children.) How does it do so? I suggest that the erotic love for knowledge (or the forms) replaces the kind of sexual and familial love that ordinarily ties human beings to one another. But it is crucial that the erotic love for knowledge ties the philosophical guardians to one another, and not only to the forms.

(3) Does Plato commit the fallacy of the second best? The fallacy of the second best is the fallacy of concluding, from the fact that situation 1 is more like the best arrangement than situation 2, that situation 1 is better than situation 2. Given that the philosopher-king is a proposal for a second-best arrangement, does the proposal commit this fallacy? No. There are two considerations. (a) People commit the fallacy of the second best when they do not make their judgments based on a full understanding of the features of the best situation, in virtue of which it is the best. Socrates has given precisely such an account of what is good about the community of women and children. We can connect this account with my explanation of how it is that the philosopher-king approximates the community of women and children, to explain how the philosopher-king will be good for the (imperfect) city. (b) Socrates gives a nuanced and sophisticated account (already cited under (1) just above) of how and why the circumstances of existing cities prevent philosophy from being useful to them. You only get a second-best city (a city with a philosopher-king but without the community of women and children) if those circumstances change. Suppose it were possible to establish a philosopher-king without changing those attendant circumstances (that is, a city in which there is a philosopher-king, but one whose rule is ineffectual). Neither Socrates nor Plato would be committed to the claim that such a city is a good one.

(4) What is the practical political upshot of the model of the best city in the Republic? It would be unsatisfying, if my interpretation is correct, for us to be unable to say anything at all about what the practical political consequences of Plato’s model of the
best city are. Yet it is difficult to say what they are. The text gives us good reasons to think that there will be no standard political consequences, which are the same across a wide array of particular political circumstances. (I infer this from the explanations of the obstacles to philosophy’s having a salutary political effect in Book VI, and from the discussion of the philosophers’ return to the cave, and from some features of the discussion of the degenerate regimes.) Rather, the specific actions to be taken will depend both on the political circumstances and on the person’s own capacities and position. But it would be wrong to infer (e.g., from VI 496a-e) that the philosopher will refrain from politics. Rather, the philosopher will pursue the political affairs of the model city (cf. IX 592a-b). For this reason, he is liable to receive no honors for his political activity (cf. IX 591e). But political activity it will be nonetheless. For instance, he may well pursue philosophical conversation with politically powerful people. And the philosopher will see the political character of many things whose importance may not be widely appreciated, such as musical / literary education, or the attachment to family, or reorienting the soul away from the perceptible and towards the intelligible. The philosopher will surely also take thought for the bad consequences, both for himself and for the city, which could arise from such activity, and will seek to avoid them.

Obviously, these are substantial claims, which would require much more extensive justification. But if the arguments of this paper are correct, then the questions listed above—which, except for (4), to my knowledge, have never been asked by commentators—need to be answered in some way or other.