Plato’s Republic and its Guardians

Instead of just giving a synopsis or commentary of The Republic, I will try to make Plato’s arguments relevant to our current state of affairs; imagine Socrates together with Gluacon who debated the value of The Republic now have new bodies. These are called Croce and Giovanni respectfully; they decide to engage in a dialogue about the Republic and its Guardians. While doing this they are fully aware of the threat posed from Mussolini’s Fascism:

Croce: Taking Plato’s definition of a Guardian and where it fits within his model for his four types of society, would you briefly consider how the dialectic should function and whether it can work for such a model?

Giovanni: I certainly will, but let us recap the attributes of a Guardian before we plough into Plato’s model of a society to see if his reasoning can stand up to a critique.

Croce: if I follow Plato correctly, the Guardians must be skilled in philosophy and the art of warfare. For philosophy they must be skilled in arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy and harmonics. These though are just a preliminary to understanding the method of the dialectic. Without this, the objects of their knowledge would not be eternal. These Guardians can also be men or women; they should also share the same education and the same occupations in peace and war. This we have already agreed. We have also agreed that when the rulers are ***appointed*** they provide accommodation for the soldiers; there will be no private quarters and everything will be common to all of them. Before any judgement regarding their value or likelihood of being, it must be remembered:

‘Dialectic, in fact, is only the procedure which proceeds by the destruction of assumptions to the very first principle, so as to give itself a firm base’ (The Republic, Penguin ed. p265, Part VIII [Book VII])

If it is not then like the slaves in the cave we will end up believing that even shadows are Gods!, or rather that the truth is all about belief and illusion which belong to opinion on the divided line. Knowledge is concerned with intelligence or dialectic and mathematical reasoning. From there you get the forms and the intelligible realm as opposed to mere phenomena; shadows and images of the visible realm. So you agree that in calling a man a dialectician he is one that can account for the essential nature of things?

Giovanni: Yes that all seems very well, but how are these Guardians to attain their title?

Croce: It is through the education and selection that an ethical and moral curriculum can be advocated and developed. Most significantly Plato says:

‘Arithmetic and geometry and all other studies leading to dialectic should be introduced at childhood, though we mustn’t exercise any form of compulsion in our teaching, as learning ought not to be under duress (p269 Ibid)

Giovanni: how though should this curriculum be created and introduced?

Croce: by those who are already skilled in philosophy, but there should be no bar on such a label and anyone or group in a free society should have the opportunity to make such a proposal. The problem then seems to be for such proposals to have the same exposure. This is to avoid the ones being selected are not hostile to the dialectic, as they can be when guided by mere opinion and beliefs of those that cannot reason about the intelligible realm. To do this I presume their publicity must be available to all within the state; otherwise selection, wealth, election or force can be used by the state’s constitution to undermine its morality. In a similar way once trained, it is the Guardians who should have the opportunity to propose a new constitution for the state. If the state proposes its own constitution, it seems obvious it will stick with the one that fits its type of society!

Giovanni: Presumably you are referring to Plato’s four imperfect societies: Timarchy, which is basically a foundation for aristocracy, Oligarchy for the super rich, Democracy for the mob, or currently the corporations and Tyranny for the military. This model even includes hereditary monarchies and states where kingship is bought, so any variation of the four types of society can be considered?

Croce: that is right, so it is wrong to presume Plato advocates the philosopher king should be a dictator. Each can be taken as an ideal, but none it would seem can create Guardians.

Giovanni: With today’s democracies the politicians have little or no training in philosophy or warfare. In fact they could be actors, lawyers and business people. There education seems to be independent from what their job is; to be a politician. It is not supposed to be bias, so some might think that by advocating philosophy and warfare their education and job title would become bias?

Croce: It is bias as their interests cannot be in a moral constitution, as it is this which they already believe the state to have. The philosopher, though is not motivated, by belief but by a knowledge of those reasons which uphold virtue. Unlike the Athenian democracy it is unlikely they would execute Socrates, but covert assassination is still a possibility given the right to bear arms in the USA. Where as in the UK there is a monarch, a house of appointed and hereditary Lords with a common house representing the elected party’s. The party’s of the government and the opposition put their interests and rights first; before the state. The state it could be argued is made up of many estates whereas the ones that are in control within the democracy are the corporations and their unions; as they finance the party’s. There interest is in privatisation and nationalisation, so the particular will of its officers are motivated by their aims. For this reason, it appears these societies can never be states that have Guardians. And those that argue that Mussolini is a Guardian forget that there is no mediation between the hereditary rights of the monarch, as none exists, and the non-hereditary rights of the government. That is, there is no real opposition which is necessary for the reasoning of the dialectic. For if the hereditary right of the monarch increases to the point where the government has no rights, you have the tyranny of the sovereign. And if the government’s rights increase to the point where the monarch has none, the government becomes sovereign and you also have a tyranny.

Giovanni: So kings must be like philosophers, in that they must not let the power of their position go to their head. And this they can only do if they have knowledge of the dialectic?

Croce: Yes, but according to Plato, if we really want a moral society; one where the interests and rights of the state come first, do we need to elect the way the guardians are educated and selected?

Giovanni: it seems some must be elected while others are not.

Croce: this is the most difficult point on which to defend Plato’s argument. It seems the education and selection of rulers can be based on the difference between real oppositions given the dialectic is concerned with their unity and difference. When only alternatives are presented as a result of debating acts and bills, the oppositions are abstract. Mere alternatives negate what is complementary by denying any difference in errors between the dialectical and logistic way of reasoning. For the logistic way of thinking, the oppositions cannot complement each other as they are falsely taken to be contradictory when they are not. So when it comes to predicting the likely consequences of society’s culture all we get is indeterminacy. Officers, like the Fascists, who put their own interests first and Guardians who put the understanding of logic first do not make the same decisions. When alternatives within a system of state are presented as a final solution its method of election, selection, opportunities and forces are imposed upon the will of its citizens. As such the state cannot weigh up the options in a way that is not limited by its final solutions. This I presume explains the financial crisis, as there is no oversight within the democracies given it is driven by capital and not the real oppositions necessary for the citizens’ freedom. This in turn leads to unmediated decision making and so the seeds for dictatorship and ideologies like Fascism.