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CHAPTER ONE

Authority and conservatism in Plato's *Republic*

Joseph M. Ellis and Casey R. Pratt

The Republic

Book VIII

Liberty makes its way into private households and in the end it breeds anarchy even among the animals. – What do you mean?

I mean, for example, that a father will accustom himself to behave like a child and to fear his sons, while the son behaves like a father, and feels neither shame nor fear before his parents, in order to be free. A resident alien is the equal of a citizen and a citizen the equal of a resident alien, and so too a foreign visitor. – This is what happens.

Yes it does, I said, and so do other such small matters. A teacher in such a community is afraid of his pupils and flatters them, while the pupils think little of their teachers or their tutors. Altogether the young are thought to be the equals of the old and compete with them in word and deed, while the old accommodate themselves to the young, and are full of playfulness and pleasantries, thus aping the young for fear of appearing disagreeable and authoritarian.¹

Plato's *Republic* is the first thoroughgoing exploration of political philosophy on record. His work captures the conversations of his great teacher, Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) on the question of justice: what it is, and how a society can be constructed to provide for it. The *Republic* is divided into ten 'books' – or chapters – and in each book, Socrates and his various interlocutors work through this question of justice. Book VIII, in particular, is a fascinating chapter for political scientists, as it lays out a theory of regime evolution which appears relevant to today's political environment. It is also a fascinating chapter for conservatives, chiefly on the question of authority. While we should be cautious in assigning to Socrates the identity of a conservative icon, an analysis of Plato's written work and Socrates' spoken words has much to contribute to conservative discourse. Some of these ideas are apparent in the writings of Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, for example (see Chapters 5 and 9).

We devote the first section of this essay to analysing Socrates' thinking on the question of authority, democracy and tyranny. In this section, attention is paid to Socrates' understanding of fathers and teachers in relation to authority, and the dangers which can arise from rejecting such authority figures. In the second section, we examine Book VIII in relation to conservatism, and how Socrates' ideas on authority might speak to our historical understanding of conservatism. In the final section, we conclude with some germane thoughts regarding the current state of conservatism and its relation to authority, in particular within the context of modern American conservatism.

In Book VII, Socrates defines the ideal regime type: a polity ruled by an aristocracy of philosopher kings. Socrates says that 'they will attach the greatest importance to doing what is right and to the honors deriving from that; they will regard justice as the greatest and most essential thing' (540e). The entire trajectory of the *Republic* builds to this moment, when Socrates lays out once and for all what the just regime looks like. By Book VIII, however, Socrates had turned his attention to the degeneration of this ideal. The above quotation (562e–563b) examines the devolution from democracy to tyranny, where ultimate freedom is traded for ultimate authority. Socrates' description of democracy is laudatory in part, but highly critical overall. He regards democracy as a regime which promotes both liberty and, in its own way, mob rule; indeed, it was this very mob that would imprison him, and eventually put him to death. But Socrates also notes that democracy is the only regime type where philosophers are genuinely free to live their lives. On this diversity and variety, Socrates remarks: 'This is the most beautiful of all constitutions. Like a cloak embroidered with every kind of ornament, so this city, embroidered with every kind of character, would seem the most beautiful, and perhaps many would judge it to be so, like children and women gazing at embroideries of many colors' (557c–557d). But the variety gives way to permissiveness, because individuals will not feel compelled to abide by any single source of authority, or 'be ruled if [they] do

not want to be' (557e). This permissiveness will lead to its downfall: order will collapse, and in that search for order, the mob will reach out to a strong 'protector' to repair what ails them.

Socrates' use of a father figure and a school teacher to catalogue this collapse of order is an important moment in the book. Traditionally, the father or teacher would be significant sources of authority. Socrates asks, hypothetically, 'What do you think will happen in a society where no one obeys their father or teacher?' This is a timeless and universal question, in the sense that societies have always depended on parents and educators of one sort or another to shape future generations. Perhaps it could be argued that fathers specifically, or teachers generally, are not always the best at doing this. But no one would dispute the historical significance of either role. For instance, in fifth century BC, *The Analects of Confucius* recorded a student asking, 'whether there were any form of encouragement by which he could induce the common people to be respectful and loyal?'²

What invests fathers and teachers with authority? The implication from Socrates is that they possess a degree of maturity, experience and, ultimately, wisdom. In degenerating to tyranny, Socrates notes that a father will behave like a child in trying to appease his child, and the child will in turn dominate the father and rebuke his power. Likewise, the teacher will come to fear his students, and instruct in such a way that the student is placated rather than educated. Grube's translation uses the word 'aping' to describe this process, whereby the elders will imitate the 'playfulness' of the younger generation in attempting to connect with them and appear less 'authoritarian.' However, the more the father or teacher descends to the level of the child, the less the child will accept him or her.

Leo Strauss (see Chapter 8) suggests that while the specifics of the political situation in Athens are unknown to the reader of the *Republic*, the conversations take place in an 'era of political decay'.³ This decay did not happen all at once, hence the need to describe the degeneration of the political process. Like the regimes Socrates documented, the collapse of the institutions of parenting and teaching is the result of a slow but theoretically inevitable deterioration. These institutions are developed over time, by a gradual process which creates two distinct populations: father/child, or teacher/student. Democracy, as Socrates understands it, begins to level that relationship, and in doing so, casts out a traditionally important source of authority.

Why fathers and teachers *should* have authority is a complex question. It would be too simple to say that fathers or educators are *naturally* more authoritative according to Socrates, and thus deserve the respect of the child strictly by the nature of the relationship. In the beginning of the *Republic*, his first conversation is with Cephalus, an old man. Socrates tells Cephalus that he 'enjoys conversing with men of advanced years', and wants to learn from the path taken by those who came before him, such as a father, implying that knowledge can be gained by experiences (328e). Moreover,

Socrates recognizes that fathers in particular can be important teachers and role models for children.

In both *Apology* and *Crito*, Socrates is acutely aware of the lesson he would teach his own sons by his actions in the court of law, and later, in prison. He admits in those dialogues, in so many words, that engaging in an injustice would undermine his authority as a father. In *Crito*, he describes how his own parents raised him to obey the laws of the city, and how he raised his own sons to obey those same laws.⁴ He also encourages the crowd to hold his sons to a high standard, saying in the *Apology*: ‘When my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue, or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody.’⁵

Without fathers and teachers, where will the son or student turn for authority and leadership? Socrates’ view is that the search for authority will lead to a tyrant, though every member of the community will set off on different paths in the last vestiges of democracy. It begins with a society that divides itself into three parts: the idlers, the money makers, and the people. The idlers do nothing and appreciate the liberty of the democratic society, the money makers obsess over wealth and the people, who work with their hands, are at first non-political, and have few possessions. As the money makers seek to control society, however, the people will resist, and they will elevate one man above the others to protect them from this threat.

Initially, Socrates renders a sympathetic portrait of such a man. Socrates refers to him as the ‘people’s champion,’ someone who protects the middle classes from the wealthy. But, the more the tyrant is elevated, the more his thirst for power becomes insatiable. Socrates says: ‘[T]he man who has tasted human flesh, a single piece of it cut up among the pieces from other sacrificial victims, must inevitably become a wolf’ (565d–565e). As this one man protects them, he will highlight the ‘enemies’ of the people, prosecute and order power around himself, all the while distributing resources to the people who put him in power. A snapshot of such a character – named Thrasymachus – is revealed in Book I of the *Republic*.

Thrasymachus is the representation of brute power in the *Republic*. His version of justice is something to the effect of *might makes right*. Thrasymachus argues that justice lies in obeying the rulers, and making your opponents weak. Such a notion of justice results in the ruler’s continued authority over the subjects (339d, 340b). But Socrates turns the tables on Thrasymachus when he notes that the best leaders rule on behalf of their subjects. The shepherd is successful because he uses his authority to care for his sheep, not simply to use the authority to abuse them. This causes Thrasymachus to blush, and ultimately to agree with Socrates that a ‘just man ... [is] wise and good, and the unjust resembles the bad and ignorant’ (350c).

The notion that justice is related not only to goodness, but also wisdom, brings us back to the significance of the father. In an earlier portion of

Book VIII, Socrates describes the dilemmas facing a young son in a society which exalts meddlers and boasters, but ignores those who mind their own business. What should the young boy do? Socrates instructs that while 'the young man sees and hears all this ... he also listens to what his father says, observes what he does from close at hand, and compares his actions with those of others'. Moreover, while the young man is pulled multiple ways by society, the father 'nourishes the reasonable part of the soul' (550b). The father becomes a central figure in Socrates' dialogue on the question of wisdom, how it is preserved and how it is passed down. These are the very same questions that conservatives like Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott would ask some 2,000 years later.

It can be unwise to make modern political assessments of historic texts and thinkers. There is a danger of making Socrates (or any classic thinker) out to be a spokesperson for one's pet political project, whether that be conservatism, liberalism, communism, fascism, and the like. In reading the *Republic*, a book in which marriage is abolished, property is shared and there is a rigorous division of the social classes, it would be hard to describe Socrates as a type of conservative in any modern sense of that word. Yet, there are aspects of the book which speak to modern political problems, especially problems identified by conservatives.

In Book VIII, Socrates laments the loss that occurs when fathers and teachers – trying to conserve and pass down tradition and knowledge from past generations – find their authority questioned and their speeches ignored. This idea of a slow but gradual process, whereby maturity, experience and wisdom are created, is the starting point for most conservative perspectives in understanding what makes society work. This view of conservatism comes from the writings of Edmund Burke, when he was lamenting the downfall of tradition and stability in France amid the upheaval of the French Revolution. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* depicts a political environment in which the traditional sources of authority, such as the family, the church and the school, are eradicated in favor of abstract principles, such as liberty. In doing so, society is left with 'no compass to govern [itself], nor can we know distinctly to what port [to] steer'.⁶ The analogy of an aimless ship is illustrative, insofar as wisdom passed down over generations is a crucial means for navigating human existence. These traditions also promote restraint and a degree of caution.

Yuval Levin, in *The Great Debate*, highlights the Burkean idea that 'prudence is a function of experience and education'.⁷ Prudence, coupled with judgment, keeps individuals safe from the excesses of an overly atomized society disconnected from traditional institutions. Levin notes that:

Breaking apart all the connections that stand between the individual and the state and leaving equal but separate individuals alone would expose them to the raw power of the state directly. The people would also have no protection from one another or from the mass of citizens, in such a

situation. Burke worries that this would leave them unable to defend their freedoms and subject to even more brutal and dangerous abuses of power than the ancient despotisms could be capable of. The social institutions that stand between the individual and the government are crucial barriers to the ruthlessness of public officials and the occasional cruelty of majorities. They are essential to liberty.⁸

Levin's remarks correspond to Socrates' fears. Fathers and teachers provide a type of bulwark against the power of the state. Once those 'social institutions' are removed, reliance on domineering political actors is more likely. The tyrant becomes a stand-in for other potential authority figures.

However, tyranny does not have to proceed just with bad actors, either. Good people come along who speak with perfectly reasonable intentions that can, in turn, however, reject traditional, more conservative ideas. Burkean Conservatism's most articulate spokesperson in the twentieth century was British educator Michael Oakeshott. In his essay 'Rationalism in Politics,' Oakeshott recognizes one of the more pernicious problems in contemporary European society as the ever-present 'Rationalist'. The Rationalist, according to Oakeshott, values reason above all other principles, shirking tradition, habit and prejudice. Oakeshott wrote:

His mental attitude is at once skeptical and optimistic: skeptical, because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls 'reason'; optimistic, because the Rationalist never doubts the power of his 'reason' ... to determine the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action.⁹

The simultaneously sceptical *and* optimistic person is a perfect description of the youth in the latter stages of Socrates' construction of democracy. Sceptical is an appropriate word in the sense that no father or teacher could possibly have knowledge worthy to be attained by the son or pupil. The outlook is optimistic in the belief that the young can do it on their own, not needing the advice or wisdom of others. Reading Oakeshott and Plato together, we should by no means conclude that reason is bad, or should be rejected outright. Reason is a prerequisite for learning philosophy, after all. But the Rationalist use of reason can become something of a battering ram to dominate others. A person driven by reason might have a type of authority, for example, but he or she might also be deficient in something like wisdom or experience. Thus, even a cursory glance at the young son in Book VIII would be a troubling turn of events for conservatives in the tradition of Burke, or Oakeshott, among others.

Moreover, as Strauss pointed out, the regime types Socrates defines are not so much ideologies as they are a composition of a political community. As Strauss wrote: '[Socrates] is concerned with the character of each kind of

regime and with the end which it manifestly and explicitly pursues.' Strauss goes on to write that democracy's downfall is that the end it pursues is 'not virtue but freedom, i.e., the freedom to live either nobly or basely according to one's liking'.¹⁰ One could, for example, make the argument that the son has much to teach the father, and certainly anyone who has ever taught a class understands how much our own students can teach us. That would seem noble. But Socrates does not see democracy approaching a noble outcome. The youth will be driven to excesses, and those excesses will mark the collapse of the democratic order.

It is important to restate that Socrates' position as some type of conservative figurehead greatly overstates his place among conservative thinkers. As an ideological movement, conservatism was not expressed in any meaningful way until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even then, had a tenuous relationship with ancient philosophy. Modern conservatism would especially reject the 'communal' arrangements recommended in the *Republic*. That said, in two very important respects, Socrates – by way of Plato's writing – has much to offer conservatism. First, the idea of authority coupled with the institutions of family and schooling is central to Socrates' thinking in Book VIII, and representative of concerns conservatives have long had about the rejection of traditional forms of authority. Second, Socrates was gravely concerned about political arrangements, which at first appear to be in the best interest of the people, to only subvert that interest over time. This is how he and many Greeks would have understood democracy during their era.

For example, the recent presidential election in the United States represented the variety, diversity and perhaps the beauty inherent in democracy. The election of Donald Trump pulled from the sidelines those whom the political establishment had abandoned. It was an election that gave many hope after years of being ignored. But his election also deeply concerned many Americans who were worried that it reflected a troubling slide into a more authoritarian, or tyrannical, moment. For these critics, he is a tyrant-in-waiting, taking advantage of the democratic structures of society to coalesce his power.

This criticism is overwrought. The United States has persevered, despite civil war, political scandal and serious ideological divisions, and will maintain democratic features long after Trump leaves office. Yet, Trump is an interesting political figure, not least because although he is perhaps not a traditional conservative in the heritage of Burke or Oakeshott, he has successfully maneuvered conservatism – at least in America – to something to fit his world view. This world view is based on a certain idea of authority that does not square with Socrates, and has little use for fathers or teachers. Trump's worldview is much closer to that of Thrasymachus, that to be authoritative is to be tough, stubborn and in charge, but not necessarily wise or particularly experienced. Again, this does not mean that Trump or Thrasymachus are textbook tyrants. And Trump is neither the first American president nor will he be the last to tangle with the media, the judiciary and

members of Congress. But through Socrates' dialogue with Thrasymachus, and his remarks in Book VIII, a composite sketch of a very perilous political character begins to take shape. Trump may not be the tyrant, but at minimum, he has come along at a time when all of the traditional sources of authority – parents, teachers, elected officials, journalists, even religious leaders – are seen as woefully inept guideposts for society.

Socrates' description of the transition from democratic government to tyranny is undoubtedly both provocative and instructive, especially for students of modern political philosophy. The people selected their protector for his strength, and while his strength was deployed in strict alignment with the interests of the people, perhaps the people were satisfied that democracy had once again righted itself. But, through a process compared to 'the legend that is told of the shrine of Lycaean Zeus in Arcadia' (565d–566a), the strong protector transforms into a tyrant; the same strength that effectively protected the people from the plundering of the wealthy class now becomes a terrible source of persecution. If Socrates does not articulate quite clearly enough to satisfy us precisely on when and how the transformation takes place, he has at least pointed us toward the key questions: from whom do we seek authority, and why; and, following an attempt to reform that problem, how much authority – how much strength – is helpful and just? And how much is dangerous?