The Noble and the Slavish Physician: 
Medical Metaphors in Plato’s Political Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways that medical and bodily metaphors shape Plato’s political philosophy. Greek medicine emphasized healthy, balanced living, preferably achieved through alteration of diet and regimen rather than surgery. Plato’s politico-medical metaphors – justice as health, soul and city as body, philosopher and statesman as doctor – similarly emphasized moderation or temperance. I identify a “triadic triage” of virtue in both individual and city: it is best to lead a moderate and healthy life, second-best to be purged and healed of decadence, and worst to remain degenerate and ill. I argue that if Plato offers a political idea in the Republic, it is the temperate, healthy so-called “city of sows,” while the purged Kallipolis is only remedial and second-best; worst is an unregenerate and feverish luxurious city. Plato also likened philosophy and sophistry to noble and slavish medicine, respectively: a noble doctor like Socrates dialectically educates the polis to temperance, while a slavish sophist enables over-indulgence. The noble physician does not engage in harsh civic surgery, preferring the gentle cure of philosophy, and is thus not totalitarian. I conclude that Plato’s medical metaphors support educational interpretations of his political thought.
If Phoebus did not cause Plato to be born in Greece, how came it that he healed the minds of men by letters? As the god’s son Asclepius is a healer of the body, so is Plato of the immortal soul. – Diogenes Laertius

Organic metaphors are an essential part of western political thought, appearing prominently and ubiquitously throughout its history, and it is not too much too say that serious usage of them begins with Plato. One of the most common organic metaphors is the image of the “body politic,” in which the body, with the complex interdependency of its diverse parts, is used as an anatomical model for organizing a political constitution (“constitution” is itself an organic political metaphor; so is “organ”-ize). Other body-related metaphors, of health and illness, growth and decay, medicine and the physician, etc. have also framed many western political ideas. While organic political and social metaphors can be traced back at least to ancient India and are recorded in Greece as early as Aesop, Plato was the first Greek thinker to fully exploit their political and philosophical potential. Before him, organic political metaphors were rare and undeveloped in Greek thought. But Plato deployed medical imagery more systematically than ever before, and it became an essential part of his political philosophy. The influence of Plato’s medical metaphors echoes in the organic conceptions of Aristotle, Seneca, Rousseau, and many others. In this paper I analyze organic metaphors from Plato’s dialogues in the context of relevant classical medical discourses. I explore the ways in which medical and bodily metaphors shape Plato’s political philosophy and conclude that they support educational interpretations of his political thought, while weakening criticism of him as a proto-totalitarian.

Cognitive Metaphor Theory and Context

According to the cognitive theories of metaphor that have emerged in recent decades, metaphor is not merely decorative embellishment or verbal expression but is cognitive and conceptual: metaphors routinely frame, structure, and even constitute thinking. For one thing, metaphor is more common than usually acknowledged and often goes unnoticed in everyday discourse. It is easy enough to see that an utterance like “we’re in the same boat together” is a metaphor. According to cognitive metaphor theory, this is no meaningless expression; it is a metaphorical way of understanding, of thinking about, two or more people are in a common situation; yet the two people are not usually literally sitting in a boat together (unless they are actually fishing or sailing). Even apparently non-metaphoric utterances are normally metaphor-laden: “The pressure of his responsibilities caused his breakdown.” Here the physical concept of “pressure” frames thinking about the demands of some social relationship, while the idea of a machine “breaking down” frames psychological distress. It is only out of habit and long use that we forget the metaphors that we are constantly using, but it takes little effort to uncover them. The most obvious metaphors are the rare original ones that help people to think and see in news ways. Most metaphors, as in the above examples, are conventional ones that appear in both everyday speech and in specialized discourses, including science and philosophy. Except among some scholars and writers, conventional metaphors are usually taken for granted as dead metaphors that have become literal. Metaphor is still widely assumed to lack cognitive content, and is therefore marginalized in favor of rational analysis. However, according to cognitive metaphor theories, the traditional distinction
between “living” and “dead” metaphor (a distinction itself based on a bodily metaphor) fails to account for the ways that metaphoric imagery underlies conceptual systems, including rational systems. In short, both novel and conventional metaphors provide patterns of inference for cognizing—patterns at work even after a metaphor becomes abstract, conventional, and loses its vividness. As Nietzsche observed, our truths are “worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.”10 Although metaphors may not entirely determine thought and discourse, according to new metaphor theories they at least guide, frame, and structure thought and speech, and they do so routinely. Even political theorists skeptical of cognitive metaphor theory are increasingly willing to acknowledge, in the wake of the linguistic and postmodern turns, that metaphors are important elements in political thought.

Despite Plato’s reputation as the father of Western rationalism, he was a master of metaphor. I do not intend in this paper to offer analyses of Plato’s general use of metaphor or his views on artistic mimesis; following modern cognitive metaphor theories, I am interested in understanding the patterns of Plato’s organic political metaphors in order to lay groundwork for further analysis of later bodies politic in the history of political thought as a broader research agenda. John Kirby points out that Plato did not have an explicit metaphor theory and did not use the word metaphor (which only achieved wide currency following Aristotle’s influential theory of rhetoric).11 Plato instead used the terms eikon (“likeness”) or paradeigma (“pattern”). In any event, the most cursory reading of Plato’s works reveals a rich interplay of imagery, and even his abstract philosophical conceptions are presented metaphorically, e.g. the doctrine of the forms is depicted by the metaphor of the divided line, the myths of the cave and of the sun, etc.12 Plato’s choices of imagery are neither random nor superficial, for their patterns define key concepts in his philosophy and establish how those concepts relate to each other. Plato repeatedly tapped the domains of the body and medicine for political theorizing, although he had no simple anatomical metaphor of the body politic. Frequently, he would create a “picture within a picture” to generate a triplet analogy, where A is like B, B is like C, and finally A is also like C; his metaphor of polity and body also included the soul as its third term, and several different permutations of the pattern body/soul/city appear in his works.13 An intricate back-and-forth between terms helps to make Plato’s oeuvre so rich by creating overlapping and multiple meanings. Plato’s political anatomy appears in the similar constitutions of the individual and the Kallipolis: the individual soul is tripartite (desiring, spirited, and reasoning parts), while the Kallipolis has three corresponding classes (producers, guardians/auxiliaries, and philosopher-rulers). Just as in a body, these elements of both city and soul are interdependent parts of larger organic wholes. Yet in both city and soul a just and healthy constitution arranges them into a proper hierarchy in which the reasoning part rules over the baser desires. A triplet analogy is also seen in the combination of philosopher/statesman/physician. This metaphor, in which medicine was conceived of as an art or techne, was a subset of the craft metaphors upon which Plato relied heavily: “In the shoes and ships of which Socrates was forever talking we have the origin of Plato’s conception of the philosopher-king, and of the virtue that is equated with knowledge.”14 Throughout Plato’s dialogues the art of medicine is used as a resource for understanding the political art (alongside other arts, of course, such as navigation).15 The fact that Plato
turned to organic metaphors repeatedly and systematically when discussing key subjects such as justice suggests that they were indeed necessary and significant to the creation of meaning in his political philosophy. As one commentator noted, in the Republic the body/soul/city metaphor “pervades the whole dialogue as a framework. It is thus by no means mere ornament, but comes to form a very extensive, oft-reiterated and essential part of Plato’s thought.” The images of justice as the health of the soul and city and the philosopher as their doctor are key pillars of Plato’s philosophy.

Plato did not, however, craft his organic political metaphors in a vacuum. In metaphorically importing ideas about bodies and medicine into his political analysis, he was importing from the medical discourses of his time, not from ours, a point which must be kept in mind. To interpret his medical and bodily images through the lens of our own modern medical discourse would be anachronistic and misleading. Elements of classical medicine such as the theory of the four humors are evident in Plato’s organic political conceptions; the idea that justice was a proper ordering or balance of things corresponds well to ancient views of health as the proper balance of bodily forces or humors. Alcmaeon of Croton, writing in the early fifth century BC, had introduced the idea that bodily health was a matter of the equilibrium (isonomia) of its forces, whereas the domination (monarchia) of any one of them was the cause of disease. Shortly thereafter, Empedocles postulated four powers in the human body: hot, cold, moist, and dry; these found their way into the Hippocratic medical text The Nature of Man as the four humors of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. So began the erroneous but influential theory of the bodily “humors” that dominated medicine for the next two thousand years, mainly because of religious prohibitions against dissection, which would have empirically disproved the theory. Plato’s argument in the Timaeus that the body and cosmos had similar structures was a variation on what by then had become Greek conventional wisdom: just as the cosmos was thought to consist of a balance of the four elements of air, earth, fire, and water, so the human body must maintain a balance between the four humors. Empedocles’ theory of the four elements of the body, and the idea that health was some sort of balance, are known to have influenced Plato via Philostion of Locri. The parallel to Plato’s call for a balance in the soul between the four virtues of justice, wisdom, temperance, and courage is striking, and suggests significant conceptual crossovers, via metaphor, between the domains of medicine and politics.

This emphasis on a healthy balance or arrangement of the forces of the body was influential in medical practice as well as theory. Today, western scientific medicine emphasizes pills and procedures to treat illness rather than healthy choices of diet and lifestyle. The ancient Greeks, lacking advanced surgical techniques and modern pharmaceuticals, had to rely on natural approaches. The physician’s art consisted of determining the specific way that the body had become unbalanced and then prescribing an appropriate regimen of diet, exercise, baths, and massages to restore the disordered body to a healthy equilibrium. Painful, invasive cures were resorted to only when these gentler measures had failed. The centrality of natural herbs to both medicine and food preparation intimately linked the two fields. Most herbs are both dietary and medicinal; Hippocrates is credited with saying, “Let your food be your medicine.” This focus on diet and regimen influenced Plato’s approach to justice in a city: an unjust city should
moderate excessive habits to healthier ones, under the advice of the political equivalent of a doctor.\textsuperscript{23}

Some of the most misguided interpretations of Plato have neglected these issues of context and metaphor. Recent commentators have kept Plato’s ostensible totalitarianism a live issue,\textsuperscript{24} despite multiple refutations.\textsuperscript{25} Most critics who have followed Karl Popper in attributing a totalitarian “organic theory” of the state to Plato have failed to understand the literary functions of his organic metaphors, and their literal readings overstate Plato’s authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{26} They paint a picture of Plato’s philosopher-king as a tyrannical butcher of a surgeon who cuts, hacks, and cauterizes the political body in order to implement a utopian vision without heed to the welfare of individuals.\textsuperscript{27} These accusations must be revised in light of the way that Plato actually employs his organic metaphors. Since medicine in Plato’s time was not the surgery-oriented biological engineering that it has now become, but aimed at healthy balance and stressed gentler, less painful cures, it becomes harder to sustain the claim that Plato was an advocate of “organic” totalitarian measures. In addition, some commentators take Plato’s political proposals at face value and ignore that, whatever else he might be doing, he is using the city as a metaphor for the soul. That Plato does so suggests that his most provocative proposals, such as the censorship, the birth lottery, etc. of the Republic, may not have been meant for implementation as part of a political program, but had something to do with individual souls.

Consequently, the following reading of Plato’s medical and bodily metaphors supports a less overtly “political” interpretation of his political philosophy and certainly a less authoritarian one than some interpreters have given. It instead supports educative interpretations in which the primary aim is not to design a utopian political constitution but to educate citizens’ souls to temperance and justice.\textsuperscript{28} This education is, as I understand it, political in its aims and effects, but not its methods: it is to be done, in most cases at least, not through a harsh totalitarian purging but through a much gentler form of medicine.

**Justice, Temperance, and Asclepius the God of Healing**

Justice is the fulcrum around which Plato’s metaphor of health in body, city, and soul turns, the site where medicine, politics, and philosophy share common ground. Justice, for Plato, is a proper arrangement of parts such that each minds its own business and performs its appropriate role, a conception patterned after a healthy body.\textsuperscript{29} “Producing health is a question of arranging the elements of the body so that they control one another – and are controlled – in the way that nature intends… Does it not follow… that producing justice in its turn is a question of arranging the elements of the soul so that they control one another – and are controlled – in the way that nature intends?”\textsuperscript{30} Plato’s medical metaphors emphasize a certain aspect of health: health requires avoiding injury and disease, obviously, but this primarily means avoiding over-indulgence, which throws the forces of the body into disorder. For Plato the virtue of temperance or moderation (sophrosune) thus becomes singular to living a healthy life, and metaphorically for creating just political arrangements. “When the body’s natural constitution is ruined, life seems not worth living, even with every variety of food and drink, and all manner of wealth and power.”\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, in the Republic the virtues of temperance and justice blur together considerably,\textsuperscript{32} and Plato spoke elsewhere of the virtue of moderation: “[I]f any one gives too great a power to anything, too large a sail to a vessel, too much food to the
body, too much authority to the mind, and does not observe the mean, everything is overturned, and, in the wantonness of excess runs in the one case to disorders, and in the other to injustice, which is the child of excess.”  

Thus, justice was a matter of balance or moderation, and Plato’s medical metaphors evince a concern with moderate, healthy living that mirrors the Greek medical emphasis on balancing the body’s forces.  

Before discussing Plato’s metaphors of body/soul/city, it will be useful to recount some of his medical metaphors, for he makes important distinctions about different types of medicine that are crucial. In the Republic these distinctions emerge in a discussion of the kinds of medicine practiced by followers of the healing god Asclepius. Mythically, Asclepius was a great healer who had once been mortal, although a son of Apollo; either he or his sons were the physicians of the Greek army at Troy. The cult of Asclepius came to prominence about the same time as the emergence of Hippocratic medicine and had been growing during Plato’s time; eventually a temple built to him on the island of Kos would become a center of healing in the Greek world. Plato mentions Asclepius more than once in his works, including a lengthy discussion of the Asclepian approach to medicine and diet in the Republic at 405d-408c.  

There is good reason to think that this passage is of special importance: Socrates’ last words, as conveyed by Plato in the earlier Phaedo, were “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it.” There was something so important about Asclepius that Plato’s Socrates refers to this god of healing on his deathbed, in his very last breath, and then Plato later discussed Asclepius in the Republic. It would be curious if this were mere coincidence.  

Plato refers to two different “schools” of Asclepian medicine in the Republic: an original unadulterated version and a later corrupted version. The topic of Asclepian medicine comes right after a discussion of the temperance-oriented education of the guardians: their musical education is to consist of simple, unmixed modes, and their physical training and diet are also to be “simple and judicious.” Socrates then returns the discussion to the city; bad education means that doctors and judges must correct for citizens’ poor self-discipline: “As lawlessness and disease multiply in a city, don’t lawcourts and clinics start opening up all over the place?” The lack of internal justice in the poorly educated requires that justice and health be produced externally – the worse the character of the citizens, the more that legal punishment and harsh medicine are needed as remedies. But Socrates is averse to such coercive measures, and would rather see lawful and/or healthy behavior come from the internal motives of the citizens. He says that it is disgraceful “to need medical attention, not as a result of injuries or the onset of some seasonal illness, but because our inactivity, and a [decadent] routine such as we have described, have filled us up with gas and ooze, like a marsh, and compelled those clever doctors of the school of Asclepius to invent names like ‘wind’ and ‘flux’ for our diseases.” Here the corrupted school of Asclepius is associated with easing the unpleasant results of intemperance rather than healing the ill and infirm.  

As an example of this wrong-headed approach to medicine, Socrates points to Herodicus, a gymnastics trainer who became an invalid. In an attempt to prolong his life he embarked on a regimen of purgatives, drugs, surgery, and physical therapy, “making his own death such a long drawn-out business.” In so doing he made himself and everyone around him miserable, without achieving anything in the end: “He devoted himself to his terminal illness – without ever really managing to cure himself – and spent his whole life completely wrapped up in the business of being a patient.” Plato then has
Socrates distinguish between the current insalubrious Asclepian medicine and past practice as it was originally intended by the god: “it was not until the time of Herodicus, or so they say, that the school of Asclepius took up the modern medicine which is a slave to the disease.” The choice of Herodicus to exemplify this slavish medicine is no accident: in the Gorgias, Socrates calls attention to his profession as a doctor or trainer and points out that Herodicus is the brother of Gorgias – a sophist. But originally Asclepius intended no such slavishness; rather, Plato says, he introduced things like purgatives and surgery only to assist the healing of normally healthy bodies that had suffered some injury or acute illness. He did not intend his cures to be corrupted into a way of life for those chronically ill from overindulgence. It is better, says Socrates, to use medicine as it was originally intended by Asclepius – to return the patient to health, so that he may fulfill his proper function in the city:

There are some people whose constitution and regimen give them good physical health, but who have contracted some identifiable illness. It was for their benefit, and for people in their situation, that he taught the art of medicine, using drugs and surgery to rid them of their diseases, but then prescribing their normal daily routine, to avoid disruption to civic life, whereas he did not try to prescribe for those whose bodies are internally riddled with disease. He didn’t try to purge a little here, give a little medicine there, and in this way give men long and unpleasant lives...

Plato then has Glaucon reply, “A bit of a statesman [politikon], your Asclepius,” explicitly recalling attention to the metaphor of justice and health. Socrates then makes the link to temperance: “for men who had been in good health and living a sober life before they were wounded, [the Asclepiads’] drugs were a sufficient cure.” However, “if someone was naturally unhealthy, and leading a dissolute life, they regarded his life as of no value either to himself or anyone else. They did not believe their art was intended for people like this, and they refused to treat them, even if they were richer than Midas.” In sum, an indulgent, luxurious lifestyle leads to ill health, yet, like Herodicus, intemperate people would prefer to prolong their sickly lives through medical procedures rather than live healthily in the first place. Thus, there are two kinds of medicine available to patients: one prescribes a temperate, healthy regimen and supplements this with judicious use of drugs and purges. The other facilitates intemperance by using drugs and surgery to temporarily assuage its negative effects. It is like taking a hangover cure just so you can get drunk again, rather than simply drinking moderately. Plato’s point is that the best thing is to live well and not make yourself sick in the first place; don’t allow bad habits and indulgence in pleasures to ruin your body and necessitate a medical quick-fix that does not really cure you. Thus, corrupted medicine of the later Asclepian sort that is “slave to the disease” is not best, but second-best, compared to healthy, temperate living.

The idea that living in a healthy way is best while undergoing medical treatment is only second-best is supported by a line of argument from the Gorgias that applies this logic to the condition of one’s soul: it is best to have an innocent soul, because curing a dissolute one involves the pain of punishment. Socrates and the rhetor Polus are discussing what it means for a person to be benefited by something, and they agree that, in the case of punishment, a person is benefited by the punishment if his soul is improved. Lack of virtue is the evil of the soul, as “disease and deformity” are of the
Socrates then asks, “And what art frees us from disease? Does not the art of medicine?,” to which Polus assents; they then conclude that as the physician heals the sick body from disease, so the judge heals the sick soul from vice. However, Socrates and Polus acknowledge that healing and punishment are useful and beneficial things, but not pleasant ones. They conclude that the best situation is to never be sick in the first place; the second best, to be sick but to endure a doctor’s or judge’s unpleasant ministrations; and the worst is to be sick but never healed:

SOCRATES: But is the being healed a pleasant thing, and are those who are being healed pleased?
POLUS: I think not.
SOCRATES: A useful thing, then?
POLUS: Yes.
SOCRATES: Yes, because the patient is delivered from a great evil; and it is worth his while to endure the pain, and get well?
POLUS: Certainly.
SOCRATES: And would he be the happier man in his bodily condition, who is healed, or who never was out of health?
POLUS: Clearly he who was never out of health.
SOCRATES: Yes; for happiness surely does not consist in being delivered from evils, but in never having had them.
POLUS: True.
SOCRATES: And suppose the case of two persons who have some evil in their bodies or in their souls, and that one of them is treated and delivered from evil, and another is not being treated, but retains the evil—which of them is the more miserable?
POLUS: Clearly he who is not being treated.
SOCRATES: And was not punishment said by us to be a deliverance from the greatest of evils, which is vice?
POLUS: True.
SOCRATES: And justice chastens us, and makes us more just, and is the medicine of our vice?
POLUS: True.
SOCRATES: He, then, has the first place in the scale of happiness who has no vice in his soul; for this has been shown to be the greatest of evils.
POLUS: Clearly.
SOCRATES: And he has the second place, who is being delivered from vice?
POLUS: True.
SOCRATES: That is to say, he who is receiving admonition and rebuke and punishment?
POLUS: Yes.
SOCRATES: Then he lives worst, who, being unjust, is not being delivered from injustice?
POLUS: Certainly.

Socrates proceeds to identify those who evade punishments as “tyrants and rhetoricians” who use sophistry to escape correction “because, like a child, [they are] afraid of the pain of being burned or cut” and thus do not “pay the penalty to the physician for [their] sins.
against [their] constitution.” Such sophistry is called “disgraceful” in the *Republic*, and immediately following the discussion of Asclepian medicine, Socrates compared the physician and judge. To be a doctor, Socrates says, it is necessary to have a very deep personal experience of diseases and illnesses, so doctors should afflict themselves with poisons and diseases to get this experience first-hand. This works because they do not treat the body with the body, but treat the body with the mind. Judges, however, cannot do this with regard to vice and injustice, for judges whose souls have been polluted by vice and are then healed do not become better but worse at laying judgment upon others, because they treat the mind with the mind. Thus the best judges are those that never gave themselves over to vice in the first place.

So where do we stand? Plato has argued with regard to the body that the best condition is to live a healthy life and avoid illness; second best is to become sick but be healed; worst is to be sick but not be healed. In the last case, the ill person avoids the pain of being healed and instead uses medicine to prolong his indulgence. Likewise, this applies to the condition of the soul: best is to live virtuously and temperately; second best to live viciously but to be healed by punishment; worst is to remain vicious in soul by avoiding the pain of punishment. Plato has created three ranks of evaluation for bodies and souls to guide his philosophical medicine, and we will find it convenient to give a name to this ranking scheme. Borrowing a modern medical term we might dub it a triadic “triage.” Now let us examine the last term of Plato’s organic metaphor, the city.

### A Tale of Three Cities

In the *Republic* Plato depicts a city that grows through three stages, almost as if it were an individual growing and developing throughout life (although for convenience I will sometimes refer to these stages as three different cities). Temperance and medicine are main themes in this narrative. The first permutation of the city appears in Book II of the *Republic*, where Socrates and his young companions have been trying to define justice by examining cases of individual behavior, with limited results. Socrates suggests a change in tactics: they might do better if they look for justice in something bigger than the individual. Because human intelligence is poor, he says, searching for justice in the individual soul is like reading small letters from a distance with weak eyesight: it would help to have a copy in bigger writing, for then you could read the large letters first, compare them to the small, and see if they say the same thing. Accordingly, the group agrees to look for justice in a city first, for if they find it there they will see it better in the individual. This passage is an explicit signal from Plato that he is using a metaphor (*paradeigma* or *eikon*), and it should cast doubt on any proposed “literal” interpretation of Plato’s political philosophy. Indeed, Plato repeats this signal almost immediately by having Socrates state that the city will be created in the realm of ideas or speech (*logos*) right before beginning to describe its first version; this gets variously translated as “hypothetical,” in “theory,” or “in the ideal.” Another explicit pointer appears later at the conclusion of the construction and development of the city at the end of Book IX, where it is again called a city “in words.” Thus, within the dialogue the discussion of the cities is bookended by reminders that they are cities *in speech*, imaginary and discursive. In the later bookend, Socrates and Glaucon are questioning whether the good man would take part in politics, and they conclude that he would not in his “native,” real-world city, but would in the “regime within him,” or “the city which is his own,” “the city
we have just been founding and describing, our hypothetical city, since I [Glaucon] don’t think it exists anywhere on earth.” Socrates agrees, saying that this city is unlikely to come into being on earth “barring some heaven-sent piece of good fortune,” and if it exists it does so as a “pattern or model (paradeigma) laid up in heaven somewhere, for anyone who chooses to see it – and seeing it, chooses to found a city within himself” They conclude that it is moot whether the proposals of the dialogue are practical as a real-world political program: the soul is what is of concern, and the city described in the Republic is only a pattern (paradeigma) for it – it is, in short, a metaphor.

The first city that Socrates and his young interlocutors describe is one that not only illustrates the metaphor of body/soul/city but also underscores the virtue of temperance. Socrates begins by establishing that the community will consist of interdependent members who organize a division of labor to meet their needs. Even in the simple city this division of labor is extensive: in addition to farmers and herdsmen, the city has weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and other skilled laborers; merchants, arbitrageurs, and seamen for commerce; and finally manual laborers. These are all “honest trades,” ones that produce some tangible benefit to the city; there are no parasitic financiers, vanity-oriented hairdressers, or flattering sophists in evidence. Daily life is simple: the people live in modest houses, wear plain clothes, eat a coarse but healthy diet, and spend their evenings reclining on straw beds, drinking wine moderately, and singing the praises of the gods. Their simple diet would have been associated with the lower class: barley cakes, wild vegetables, chickpeas, and the like were considered poor people’s food, as many might consider macaroni and cheese today. Yet this modest way of life is by no means a subsistence economy of deprivation and disease, but just the opposite. Socrates says that people living in this way will “live quite happily with one another,” “avoid poverty and war,” and, “living lives which are peaceful and in all probability healthy, they will die in old age, handing down the same way of life to their descendants.” A conclusion is reached: justice is found in the relationships between the parts of this city, “in some sort of need which those elements have of one another,” that is, in the mutual benefit they provide to one another.

Glaucon, urbane and gluttonous, balks at this moderate way of life, complaining about the rural rudeness of the diet and objecting that the city will not have the “art of cookery.” He protests, “If you were organizing a city of pigs, Socrates, isn’t that just how you would feed them?” and thus this first simple and healthy city is sometimes called the city of sows. Glaucon craves more comfort and luxury for the city, and Socrates clarifies that indeed the citizens would have an art of cookery, a simple one consistent with good health. Many believe that this city is rejected by Socrates as a pattern for a just and desirable way of life, because he seemingly accepts Glaucon’s criticism and moves so quickly to the next city. Furthermore, the simple city is often thought to be unsuitable to Socrates’ philosophical project: it appears to neither have nor need philosophy or justice, and some interpreters consider it unrealistic. But there are reasons for doubt. For one thing, Socrates immediately says that the simple city is indeed best, and it would seem sensible to take Socrates’ opinion more seriously than Glaucon’s: “So we are not looking at the origin of a city, apparently, we are looking at the origin of a luxurious city…I think the true city – the healthy version, as it were – is the one we have just described. But let’s also look at the swollen and inflamed city, if that is what you prefer.” Socrates thus makes an association between luxurious indulgence and a city (or
soul) being ill—“swollen and inflamed”—using health to describe the political body (and
the soul). Moderate cities (and temperate souls) are “true” and “healthy,” according to
Socrates. Furthermore, as noted above, simple cities are just in their internal
arrangements, and so a kind of healthy, unspoiled justice can be found there. Why, then,
does Socrates agree to discuss a luxurious, swollen, inflamed city? He does so, he says, to
“see the point where justice and injustice come into existence in cities.”75 In the account
that follows, it becomes clearer that in Socrates’ hypothetical cities (which are models for
the soul), it is necessary to see exactly when injustice emerges before determining when
justice returns.

Socrates and his companions consequently depict a luxurious, feverish city. In
addition to the few belongings that the citizens needed for their formerly simple lives,
they now become acquisitive and fill their homes with possessions: “They will have
couches and tables, and other furniture in addition, and cooked dishes of course, and
incense, perfumes, call-girls, cakes—every variety of these things. As for those needs we
talked about at the beginning, we can no longer prescribe only the bare necessities—
housing, clothing, and shoes. We must introduce painting and decoration, and start using
gold and ivory and all those sorts of things…”76 The city engorges itself and its waistline
expands in terms of population and geography.77 Now there must be hunters, domestic
servants such as nannies, and also chefs, artists, musicians, poets, actors, beauticians,
etc.78 The art of cookery becomes sophisticated and concerned more with pleasing the
taste than with health. Significantly, Socrates emphasizes that the citizens will “need
people to keep pigs as well. We didn’t have them in our earlier city, since there was no
need for them, but in this city there will be need for them, as also for all sorts of other
livestock, in case anyone wants them to eat.”79 Why single out pigs? Here Socrates has
slyly but explicitly repudiated Glaucon’s earlier characterization of the healthy city as a
city of pigs, and countered that an avaricious, luxurious city, a city grown fat, is truly the
one full of pigs, both animal and human.

This veiled criticism of the feverish city is buttressed by Socrates’ subsequent
observation that the city’s original territory will no longer be sufficient to meet its
voracious appetite, so warfare is born as the city must cannibalistically consume other
cities: “Do we need, then, to carve ourselves a slice of our neighbors’ territory, if we are
going to have enough for pasturage and ploughing? And do they in turn need a slice of
our land, if they too give themselves up to the pursuit of unlimited wealth, not confining
themselves to necessities?”80 The luxurious city is not only the true city of pigs; the
citizens’ avarice turns them into aggressive, wild boars – and consequently the city needs
a professional army to fight and die to supply it with luxuries. Socrates underscores that
he and his interlocutors have found the original cause of war, “the commonest cause of
evil in cities, when evil does arise, both in private life and public life”—greed.81
Immoderation has not only led the city to become swollen and inflamed, but also to
commit injustice against cities around it, and so the point where injustice emerges is
discovered. So the reason to move from the simple to the feverish city has been to
contrast temperate simplicity and intemperate indulgence, which clarifies the origin of
injustice. (The next step will be to heal this injustice). This is hardly a rejection of
simplicity as a way of life.

After diagnosing the fat and inflamed city, Socrates and his interlocutors spend
much of the rest of the Republic “purging” it, and the result is a third city, one healed of
its sickness and restored to justice, the (in)famous Kallipolis. The process should be familiar enough to readers that I will not recount the steps. The “medical” proposals that Plato puts forward to heal the feverish city are the focal point of objection for advocates of the totalitarian thesis, but reading with an eye to Plato’s metaphors of medicine raises doubts about their critique.

First, note how the three cities of the Republic correspond to “triadic triage” that Plato delineated in the Gorgias. Since the body/soul/city metaphor extensively shapes Plato’s political thinking, and since Socrates has said that the cities are hypothetical paradigms of bodies and for souls, then it is reasonable to apply the triadic triage to all the terms of the city also. Plato himself explicitly did so in the Laws, indicating that he was still thinking in these terms near the end of his life:

But war, whether external or civil, is not the best, and the need of either is to be deprecated; but peace with one another, and good will, are best… a man might as well say that the body was in the best state when sick and purged by medicine, forgetting that there is also a state of the body which needs no purge. And in like manner no one can be a true statesman, whether he aims at the happiness of the individual or state, who looks only, or first of all, to external warfare; nor will he ever be a sound legislator who orders peace for the sake of war, and not war for the sake of peace.

Extending Plato’s reasoning that there is “a state of the body which needs no purge” from individuals to cities, the implication is that if Plato does present a political ideal in the Republic it is not the Kallipolis, but the simple city that never gave itself over to feverish, luxurious living in the first place and thus needed no purge – i.e. the so-called city of sows, which Socrates had called true and healthy. The Kallipolis is only second best, for it is a city that has undergone a painful regimen of purges to restore its healthy balance, and therefore is not ideal. However, a feverish city is better off to face the ministrations of the philosopher-king after having fallen into luxurious indulgence rather than to continue in its vice. Being cured is only second best, but it is worse still to avoid taking your medicine and to remain sick. In sum, the ranking according to the triadic triage is 1) Simple city; 2) Kallipolis; 3) Feverish city. If I am right, then those who criticize the Kallipolis as Plato’s misguided and totalitarian utopia aim at the wrong target: they mistake a remedial political design for the ideal one. Plato’s point with this tale of cities is that the best, most just, life for both city and soul is one lived moderately and temperately.

Critics might counter that this distinction is of little import. Even if the Kallipolis is remedial and not a utopian ideal, it is still a real political program, and its procedures are oppressive: attempting to “heal” a decadent city entails harsh civic surgery, for the freedom of individuals in a city undergoing “treatment” will be curtailed and they will suffer severely. The metaphor of a patient voluntarily undergoing some pain for the sake of future health is stretched too far when the body in question is a political one, for “purging” and “treatment” really mean exile and execution for some individuals.

But it is also important to recall that the cities in the Republic are paradigms for the souls of individuals. Often, both Plato’s critics and defenders operate on the assumption that Plato advocated political authoritarianism. But if Plato is speaking metaphorically about the character not of the city but of the soul, then this limits potential interpretations, because he may not be talking about political authoritarianism but about
educational authority. Within the city metaphor, education is emphasized as it is throughout the dialogue at different levels: the purging of the feverish city is done in part by simplifying and moderating the “diet” of poetry and music received by the souls of the guardians of the city. What critics label as totalitarian censorship is Socrates moderating the food of the soul – and if the city is a metaphor for the soul, then what he is doing is laying out an educational “curriculum” for philosophic students, one that expunges references to the intemperance and avarice (pleonexia) of gods and heroes and instead valorizes healthy, philosophic virtues. Given the body/city/soul metaphor, we cannot take it for granted that the proposals in the Republic for censorship, a caste structure, exile, community of women and children, and so on, are meant as serious political proposals; they might be metaphors meant to create justice in souls, not cities. And if the prescriptions for the Kallipolis are not literal policy proposals but metaphors useful in character education (paideia), then Plato’s statements cannot accurately be characterized as totalitarian.

**Bedside Manner: the Gentle Cure**

Another objection might remain: what if Plato was talking about both cities and souls? Doesn’t he sometimes make a correspondence between the constitution of a city and the kinds of individuals who inhabit it? For example, in Book VIII of the Republic, he associates the timocratic city with the timocratic man, the democratic city with the democratic man, etc. Perhaps Plato meant the Kallipolis as both a pattern for a soul and a serious constitutional design. I doubt this, for reasons already noted: Socrates repeatedly calls it a city in speech; he says that its true existence is as a pattern in the heavens; and even if it is more than an image he states that it would take a heaven-sent miracle to realize it on earth. This last statement does suggest that the Kallipolis may have been meant as an actual design, but one so unlikely to come to fruition that Plato might find it necessary to advocate an alternative political strategy to promote justice.

Let us say for the sake of argument that Plato was discussing cities in some real sense, and take the proposals for censorship, etc. under consideration as part of a political program. Further reasonable doubt against the charge of proto-totalitarianism arises in light of some of Plato’s other medical metaphors. These suggest that, in politics as in medicine, gentle cures should be tried before harsh ones. In the Gorgias, Plato had recognized that medicine and punishment were beneficial but not pleasant; that, however, does not mean that a physician or lawmaker has to maximize the pain:

> And surely most people insist on this, – that the lawgivers shall enact laws of such a kind that the masses of the people accept them willingly; just as one might insist that trainers or doctors should make their treatments or cures of men’s bodies pleasurable. [Exactly so.] But in fact one often has to be content if one can bring a body into a sound and healthy state with no great amount of pain.

And thus, the metaphorical implication runs, a legislator will not always be able to pass laws that are pleasing, but must be satisfied if he can enact reforms that are beneficial to the city while also keeping the necessary pain to a minimum. Here Plato suggests that there is a kind of physician-statesman with a tender bedside manner whose gentle ministrations can restore a dissolute city to health, but who avoids inflicting excessive or unnecessary pain. If this were the case, then we might still successfully charge Plato with elitism (for privileging the authority of the lawmaker), but not totalitarianism.
Now, recalling that cities are souls written in large letters and that Plato was concerned with education, one possibility with regard to the gentle political cure is that it might consist of education through dialectic rather than the crude medicine of coercive law. Plato had discussed mild medicine earlier in the Laws, focusing on deliberative rather than coercive political relationships. Seeking the least painful way of purifying an inflamed city, he distinguishes between a lawmaker who simply issues commands and one who respects citizens enough to provide an explanation for a law:

And is our legislator to have no preface to his laws, but to say at once, Do this, avoid that – and then holding the penalty in terrorem, to go on to another law; offering never a word of advice or exhortation to those for whom he is legislating, after the manner of some doctors? For of doctors, as I may remind you, some have a gentler, others a ruder method of cure; and as children ask the doctor to be gentle with them, so we will ask the legislator to cure our disorders with the gentlest remedies... And yet legislators never appear to have considered that they have two instruments which they might use in legislation – persuasion and force; for in dealing with the rude and uneducated multitude, they use the one only as far as they can; they do not mingle persuasion with coercion, but employ force pure and simple.  

Here we see a hint that achieving reform in a polis like Athens requires the legislator to make good use of his persuasive skills. The two types of lawmaking are here and elsewhere metaphorically compared to two types of doctors, the first of whom pursues a deliberative course of treatment and the second a crude empirical course: “What I mean to say is, that besides doctors there are doctors’ servants, who are also styled doctors…they acquire their knowledge of medicine by obeying and observing their masters; empirically and not according to the natural way of learning proper to freemen....,” i.e. dialectic. Thus there are “noble” and “slavish” doctors. The slavish doctor’s empirical method is tyrannical, but the noble doctor uses a deliberative alternative:

You are aware that there are these two classes of doctors?... And did you ever observe that there are two classes of patients in states, slaves and freemen; the slave doctors run about and cure the slaves, or wait for them in the dispensaries – practitioners of this sort never talk to their patients individually, or let them talk about their own individual complaints? The slave doctor prescribes what mere experience [empeirias] suggests, as if he had exact knowledge; and when he has given his orders, like a tyrant, he rushes off with equal assurance to some other servant who is ill; and so he relieves the master of the house of the care of some of his invalids. But the other doctor, who is a freeman, attends and practices upon freemen; and he carries his enquiries far back, and goes into the nature of the disorder; he enters into discourse with the patient and with his friends, and is at once getting information from the sick man, and also instructing him as far as he is able, and he will not prescribe for him until he has first convinced him; at last, when he has brought the patient more and more under his persuasive influences and set him on the road to health, he attempts to effect a cure.  

Thus, the best kind of doctor or lawmaker is not one who relies on empirical methods “like a tyrant,” but one who respects his patients enough to diagnose their ills dialectically, and then convince them of the need for treatment. Could it be that the
philosopher-king, allegedly a totalitarian tyrant, is really one who prefers deliberating with and persuading citizens rather than the harsh measures of political purging? Is it possible that Socrates was the philosopher-king, the deliberative, noble doctor who pursued his cures via discussion, seeking to convince the freemen of Athenians to temper their “swollen and inflamed” habits using the dialectic of philosophy, rather than participating directly in politics and coercive lawmaking? At one point Socrates directly compares the noble physician and the lawmaker-philosopher. The kind of cure that the noble doctor seeks is not the surgical amputation of diseased members, but the education of the patient to live a healthier life; a slavish doctor observing such a course of treatment will in fact confuse the noble doctor with a teacher and ridicule him for it:

Do you remember the image in which I likened the men for whom laws are now made to slaves who are doctor by slaves? For of this you may be very sure, that if one of those empirical physicians, who practise medicine without science, were to come upon the gentleman physician talking to his gentleman patient, and using the language almost of philosophy, beginning at the beginning of the disease and discoursing about the whole nature of the body, he would burst into a hearty laugh – he would say what most of those who are called doctors always have at their tongue’s end: Foolish fellow, he would say, you are not healing the sick man, but you are educating him; and he does not want to be made a doctor, but to get well… and he might remark upon us, that he who discourses about laws, as we are now doing, is giving the citizens education and not laws; that would be a rather telling observation.  

Socrates believes it the task of the civic doctor to educate his patients, the freemen of the city, to live their lives in a healthier way – he practices the original, uncorrupted form of Asclepian medicine, educating people to a proper regimen for body and soul, and only occasionally resorting to the political equivalents of drugs and surgery. Socrates sought to heal feverish Athens and brings its people back to temperance, but as a noble doctor rather than a tyrant, using the gentle cure of philosophical persuasion. His actual, real-world practice was not the route of political purging as depicted in the hypothetical Kallipolis, but the patient path of the noble doctor who first convinces his patients to adopt a healthy, temperate regimen.

Sophists as Slavish Doctors

The two types of Asclepian medicine – that which heals the strong constitution and that which is slave to the disease – closely correspond to philosophy and sophistry, respectively. One of these types of medicine is, for Plato, a kind of political quackery, while the other truly promotes the health of the city.  

This is clear if we return to another of Plato’s discussions of cooking, this time in the Gorgias. There, Socrates points to sophisticated cooking like that practiced in a feverish city and says that it is not a true art like medicine or seamanship but only an empty “experience” (empeirian) – a pastime or activity designed to delight one’s dinner guests. A host flatters and impresses guests by serving them a fine meal, but also by wearing fine clothes and perfume, having face and hair done up, etc. Cookery, tailoring, and hairdressing thus form a category of flattering activities that deal with the empirical world of appearances – as do sophistry and rhetoric. The latter, says Socrates, are forms of mass flattery in the courts and the assembly. Their practitioners are masters of persuasion, but do not have real knowledge of the
subjects of which they speak, any more than a chef has a doctor’s knowledge about a healthy diet:

Cookery assumes the semblance of medicine, and pretends to know what food is the best for the body; and if the physician and the cook had to enter into a competition in which children were the judges, or men who had no more sense than children, to decide which of them best understands the goodness or badness of food, the physician would be starved to death. A flattery I deem this to be and of an ignoble sort…

Thus, all forms of flattery consist of ignorant people charming other ignorant people, usually for manipulative purposes. That is, the purpose of sophistry, the form of flattery in the political realm, is to hold power over people. It is a kind of tyranny. Not only does Plato identify the slavish doctor with the tyrant, but he also suggests that the sophist has a tyrannical soul, as is clear from Plato’s account early in the Republic of Thracymachus’ bestial rage, combined with his description of the tyrannical soul in Book IX. To follow the advice of a tyrant and sophist is to follow the prescription of a quack who knows nothing of the art of the physician, since he knows nothing of temperance and the proper arrangement of souls or cities, but lets desire rule all.

Immediately after this statement in the Gorgias, Socrates explicitly analogizes: as cookery is to medicine, so rhetoric is to justice. Pleasures can be either good or evil, as can pains; but cookery, flattery, and the like are concerned not with distinguishing good pleasures from bad ones but only with pleasure as such. That is why they are poor guides to action. Listening to a sophist in the assembly is like calling on a cook rather than a doctor for advice about diet – and it follows that listening to a sophist during a state crisis is like eating your cook’s pastries as medicine when on death’s door. The words of the sophist may be sweet, but they do not make the city healthy. In the Gorgias, Socrates criticized Pericles and other widely respected Athenian statesmen for turning Athens into a feverish city lacking temperance:

You praise the men who feasted the citizens and satisfied their desires. People say that they have made the city great, not seeing that the swollen and ulcerated condition of the state is to be attributed to these elder statesmen; for they have filled the city full of harbours and docks and walls and revenues and all that kind of rubbish, and have left no room for justice and temperance.

A true statesman would not flatter the people by offering them pleasing luxuries and creating a feverish economy; his aim is to improve their character. Socrates says as much during an exchange with the rhetorician Callicles: “Am I to be the physician of the state who will strive and struggle to make the Athenians as good as possible; or am I to be the servant and flatterer of the state?” The feverish commerce of the city only leads to endless and fruitless economic regulation, which is comparable to the medical approach of Herodicus – purging a little here, giving a little medicine there, while never truly curing the ills of commerce. Instead, like a noble doctor, Socrates would persuade the city to adopt a simple, healthy, and just way of life. But note the compatibility of Socratic therapeutic practice with Athens’ democracy: Socrates criticizes because he seeks to improve the citizens, not because he wishes to rule as a tyrant or manipulate as a sophist.

The true statesman is not concerned with legislating harsh cures to make a feverish city healthy, but with gently establishing a temperate and healthy regimen for the city through philosophical persuasion and education. Like a doctor who prescribed bad-
tasting medicine, however, such a statesman would not be popular. As though anticipating his own trial, Plato’s Socrates declares:

I think that I am the only or almost the only Athenian living who seeks the true art of politics [politike techne]; I am the only practicing politician [prattein ta politika monos]. Now, seeing that when I speak my words are never uttered with any view of gaining favour, and that I look to what is best and not to what is most pleasant, having no mind to use those arts and graces which you recommend, I shall have nothing to say in the court of justice … I shall be tried just as a physician would be tried in a court of little boys at the indictment of the cook. What would he reply in such a situation, if someone were to accuse him, saying, ‘My boys, many evil things has this man done to you: he is the death of you, especially of the younger ones among you, cutting and burning and starving and suffocating you, until you know not what to do; he gives you the bitterest potions, and compels you to hunger and thirst. How unlike the variety of meats and sweets on which I feasted you!’ What do you suppose that the physician would be able to reply when he found himself in such a predicament? If he told the truth he could only say, ‘All these things, my boys, I did for your health,’ and then would there not be a deafening clamour from a jury like that? How they would cry out!

In other words, Socrates is a true statesman who tells the citizens what they need to hear, not what they want to hear – and consequently he is not well-liked. In the Republic, Socrates observed that the gluttonous lifestyle of the “swollen and inflamed” feverish city will “have much greater need of doctors” to care for the self-inflicted ailments of the citizens – presumably including noble political doctors. Here in the Gorgias, an earlier dialogue, he had already claimed the mantle of philosopher-king: “I am the only or almost the only Athenian living who seeks the true art of politics…” This is a bold claim for one who appears to be an idiote, who avoids the assembly and the courts, yet he can make it because he is the only one working to improve the character of the Athenians rather than flatter and manipulate them. He sees himself as their civic doctor even if the beneficial cure of philosophy makes him unpopular among them: “And what about their equally charming habit of reserving their greatest hostility for the person who tells them the truth, which is that until they give up drinking, over-eating, sex and idleness, no medicine, cauterization or surgery, no charms, amulets, or anything of that kind, will do them the slightest good.” Yet although Socrates refuses to manipulate the Athenians like a sophist, he also would not inflict harsh, tyrannical cures: “as children ask the doctor to be gentle with them, so we will ask the legislator to cure our disorders with the gentlest remedies…” The remaining course left to him: convince and prescribe like a noble doctor, using the method of persuasion. Through this method Socrates avoids the tyrannies both of harsh cures and sophistry; yet he still works to fulfill the duty of a statesman, the improvement of the citizens. If Socrates is the civic doctor, but avoids politics and confines himself to philosophical dialectic, then surely Plato’s political physician is no slavish tyrant but of a gentle, noble stripe. He seeks a respectful conversation between freemen, for the relationship of philosopher to citizen is as that between noble doctor and noble patient: the doctor does not coerce the patient, but the patient does defer to the knowledgeable authority of the doctor.

**Medicine of the Philosopher (-King): the Noble Lie**
Imagine an American politician today who, for whatever ideological reason, wanted to convince the American people that they had to give up the feverish consumer lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. He would doubtless be ridiculed in the popular media and voted out of office faster than lightning – and more importantly, in the process would fail to achieve the goal of getting Americans to moderate their consumption. Socrates seems to be in a similar dilemma: how does one convince Athenians to temper their habits and live justly – without being shouted down and dragged before the court? The concern is not so much prudence, but the fact that this bad result would mark a failure to promote justice. Plato provides an answer to this dilemma: in order to induce his patient to swallow his bitter-tasting medicine, the civic doctor must resort to little white lies – noble lies – like adding honey to medicine.

Socrates, of course, justifies such deception with medical analogies. In the Republic’s discussion of the guardians’ education, he argues that myths which glorify the shrewdness of gods and heroes should not be told, and only morally edifying stories should be. Socrates contrasts “true falsehood” with “verbal falsehood,” and says that, like medicine, the latter has its uses.111 “What about verbal falsehood… Isn’t it useful against enemies, or to stop those who are supposed to be our friends, if as a result of madness or ignorance they are trying to do something wrong? Isn’t a lie useful in those circumstances, in the same way as medicine is useful?”112 Using such falsehoods to retool the educational “curriculum,” Socrates counters his young audience’s admiration for the cunning and avarice of the Homeric heroes – his way of turning the spirited parts of their souls from passionate admiration of war, money-making, and adventure to reason and philosophy.113 To do this, he must create new fables of philosophy to supplant the vice-ridden Homeric myths. Just as medicine should be administered by a qualified doctor, lying should be restricted to philosopher-kings:

If we were right just now, if lies really are useless to the gods, and useful to men only in the way medicine is useful, then clearly lying is a task to be entrusted to specialists. Ordinary people should have nothing to do with it…So if anyone is entitled to tell lies, the rulers of the city are. They may do so for the benefit of the city, in response to the actions either of enemies or of citizens. No one else should have anything to do with lying, and for an ordinary citizen to lie to these rulers of ours is a big mistake – bigger, in fact – as telling your doctor or trainer lies about the condition of your body when you are ill or in training…114

A little while later, Socrates gives specifics about what he has in mind: the philosopher-rulers of the Kallipolis are to lie about its origins with the myth of the metals, “one of those necessary falsehoods we were talking about a little while back… a single grand lie which will be believed by everybody…. “115 In this myth, the population is told that they were sprung from the ground as children of the earth, all brothers together, some born with gold in their souls, some with silver, and some with iron or bronze. Each type of soul will have its place in the class hierarchy. This division into classes will ensure that the best will rule and that the lower classes will keep their place; but it also has another function. It “might help them to care more about the city and one another.”116 The guardians, at least, will not need to care for riches because they will believe that they already have gold in their souls.

Another noble lie is told regarding the breeding program in Book V. Socrates says that if the rulers of the Kallipolis are going to execute a breeding program, they will have
to be “extremely expert… because they are going to have to use some pretty strong medicine”:117

With doctors, I take it that when your body is ready to respond to a prescribed regimen, and doesn’t need medicines, a second-rate doctor will do. But if it’s a question of prescribing medicines as well, then we know a more resolute physician is needed… the probability is that our rulers will need to employ a good deal of falsehood and deception for the benefit of those they are ruling. And we said, if I remember rightly, that useful things of that kind all came in the category of medicine.118

Just as doctors may deceive patients during a course of treatment, so can statesmen/philosophers use deception in order to make cities and souls healthy.119 Now recall that the city is used as a metaphor for the soul, and that the Kallipolis is a remedial constitution for correcting feverish excess. Rather than constituting a political program for a utopia, the purgatives that clean the slate of the Kallipolis in Book V of the Republic are examples of noble lies: they are myths that induce healing of the soul, making it temperate and just. The community of property and of family and the other proposals in Book V are tales told by Socrates to his audience of young men to turn their attention from wealth, pleasure, and even family to the care of the soul via philosophy. The myth of the breeding program, and the sexual equality leading up to it, are necessary to get these young men to curb their sexual appetites and their partiality to family – hence the story of the rigged lottery for determining mates, the moral of which is that sexuality must be submitted to the rule of reason: it is no longer governed by desire, but by the cosmic nuptial number.120 Thus, in light of Plato’s medical metaphors, in which the city is a metaphor for the soul, these things seem less like actual political proposals and more like morality tales for the philosophically-minded student who “chooses to found a city within himself.”121

Another candidate for a noble lie is the myth of Er. In the final book of the Republic, Socrates tells his audience a tale about the choices of lives that they will face after death, in which reward in the afterlife depends on choosing the moderate, philosophical life instead of a feverish life endlessly seeking power and pleasure. The myth of Er has always posed something of an interpretive problem: coming at the end of the Republic, after all political, ontological, and epistemological discussion has ended, it goes off in an apparently whole new direction, discussing a tale of the afterlife that just doesn’t seem to fit into the rest of the dialogue. What is it doing there? One answer is that the myth of Er is comparable to some of the other noble lies presented in the Republic, such as the myth of the metals: it is an attempt to turn the audience – both the young men within the dialogue and we outsiders reading it – from selfish decadence to care of the soul. In this way, “Er” is synecdoche for the whole of the Republic, medicine for the soul intended to persuade patients to live a life of temperance and justice.122

Indeed, the many medical and others metaphors that Plato uses throughout his dialogues – metaphors of techne, the ship of state, music, light, vision, rising and descending, ad infinitum – help to educate Plato’s readers in various ways. His metaphors themselves might be characterized as educative noble lies, aimed not at characters within the dialogues but at those of us reading them from outside the fourth wall of the play.

Conclusion
The virtue of temperance, and its close cousin justice, ties the complex threads of Plato’s organic political metaphors together. Greek medicine aimed for a proper balance of bodily humors by moderating diet, exercise, and daily routine, and Plato took a similar tack with the soul: a just soul will have its forces or parts properly arranged, with the reasoning part ruling the rest. In the *Republic* this metaphor is extended to a city that also exemplified temperance: a simple but healthy city becomes greedy in its desires, grows corpulent in its excess, and commits the grave injustice of war in order to feed its ungoverned appetites. It must then go through medical treatment in order to properly reorganize itself so that its reasoning class governs the city.

Since Socrates repeats that his city is a pattern or model for the soul, one might be tempted to think of it as the growth story of an individual: an innocent youth grows into adulthood, succumbs to pleasures and vices, and, realizing that intemperance has ruined him body and soul, learns to maturely govern his desires with reason. This sounds plausible, except for what I have called Plato’s “triadic triage”: the best case, he says, is to never give yourself over to vice in the first place, just like the good judge. Failing that, it is better to learn temperance than to continue to overindulge, despite the difficulties involved. The sick should not sacrifice the long-term health of the body by avoiding the short-term pains of medical treatment, and the intemperate should not sacrifice the long-term health of the soul for short-term pleasures.

All of this, however, does not meant that the philosopher has to use harsh treatments to teach temperance and justice, especially when attempting the large-scale philosophical healing of an entire feverish city. Trying to impose temperance through the force of law, or even simply offering public criticism of the city’s extravagance, will not work; both methods will fail while creating a backlash. (Plato may allow some small possibility for harsh political purging, but gentler methods are given preference). Philosophical medicine will only be accepted in the form of the noble lie, which is no tool for slavish sophists to pander to the desires of the people. It is for philosophers to persuade their students to moderate their appetites, care for wisdom, and become just. Hence the main focus becomes reforming individuals through character education, not political reform imposed from above. The true civic doctor is not the philosopher-king, as that phrase has come to be understood as an actual political ruler (although living temperately he does rule the “city within himself”)

The noble civic doctor is simply the philosopher, who attempts to persuade and convince his patient, the city, individual soul by individual soul, that a moderate, temperate life is best. Thus the healing of a city is to be achieved not by totalitarian surgery, but by a much gentler cure, the medicine of philosophy that heals the city’s souls.

If any of the cities of the *Republic* should be taken as a serious political blueprint, it is not the Kallipolis but the simple city: it conforms to the idea of temperate justice and reflects the best state according to Plato’s “triadic triage.” Plato’s political philosophy is admittedly elitist in that the philosopher-statesman, the ideal practitioner of *politike techne*, will have the same authority as a physician and should receive the same deference; but it is not authoritarian in the sense that Plato advocates political rule by a totalitarian dictator. The doctor-patient relationship is one of responsible authority, but not authoritarianism.

Plato’s intricate medical metaphors touch on all aspects of his political and ethical philosophy, and shape his ideal of justice as the healthy moderation of one’s habits of
living. Their complexity is astonishing, and I have hardly done them justice here. Plato’s views on political medicine were highly influential throughout classical antiquity, when the main thrust of organic political metaphors was on fostering the virtues. This is clear, for example, in the medical metaphors of Epictetus, and Seneca’s theory of punishment borrows liberally from Plato’s organic view.125 And by rooting his conception of justice so strongly in his bodily and medical metaphors, Plato made the “body politic” a lasting part of the western political vocabulary. By gaining a fuller appreciation of his organic metaphors and putting them in context, we can better see how his political theory is tied to his view of philosophy as an educative medicine for building character.


5 I will focus only on Plato’s politico-organic metaphors, and even then I must leave much out. It may also seem that I neglect the possible development of Plato’s thought over time, but I do recognize the risks of setting organic metaphors in, say, the Gorgias side-by-side with those in the later Laws. I hope that the frequent appearance of medical political metaphors in Plato’s writing and the unifying themes that appear throughout outweigh any differences that appear over time. Given the many difficulties in even accurately dating Plato’s works, much less tracing out his intellectual development, taking such an approach seems necessary and forgivable (Charles Kahn, “On Platonic Chronology,” in New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient, Julia Annas and Christopher Rowe, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002)).


7 A survey of the extensive literature on metaphor is far beyond the scope of this paper. For some of the more important modern texts, see Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and

8 The example is from Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 27.


14 Bambrough, “Political Analogies,” 100.

15 Bambrough, “Political Analogies,” 100; Shelley, *Multiple Analogies*, 89-90; David Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato’s Understanding of Techne* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Wallach, *Political Art*, 28-9, 43-5, 101-112, 234 ff., 255-6, 268-9, 308ff., 325, 344-5. Wallach observes that the notion of *techne* does not entirely encompass what Plato meant by philosophy, because *technai* such as carpentry were instrumental, programmatic applications of already-understood principles of the art and lacked the questioning and critical aspects of philosophy (Wallach, *Political Art*, 248-9). This is less true of the art of medicine, which requires critical

16 Hussey, “Complicated Figures,” 338. See also Wallach, Political Art, 267, 269 for comments about the necessity of Plato’s images for his educational purposes.


20 In the Timaeus, body, soul, city, and universe all exhibit a similar hierarchic pattern (Timaeus, 30c-34b, 44d-45b; Hussey “Complicated Figures,” 343). The cosmos is envisaged as a perfect sphere, governed by a rational order; the human torso, also roughly spherical, takes its basic shape from the universe, except that the rational head has been pinched off at the neck to form another sphere governing it, and limbs have been added for locomotion and the manipulation of objects (Timaeus, 44d-45b). Metaphorically, the thinking head is the ruling part of the body, as the guardians rule the city, as the reasoning part rules the soul, and as reason rules the cosmos. Plato’s organic political metaphors are thus a subset of a larger set of cosmological-organic metaphors, ranging up and down the entire ladder of existence. This is the source of the medieval “Great Chain of Being.”

21 Lonrigg, “Philosophy and Medicine,” 152, 156.


23 Some recent interpretations attempt to cast Plato’s political thought in a more sympathetic, even at times more democratic light by emphasizing the influence of Athens’ democratic culture on Plato’s philosophy (Euben, Corrupting Youth, ch. 3, p. 207; Sarah Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000): 14, 17, 115; Wallach, Political Art). Plato was undoubtedly influenced by his culture, and these authors have excelled at tracing out some of the specific ways in which the democratic nature of Athenian political culture might have exerted its influence and indeed might even have been a prerequisite for the critical discourse of philosophy itself. But Plato still remained highly critical of specific democratic practices and politicians, and of democracy as a form of government (as each of the cited authors admits).


27 Popper, *Open Society*, 79-81, 100, 166.

28 My interpretation should not be taken as exclusive. It does clash with some interpretations, such as Popper’s, but is compatible with and I hope complementary to others, such as many cultural, literary, or feminist readings. Plato’s corpus is highly complex, and in my view, many different viewpoints can be informative – although some pictures are so badly composed as to require outright rejection..

29 *Republic*, 433a-436b, 439e-441e, 443b-444e, esp. 444d.

30 *Republic*, 444d.

31 *Republic*, 444b.


33 *Laws*, 691c; emphasis added.

34 *Laws*, 372a.


36 Asclepius also appears in the physician Eryximachus’ speech in the *Symposium*, in the context of health as a balance between opposites (*Symposium*, 186e). Plato also mentions Asclepius in passing in the *Ion*, 530a, with no extended discussion.


38 *Republic*, 404b.

39 *Republic*, 405b ff.

40 *Republic*, 405d.

41 *Republic*, 406b.

42 *Republic*, 406b.

43 *Republic*, 406b.

44 *Republic*, 407d-e.

45 *Republic*, 407e.

46 *Republic*, 408b.

47 *Republic*, 408b. Socrates is not denying anyone actual medical treatment here; as we will see, this a reference to the medicine of the *soul* (see p. 50, n. 95).

48 *Gorgias*, 476d ff.

49 *Gorgias*, 477a.

50 *Gorgias*, 477b.

51 *Gorgias*, 477e-478a.

52 *Gorgias*, 478b-e.
53 Gorgias, 479b.
54 Republic, 405c-d.
55 Republic, 408d-410a
56 Republic, 408e.
57 Republic, 409a-b.
58 Republic, 368e-369b.
59 Republic, 368d-e.
60 Plato also reminds the reader of this later, at 434d.
61 Republic, 369d. The Cambridge edition translates this as “hypothetical,” while the Loeb version uses the other terms (“theory” at 369d, “ideal” at 592b). See also Wallach Political Art, esp. 309-10.
62 Republic, 592b.
63 Republic, 592b.
64 Republic, 592b. It should be noted that Plato’s Socrates may have been referring to the model of the cosmos that Plato described in the Timaeus (see above, n 20).
65 Republic, 369b-372d.
66 Republic, 369c-e, 370d-371e.
67 Republic, 372a-b.
69 Republic, 372c, d.
70 Contra T.H. Irwin, “Aristotle’s Defense of Private Property,” in A Companion to Aristotle’s Politics, David Keyt and Fred D. Miller, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 202-205. Irwin argues that Socrates vacillates about whether the simple city or the Kallipolis is best, because he does not explicitly call the people of the simple city just (204). But Socrates and his interlocutors do find justice there, in the relationships between the citizens (Republic, 372a). Socrates repeats later that “our first attempt at founding our city might possibly, with a bit of divine guidance, have hit upon both the origin, and some sort of model, of justice” (Republic, 443c).
71 Republic, 372d.
72 Republic, 372c-d.
73 Wallach suggests that, while there is “something” to the idea that justice is present “in a sense” in the simple city, Socrates still presses ahead for further clarification. Wallach also dispensies with the simple city as “idyllic and unreal” (Wallach Political Art, 251-2). Samaras argues that the simple city had little to do with the “political realities” of Plato’s time (Samaras, Plato on Democracy, 25). Rejecting the simple city as unrealistic seems an oddly pragmatic dismissal with regard to Plato, who was so concerned with the ideal forms of things.
74 Republic, 372e; emphasis added.
75 Republic, 372e.
76 Republic, 373a.
77 Republic, 373b-e.
78 Republic, 373c.
79 Republic, 373c; emphasis added.
80 Republic, 373e.
I am not the first to claim that the simple city is preferred to the Kallipolis, but others have not made the link to what I have called the triadic triage. Some acknowledge that the Kallipolis is not ideal and proceed to criticize the political vision embodied in it anyway; see Samaras, *Plato on Democracy*, 25, and 42n.2. But recall that the cities are patterns for souls, so there may actually be no political ideal presented at all.

It should be noted that in the Book V of the *Laws* Plato initiates (but never completes) a discussion of first, second, and third-best cities that follows a somewhat different scheme (*Laws* 739b-e). That passage can be interpreted to support the idea that the Kallipolis is Plato’s political ideal, but that is a mistake, in my view. At first glance, the ideal city described in the *Laws* appears to be the Kallipolis and not the simple city in that there is “communism” in which everything is shared. However, the communism there is different in that it applies to the whole city, not only to a guardian class. Moreover, the best city of the *Laws* is a city of the gods and not of men. The ideal *human* city of the *Laws*, presented in great detail in the last seven books, is small, well-ordered, and avoids wealth, luxury, and money-making; like the simple city of the *Republic* it shuns the commercial feverishness of Athens – indeed, the citizens are forbidden from engaging in commercial professions, which must be left to metics (*Laws* Bk. 11, esp. 918b-920a). Thus, the emphasis on temperance remains even to the end of Plato’s life. These cities in the *Laws* do not appear to undercut the claim that a simple, moderate city was Plato’s political ideal. Plato’s conception of health and justice according to the logic of best, second-best, and worst as I have described it appears quite prominently in several places in his works, and thus seems to be the way that he usually thought about it. The exception in the *Laws* looks to be exactly that, an exception, coming at the end of a long philosophic career in which some variation in thought is to be expected.


The exception in the *Laws* looks to be exactly that, an exception, coming at the end of a long philosophic career in which some variation in thought is to be expected.
life” the benefits of their medicine “even if they were richer than Midas,” he was possibly
referring to his own philosophic medicine, for which he charged no fee (Republic 372d; 408b).

96 Gorgias, 462c.
97 Gorgias, 463a-c.
98 Gorgias, 464d-e.
99 Gorgias, 463b.
100 Republic, 336b-c, 571a ff.
101 Republic, 465c.
102 Republic, 500b-501d, 514d-e.
103 Republic, 518e-519a; emphasis added.
104 Gorgias, 521a.
105 Republic, 407d-e, 425e-426d.
106 Gorgias, 521d-522b.
107 Republic, 373d.
108 Republic, 426b.
110 It would be a distortion to say that Plato advocates that the philosopher confine
himself to a moral or ethical realm and avoid the political; the ethical and political in
ancient Greece were too closely linked (Bambrough, “Political Analogies,” 99). Yet we
do see Socrates distinguish between politicking in the traditional institutions of the polis
– courts, assembly – and philosophizing outside these channels. He lands firmly in favor
of the latter. His stance is not so much apolitical (and amoral) as anti-domination.
112 Republic, 382d; emphasis added.
113 Cf. Apology, 29e, 30b.
114 Republic, 389b-c.
115 Republic, 414c.
117 Republic, 459c.
118 Republic, 459e-d.
119 There is no evidence of which I am aware of that lying was central to the actual
practice of Greek physicians. Seneca, however, describes an example of medical
deception which may give us an idea of what Plato had in mind: “There is a story of a
doctor treating a princess and unable to do so without surgery. Gently bathing her
suppurating breast, he inserted the knife concealed in a sponge. The girl would have
resisted the treatment if it had been openly applied, but because she did not expect it, she
put up with the pain. Some things are only cured by deception.” Seneca, De ira, III.39.4.
120 Republic, 546a-d.
122 See Lars Albinus, “The Katabasis of Er: Plato’s Use of Myths, Exemplified by the
Myth of Er,” in Essays on Plato’s Republic (Aarhus, DK and Oxford, UK: Aarhus
123 See above, p. 16.
124 Republic 592b.