

The Best City in Plato's *Republic* Is it possible?

Jonathan Beere
Institut für Philosophie
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

1 Introduction

Plato's *Republic* describes a utopia—Socrates calls it “the *best* city”. Socrates asks about this city whether it is possible. Yet his answer to that question is not easy to understand, and interpreters have disagreed sharply about whether or not Socrates thinks the best city is possible. That is the framing question of this paper: is the best city described in the *Republic* possible? But it is not the only question. In order to answer it, we need to address another question: to what extent is possibility a constraint on the best city?

It is natural to think that the best city must be possible—that is, only possible cities are candidates for being the best. One reason is a version of the view that *should* entails *can*. The best city is a city that should be established. But, since *should* entails *can*, if a city should be established, then it can be established. Thus, if a city cannot be established, then it is not one that should be established. While we might imagine a city better than any possible city, such cities are illusions and fantasies. They have no more normative force than fantasies of immortality or magic powers. No impossible city, no matter how wondrously good, is a candidate for being the best city. This is a demand for *possibility*.

Moreover, we might reasonably demand of political philosophy that it illuminate what we should do here and now. For instance, we might think that our cities (our political communities) are so obviously and grievously deficient that political philosophy ought to respond to the urgent need for political improvement, rather than wandering off into the construction of theories that do not help us decide what to do here and now. This is a demand for *practical relevance*. At first blush, it would seem that the demand for practical relevance is even more restrictive than the demand for possibility: what is impossible is not practically relevant. And presumably many things that are in some sense possible are not practically relevant.

Socrates in the *Republic* worries about precisely these demands. He says that the city is “best *if it is possible*” (my emphasis 502c2; cf. also 502c5-7), and this constitutes some kind of acceptance that possibility is a constraint on the best city. In a longish speech, he also decries political theorizing that is like daydreaming—impractical fantasies (457e-458b). Socrates himself raises doubts about the possibility and the practical relevance of the city he describes. We might, then, have expected that Socrates would allay these doubts about his own project, but he does not—or at least, he does not do so explicitly and clearly. And so commentators have disagreed fiercely over the question whether the best city, the Kallipolis, is possible.

The problem with trying to say whether the best city is possible (according to Socrates in the *Republic*) is that the question is ill-formed. (This is one of the most important reasons why

commentators have not been able to come to agreement about it.) The question as formulated has no answer because it fails to account for two things. First, Socrates works with three different criteria for possibility. Second, Socrates says different things about the possibility of different proposals that he makes in Book V. Rather than asking whether the best city (all of the proposed measures) is possible (by a single criterion for possibility), we need to ask which of the crucial proposals of Book V are possible and by which criteria for possibility.

In order to reformulate the question, I will first need to distinguish the relevant criteria for possibility.

Let me remark, as a preliminary, that it is only in Book V that Socrates (or anyone else) raises any question about the possibility of his political proposals. For this reason, I will focus almost exclusively on Book V. (Below, I will say a word about why these questions don't arise until Book V.)

Socrates's three criteria for possibility are as follows.

- (1) The first criterion is *natural* possibility: compatibility with human nature. This is something like physical (or metaphysical) possibility. It is not relative to current political circumstances but to the unchanging facts of (embodied) human nature. For instance, the *Republic* seems to think that human nature includes the tripartite soul, and this means that all human beings, by nature, are attracted to pleasure and feel aversion to pain. A political arrangement that is not naturally possible is ruled out: it is impossible; it cannot come into being.
- (2) Socrates's second criterion of possibility is possibility *relative to existing cities*. The idea is that an actually existing city might change in such a way as to bring about a new political arrangement. The cities that are accessible from some existing city are possible *relative to that city*. Unlike natural possibility, it is relative to the political situation in a certain place and at a certain time.
- (3) The third criterion of possibility is significantly different from the first two. I call it *ideal* possibility. A political arrangement is possible in this sense if it is approximable—if it can function as an ideal that guides our actions and choices. Socrates spells out this criterion of possibility in terms of the previous criterion. That is, a city is ideally possible if there is a city that is possible relative to an existing city and is very like it. We might not be inclined to call this a kind of possibility at all, but, for better or worse, Socrates does.

Below, I will spell out these criteria a bit more precisely and say something more about their relationship. But first, with these criteria in hand, I can formulate what Socrates says about the possibility of the three measures that he proposes in Book V. He makes a different claim about each of them.

- (1) *Women Guardians*. The first measure proposed in Book V is that certain women, like certain men, will receive the full education of guardian-rulers and in fact become guardian-rulers. Socrates argues that this proposal is naturally possible. He does not directly address the question whether it is possible for existing cities, but there seems little reason to doubt it.

- (2) *The common family of guardians.* The second measure proposed in Book V is that all guardian-rulers should consider themselves a single family. The sort of deep love that ties parents and children, and siblings, and also spouses, should equally bind together all the guardian-rulers with one another. Correspondingly, the biological connection between parents and children should be obscured; biological parents and children should not know of their biological connection. And there should be no exclusive and lasting marriage-like relationships among guardians of roughly the same age. The point of this measure is to ensure that there are no ties among certain guardians that separate them off from the whole group of guardians. That is, *all* guardians take pleasure and suffer pain equally at the happiness or misery of *all* other guardians.

Socrates makes no claim about whether this measure is naturally possible or not. It's not that he disavows knowledge of the matter, but rather that he makes no statement whatsoever. Moreover, he says clearly that, of the three measures, this is the one whose possibility is most doubtful. I will argue that Socrates leaves open whether or not it is naturally possible. This is the simplest interpretation; there are strong reasons in its favor and nothing speaks against it. (The passages have often been taken, reasonably, to speak in favor of the possibility of this measure do not in fact do so.) Moreover, this is, I claim, an entirely reasonable stance for Socrates to adopt.

The text does not raise the question whether this measure is possible for existing cities, perhaps because it seems necessary to ascertain first whether the measure is naturally possible.

For this reason, the common family of guardians forces us to confront the question whether a proposed city is best only if it is possible. (The equal education of men and women, since it is naturally possible, did not force this question on us.) I will argue that Socrates gives a clear answer to this question: compatibility with human nature is *not* a constraint on the best city.

However, Socrates also worries about the danger of a kind of self-indulgent fantasy-theory, which fosters a lazy and detached relationship to our actual political circumstances. For this reason, Socrates takes it upon himself to argue that the common family of guardians is *ideally* possible. This means, according to the definition of ideal possibility, that there is some political arrangement that is possible for existing cities *and* is very like the common family of guardians. But does Socrates mention any such approximation of the common family of guardians?

- (3) *Philosopher-rulers.* He does: the philosopher-monarch is precisely the relevant political measure. As I will show, the philosopher-monarch has, in Socrates's exposition, a very different status from the first two. It is introduced explicitly in terms of ideal possibility. Philosopher-monarchs are not only naturally possible but possible for existing cities. This is what shows that the common family of guardians can be approximated and hence is ideally possible. The ideal possibility of the common family of guardians derives from the possibility for existing cities of

philosopher-monarchs. Socrates does not spell out how the rule of philosophers would be very like the common family of guardians. This is an important lacuna, to which I will return below.

To be clear, Socrates does, of course, think that there will be philosopher-guardians in the full-fledged best city. But he *also* thinks that rule by a philosopher could come about independently of his other proposals; that it is possible for existing cities; and that establishment of rule by a philosopher would already approximate the common family of guardians.

I expect readers to be skeptical of my claim that a philosopher-monarch is possible for existing cities. This skepticism is understandable, because much of the incredulity in the text is focused on the philosopher-monarch. But that is not, I argue, because the philosopher-monarch is the proposal whose *natural* possibility is most dubious. Rather, it is because the goodness of the proposal is in doubt, and also because the philosopher-monarch is possible in the strongest sense, namely possible for existing cities.

My argument will proceed as follows. First, I will make some preliminary remarks about the way in which Socrates raises questions about the goodness and possibility of his proposals in Book V. Then I will discuss the three measures, and Socrates's claims about their possibility, arguing for the claims just sketched. In my concluding section, I will make some somewhat speculative suggestions about Plato's approach to political philosophy about the best city.

2 How the question of goodness and possibility arises

The beginning of Book V constitutes a major structural break in the *Republic*. For the first time since Book II, Plato describes the actions of the listeners, giving vivid details; and, also for the first time since Book II, listeners other than Glaucon and Adeimantus speak up, interrupting the conversation and asking Socrates to fill an important gap.¹ The gap pertains to marriage and child-rearing. Earlier, Socrates had said merely that marriage and child-rearing will be guided by the proverb, "Friends hold everything in common" (423e-424a). Polemarchus and the others want to know what Socrates meant by this: what arrangements for marriage and child-rearing exemplify that proverb? Socrates agrees to fill in this gap, reluctantly. Why is he reluctant? Because Socrates's proposals about marriage and child-rearing, more than what he has said before, provoke doubts about *possibility* and *goodness*²:

It isn't an easy subject to explain, my good man, for it raises many doubts, even more than the topics we've discussed so far. It may be doubted even that the things said are possible, and, if they should very much come about, it will

¹ A full discussion of Book V would include a fine-grained discussion of all these details. I hope to provide this full treatment in future work.

² A reader might think that there are two further reasons in addition to those in the passage quoted. For Socrates mentions as reasons for his hesitation the "swarm" of arguments (450a-b) and a concern about dragging his interlocutors into error (450d-451a). But these are not "additional" reasons. The swarm of argument is needed to allay the specific doubts mentioned in the quoted paragraph. And it is because those doubts are warranted, and not fully addressed by Socrates's subsequent arguments, that Socrates is worried about infecting his interlocutors with error.

be doubted, too, that they would be best. That is why there's a certain reluctance to take up these things, lest the argument seem to be a [mere] prayer, my dear comrade.³ (450c6-d2)

Thus it is *Socrates*, the most authoritative speaker, who raises questions about whether the measures he will propose are possible and good. As Socrates proceeds through Books V through VII, he reverts again and again to these two questions: the question whether a proposal is possible and the question whether it is good.

It is, of course, Plato who placed these two questions precisely at this major structural juncture. By doing so, he emphasizes their importance. And this is particularly salient for the question about possibility, by contrast with the question about goodness. It is, by this point in the text, obvious that Socrates is proposing a good city, but it is not simply obvious that he is proposing a possible city.

But this little paragraph subtly signals two further things that we need to take note of.

First, it signals that the question about possibility is prior to the question of goodness. This is reflected in the order in which the two issues are mentioned: first possibility, then goodness. More clearly, the question about goodness is said to arise *if* Socrates proposals might come about. This logical relationship will be important, but it will also be undermined later.

Second, Socrates uses the word “prayer”. Should his proposals not be possible, then they would be like mere prayers. This should take us aback. Normally, prayers are for possible things. In particular, people pray for things that are possible but out of their control—for instance, that a ship survive a fierce storm or a child recover from a severe illness. This is especially true in the cultural context of the *Republic*, long before any philosophers or theologians had started to think of god as omnipotent and hence (perhaps) capable of things that are in some sense impossible.⁴ Thus the contrast between “possible” and “prayer” suggests that, when Socrates speaks of possibility, he is thinking of practical relevance. That is, the question is not whether such things could come about at all (say, by chance or by divine intervention) but whether *we* could bring them about.

So this sentence clearly signals that Socrates starts by assuming that he is describing a city that is possible in a sense that contrasts with mere prayer—a city that *we* could bring about. But it is not clear what Socrates would conclude if it turned that the city he describes is *not* one that we could bring about. He does not here trace the precise contour of the relationship

³ Οὐ ῥάδιον, ὃ εὐδαιμον, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, διελθεῖν· πολλὰς γὰρ ἀπιστίας ἔχει ἔτι μᾶλλον τῶν ἐμπροσθεν ὧν διήλθομεν. καὶ γὰρ ὡς δυνατὰ λέγεται, ἀπιστοῖτ' ἄν, καὶ εἰ ὅτι μάλιστα γένοιτο, ὡς ἄριστ' ἂν εἶη ταῦτα, καὶ ταύτη ἀπιστήσεται. διὸ δὴ καὶ ὄκνος τις αὐτῶν ἀπτεσθαι, μὴ εὐχὴ δοκῆ εἶναι ὀλόγος, ὃ φίλε ἑταῖρε. The translation here is my own. There are a number of fine points that deserve comment, but I will simply note that I have avoided (unlike a number of published translations) introducing the term “possible” in the translation of ὅτι μάλιστα.

⁴ We find confirmation of this in a passage of *Laws* IV (709a-710a). The passage distinguishes between the things that an expert, like a doctor or navigator, can bring about and the conditions that the doctor or navigator requires to be given in order to exercise their art. Those conditions are appropriate objects of prayer, and the passage obviously assumes that they are possible. (The main point of the passage cited concerns the conditions that the legislator requires in order to exercise their art. It is very interesting that the *Republic* does not speak of any such conditions. While this is very much worth discussing, it is not my topics here.) I would like to thank Anders Sørensen for drawing my attention to the passage.

between goodness and possibility. As it turns out, the relationship between the goodness and possibility of the best city is subtle—too complicated to state in a sentence or two.

3 Women Guardians

When we turn to Socrates’s first proposal, we find him proceeding just as we would expect. This is important to appreciate, because he proceeds in an unexpected way with the second proposal. For the first proposal, he begins by explaining the proposal itself: the male guardians’ wives should be guardians too, and hence should receive the same education (451d4-452a5).⁵ He immediately takes up the question whether this is possible, arguing that it is, and then turns to the question whether this is good and argues that it is.

Socrates formulates the question whether female guardians are possible specifically in terms of *natural* possibility:

However, mustn’t we first agree about these things, whether they are possible or not? And mustn’t we give to anyone who wishes the opportunity to question us—whether in jest or in earnest—about whether female *human nature can* share all the tasks of that of the male, or none of them, or some but not others, and to ask in which class the waging of war belongs? Wouldn’t this, as the best beginning, also be likely to result in the best conclusion?⁶ (452e4-453a5; emphasis added)

The end of the discussion is just as clearly marked in terms of compatibility with nature. Possibility follows from compatibility with nature:

SOCRATES: We’ve come round, then, to what we said before and have agreed that it isn’t against nature to assign an education in music, poetry, and physical training to the wives of the guardians.

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

⁵ It is worth noting that his starting question is not, “Should women also be guardians?” but rather, “What kind of a wife should a male guardian have?” And he answers, “Male guardians should have wives who are also guardians”. One might read him as saying, “Male guardians should have wives who are their equals in virtue—all four virtues—and hold corresponding political office”. Or one might read him as saying, “Male guardians should have wives who come from their social class, and hence, given our antecedent commitments, they will have to receive the education of guardians and play the role of guardians”. I see nothing in the text to help us decide. I worry that the former reading is based on an anachronistic conception of spousal relations as (in the best case) relations between equal partners. (One might plead the case for the former reading not on the grounds that husbands and wives have intimate and loving relationships—*philia*—and that this *philia*, like other *philia*, is best when it obtains between virtuous people.)

⁶ The italics on “can” are in the Grube-Reeve translation, reflecting the emphatic position of δυνατή. But note, too, the emphatic position of φύσις, “nature”, which is followed unusually by two adjectives in predicative position (“human” and “female”, each with its own article). Ἴαρ’ οὖν οὐ πρότον μὲν τοῦτο περὶ αὐτῶν ἀνομολογητέον, εἰ δυνατὰ ἢ οὐ, καὶ δοτέον ἀμφισβήτησιν εἴτε τις φιλοπαΐσμων εἴτε σπουδαστικός ἐθέλει ἀμφισβήτησαι, πότερον δυνατὴ φύσις ἢ ἀνθρωπίνη ἢ θήλεια τῆ τοῦ ἄρρενος γένους κοινωῆσαι εἰς ἅπαντα τὰ ἔργα ἢ οὐδ’ εἰς ἓν, ἢ εἰς τὰ μὲν οἷα τε, εἰς δὲ τὰ οὐ, καὶ τοῦτο δὴ τὸ περὶ τὸν πόλεμον ποτέρων ἐστίν; ἄρ’ οὐχ οὕτως ἂν κάλλιστὰ τις ἀρχόμενος ὡς τὸ εἰκὸς καὶ κάλλιστα τελευτήσειεν;

[A] Then we're not legislating impossibilities or indulging in [mere] prayers, *since* the law we established is in accord with nature. [B] It's rather the way things are at present that seems to be against nature.

So it seems.⁷ (456b8-c3; emphasis added)

The sentence marked [A] says what we would expect: the possibility (by contrast with a mere prayer) of the proposal follows from its being according to nature, as signaled by “since”.

However, the sentence marked [B] introduces a complication. Socrates says that the way things are now is against nature. This presupposes that at least some things that are *against* nature are possible (since they are in fact the case). And that might seem show that being *according to* nature is not a sense of possibility. Yet the remark [B] follows immediately on his conclusion in [A] that they are not “legislating impossibilities or indulging in mere prayers”. This conclusion unmistakably picks up on Socrates’s initial question about possibility, by contrast with goodness; in that initial question, too, possibility was contrasted with prayer. Compatibility with nature is, thus, sufficient for possibility, although perhaps it is not necessary.⁸

Socrates then marks the transition from answering the question whether the proposal is possible to answering the question whether the proposal is good:

Now, weren't we inquiring whether our proposals were both possible and best?

Yes, we were.

And haven't we now agreed that they're possible?

Yes.

Then mustn't we next reach agreement about whether or not they're best?

Clearly. (456c4-10)⁹

The argument for goodness follows (456c12-457a5). It concludes with Socrates saying, “Then the custom we've established isn't only possible but is also best for a city?”¹⁰ and

⁷ Ἦκομεν ἄρα εἰς τὰ πρότερα περιφερόμενοι, καὶ ὁμολογοῦμεν μὴ παρὰ φύσιν εἶναι ταῖς τῶν φυλάκων γυναιξὶ μουσικὴν τε καὶ γυμναστικὴν ἀποδιδόναι. Παντάπασιν μὲν οὖν. Οὐκ ἄρα ἀδύνατά γε οὐδὲ εὐχαῖς ὅμοια ἐνομοθετοῦμεν, ἐπεὶ περ κατὰ φύσιν ἐτίθεμεν τὸν νόμον· ἀλλὰ τὰ νῦν παρὰ ταῦτα γιγνόμενα παρὰ φύσιν μᾶλλον, ὡς ἔοικε, γίγνεται. Ἔοικεν.

⁸ An alternative interpretation is to say that “according to nature” and “against nature” are used equivocally by Plato. In one sense, being against nature is a kind of impossibility: to be against nature is to be incompatible with nature (so as to be impossible). (Correlatively, being in according to nature is being compatible with nature (so as to be possible).) In another sense, being against nature is normative: to be against nature is not to be incompatible with nature, but to be against the grain of nature, so that something against nature is possible but difficult and unlikely or unable to work smoothly and well. (And something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, for being according to nature.) I am disinclined to accept this alternative, because it would seem to entail that Plato first sharply distinguishes the questions of possibility and of goodness, then uses the word “nature” in a way that confusingly muddles them again. This seems uncharitable, and another interpretation is available.

⁹ Οὐκοῦν ἢ ἐπίσκεψις ἡμῶν ἦν εἰ δυνατά γε καὶ βέλτιστα λέγομεν; — Ἦν γάρ. — Καὶ ὅτι μὲν δὴ δυνατά, διωμολόγηται; — Ναί. — Ὅτι δὲ δὴ βέλτιστα, τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο δεῖ διομολογηθῆναι; — Δῆλον.

¹⁰ Οὐ μόνον ἄρα δυνατόν ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄριστον πόλει νόμιμον ἐτίθεμεν.

Glaucon replying simply, “Yes.”¹¹ This clear and unambiguous structural marking matters confirms that the first stretch of argument concerns possibility. Looking backward, it connects with the way Socrates first announced the questions to be expected: *first* possibility; *then* goodness. The fact that Socrates preserves the order here confirms that the order is important. As I noted, the order suggests that possibility is a constraint either on the very goodness of cities or, at least, on which good cities are relevant to this discussion.

Last but not least, the unmistakably clear structure of the treatment of women guardians is the background to the unexpected way in which Socrates goes on. It is to that unexpected next step that I now turn.

4 The Common Family of Guardians¹²

Socrates’s second proposal is that the guardians should form a single family. It is *this* proposal, not the first one, that answers the question that interlocutors had asked at the beginning of Book V. They had asked for an explanation of what Socrates meant when he said that, as far as wives and children are concerned, the guardians will follow the proverb, “Friends hold everything in common”. Socrates’s first proposal—that there should be women guardians, and hence (selected) women and men will enjoy the same education—does not answer that question. The proposal that all the guardians form a single family does answer that question.

Socrates gives a summary statement of his proposal right away, saying:

[A]ll these women are wives of all these men, in common, but none lives privately with any man. And the children, too, are in common, so that no parent will know their own offspring nor any child their parent. (557c10-d3)

This is the core of the second proposal. Socrates goes on to spell out many of the details, some of which are famous, such as the restrictions on sex and the associated eugenic proposals. As Socrates and Glaucon agree, given the way the guardians live together, it is inevitable that they will have sexual relations with one another (458c-d). Socrates adds that they will make the marriages “as sacred as possible” (ἱεροῦς εἰς δύναμιν ὅτι μάλιστα), adding, as a justification, that the most beneficial marriages are sacred (458e3-4). Thus the eugenic proposals and restrictions on sex are “merely” the detailed spelling out of how sexual relations are to be managed given that the guardians live together as a single family. It is entirely reasonable for Socrates to think that *something* needs to be said about how their sexual and reproductive lives will be conducted. But those regulations are not self-standing proposals; the need for them follows from the primary proposal, which is that the guardians live together in a single common household, see one another as members of a single family, and genuinely love one another accordingly. That is why Socrates’s tag for the proposal is

¹¹ Note, too, the consistency of the vocabulary for possibility (forms of δυνατόν) and goodness (where the question is consistently not just whether the relevant measure is good but whether it is best).

¹² By “common family of guardians” I mean to refer to what is usually called “the community of women and children” (although the Greek would be better translated “community of wives and children”). Plato’s phrase “community of women and children” implicitly takes the male perspective. (The husbands are just as much in common as the wives, but that doesn’t get mentioned.) I wish to avoid taking this over in my exposition. I would like to thank Christine Korsgaard for raising this issue.

“community of wives and children” (rather than, say, “breeding laws” or “restrictions on sex”).

Sometimes interpreters have misrepresented this proposal as if it were the abolition of the family. But this is clearly wrong. The proposal is, rather, to expand the family to include all guardians. As Socrates explains, men—and presumably women, too, although he doesn’t bother to say so—will consider all children their own who are of the appropriate age to be their biological offspring. And similarly the children will consider the relevant guardians their fathers and mothers, and their fellow guardians of the same generation their siblings.

Thus, when Socrates asks whether the second proposal is possible, he is asking whether the common family of guardians is possible, not whether the connected proposals about sex and procreation are possible. In what sense of possible is Socrates asking about their possibility? Well, Socrates’s discussion of the first proposal creates a strong presumption that, for the second proposal too, the question pertains to *natural* possibility. Of course, this presumption could have been overridden by some explicit remarks that introduce a new sense of possibility, but there are no such remarks. By contrast, later in the text, there *is* an explicit transition to other senses of possibility. Moreover, Socrates at one point implicitly confirms that he is asking about natural possibility, by asking whether it is possible for this having-in-common [κοινωνία] to come about among human beings too [καὶ], *as [it is possible] among other animals*” (466d5-7).¹³ The comparison with animals suggests that there is a question about human nature in the background. Human nature, which *all* human beings are born with, brings with it some constraints on how people behave and what they want. The question is whether those constraints preclude the common family of guardians. Two problems seem especially likely. Perhaps human nature makes (many) people fall in love and form an exclusive bond with one another person. And perhaps human nature makes (many) people want to form a loving bond specifically with their biological children. Obviously, these two problems might compound one another because people might want to have children with their beloved.

But Socrates nowhere in the text answers the question whether the common family of guardians is possible. Indeed, he says that the question whether it is possible is more difficult than the question whether it is good. This occurs at the very beginning of the treatment of the common family of guardians. Glaucon says about the common family of guardians, “there’s doubt both about its being possible [τοῦ δυνατοῦ] and about its being beneficial [τοῦ ὠφελίμου]” (457d4-5).¹⁴ But Socrates does not accept this, saying that the question of goodness can be resolved and implicitly suggesting that the question of possibility cannot:

I don’t think that its being beneficial would be disputed or that it would be denied that the common possession of wives and children would be the greatest good, if indeed it is possible. *But I think that there would be enormous disagreement [πλείστην ἀμφισβήτησιν] about whether or not it is possible.* (457d6-9; emphasis mine)

¹³ The comparison with animals also occurs at 451e, in connection with the first proposal, and at 458e-459b in connection with the common family of guardians. In both contexts, the comparison with animals highlights the question whether the proposal is compatible with human nature. Cf. also 424a-b.

¹⁴ Glaucon seems to be thinking that, for the first wave, there was doubt about whether it was possible, but not about whether it was beneficial, whereas in this case there is doubt about both.

Glaucon insists on his position, saying “There could very well be dispute about both” (457e1). It is worth recalling that Plato is pulling the strings. He makes Socrates, the authoritative speaker, insist the question of goodness can be resolved and that the question of possibility is extremely hard to resolve. Then he makes Glaucon, the learner, express doubt about both—perhaps expressing the attitude Plato expects from the reader. As the conversation unfolds, Socrates gives a detailed argument for the goodness of the common family of guardians. *But he never so much as ventures an opinion on the question whether the common family of guardians is possible.* The text simply leaves the question open, as one on which there is enormous disagreement. And my interpretive proposal is to take this in the most straightforward way: the text leaves open the question whether the common family of guardians is possible.

To justify this claim, we need to revisit the text. Immediately following the passage just quoted, Socrates explicitly asks Glaucon for permission to reverse the order in which he discusses the questions. He compares himself with a “lazy” daydreamer, who is imagining wonderful good things without *first* asking themselves what is possible (457e7-458b7). Socrates, like a lazy day-dreamer, wants to present first his description of the good arrangement and then consider question whether it is possible.

This interlude is important in two distinct ways. First, it draws attention to the order of the questions, inviting us to wonder why the order is reverse. An obvious proposal is this: Socrates does not have an argument to offer in favor of the possibility of the proposal. That’s why he doesn’t give. But because his lack of an argument leads into a complicated further discussion, as we will see, he wants to give his argument for the goodness of his proposal first. Second, the interlude connects the order of questions with the vice of laziness. This is very much in the spirit of the contrast between possibility and prayer. A day-dreamer who dreams of winning the lottery is dreaming of something that is possible, but not something that they themselves could bring about. Presumably *such* possibilities—possibilities that the day-dreamer cannot work towards bringing about—are just as conducive to laziness as strict impossibilities.

This passage is the crucial piece of evidence for Myles Burnyeat’s claim that the Callipolis is possible. Burnyeat takes Socrates to be asserting a general principle to the effect that one should not concern oneself with impossible political arrangements. But this is not quite what Socrates says. Rather, Socrates warns against a danger, which is *not* characterized in terms of impossibility but rather in terms of laziness or softness that comes from not considering questions of possibility. This leaves open that perhaps there might be arrangements that are impossible but are nevertheless available as goals for practical action—goals that can be approached but not reached. The danger Socrates warns of would not apply to such goals, and as we will see, Socrates goes on to make precisely such a proposal.

At first, Socrates proceeds as promised. He elaborates the proposal (458b-461e) and argues for its goodness (461e-466d), clearly marking both the beginning and end of that argument. As we expect, he then announces that he will argue for the possibility of the common family of guardians:

Then doesn’t it remain for us to determine whether it’s possible to bring about this association among human beings, as it is among animals, and to say just how it might be done?

You took the words right out of my mouth. (466d5-8)

But Socrates swerves away from the announced topic. His next words are:

As far as war is concerned, I think it's clear how they will wage it.

How so?

Men and women will campaign together. . . . (467e1-4)

Socrates goes on about this for almost four long Stephanus pages, until Glaucon insists that he finally take up the question of possibility:

. . . Let's also assume that this law and its predecessors are all fine. But I think, Socrates, that if we let you go on speaking about this subject, you'll never remember the one you set aside in order to say all this, namely, that it's possible for this constitution to come into being and in what way it is possible. I agree that, if it existed, all the things we've mentioned would be good for the city in which they occurred. And I'll add some that you've left out. . . Take it that I agree that all these things would happen, as well as innumerable others, if this constitution should come into being, and say no more on that subject. But rather let's now try to convince ourselves that it is possible and how it is possible, and let the rest go. (471c4-e5)

Socrates replies with some hesitation. Glaucon insists again.

Socrates then launches into an explanation of why he does not, after all, need to argue for the possibility of the common family of guardians. Given that it was Socrates who originally raised the question of possibility, this is rather strange. We will return to this in a moment. First, let us consider Socrates' explanation of why they do not need to prove the possibility of the best city. He reminds Glaucon that they were looking for justice itself and the completely just person in order to have a model (*παράδειγμα*; 472c4), not "in order to prove that they are able to come into being" (*ἀλλ' οὐ τούτου ἕνεκα, ἵν' ἀποδείξωμεν ὡς δυνατὰ ταῦτα γίνεσθαι*; 472d1-2). Similarly, they were making "a model in speech of the best city" (472d9-e1). Socrates concludes that they do not need to show that the good city can come into being:

So do you think that we have spoken less well to that end, if we can't prove that it's possible [*ἐὰν μὴ ἔχωμεν ἀποδείξαι*] to found a city in the way that was said?

Not at all, he said. (472e2-5)

This is a very important point. Socrates clearly thinks that the best city—in particular, the common family of guardians—is best even if it is not possible. And in the context, "not possible" means "not compatible with human nature." Thus Plato makes Socrates here clearly, albeit implicitly, accept that there could well be political norms that are incompatible with human nature.

Plato might have made Socrates leave it at that, but instead he makes Socrates go on to address the question after all! Yet Socrates does so “as a favor” to Glaucon and given a concession from Glaucon:

Then that’s the truth of the matter. But if, *in order to please you*, I must also be eager to show how and under what conditions it would most be possible [ἀποδείξει πῆ μάλιστα καὶ κατὰ τί δυνατότατ' ἂν εἴη], then you should agree to make the same concessions to me, in turn, for this demonstration. (472e6-9)

The concession, which Socrates immediately specifies, is that he only needs to show that the city can be approximated, not that it can come into being. This is justified, says Socrates, because action (πράξις) participates in truth less than speech (λέξις) (473a1-3).

So Socrates attempts to show that existing cities can be changed so as to come to approximate the common family of guardians. As he explains, he will specify that minimal change *that is possible in existing cities* which will lead to an approximation of the common family of guardians:

Then don’t compel me to show that what we’ve described in speech can come into being in deed [τῷ ἔργῳ] exactly as we’ve gone through in speech [τῷ λόγῳ]. Rather, if we’re able to discover how a city could be run in a way that is very near [ὥς ἂν ἐγγύτατα] to our description, let’s say that we’ve found out what you ordered us to, namely, that these things are possible. Or wouldn’t you be satisfied with that? *I* would be satisfied with it.

So would I.

Then next, it seems, we should try to discover and point out what’s now badly done in cities, because of which they are not run in that way, and what’s the smallest thing such that, if it were changed, our city would reach this sort of constitution—one change, preferably, or if not one, two, and if not two, then the fewest in number and the least extensive.

That’s absolutely right. (473a1-c1)

As we go forward, it will be important to bear in mind that Socrates and Glaucon are still discussing the possibility of the common family of guardians. The question of possibility that Glaucon pressed was not about the best city overall but specifically about the common family of guardians.

This last passage marks a decisive shift in Socrates’s argumentative strategy, by introducing two new senses of possibility. Most obviously, Socrates is concerned with changes that could take place in existing cities. This constitutes a new sense of possibility, alongside compatibility with human nature. It is a *new* sense of possibility because it is constrained not only by human nature in general but also by conditions in existing cities. Presumably,

Socrates thinks that, once human beings have grown up and received an education, their psychological constitution is no longer as malleable as it once was. This is a straightforward way to make sense of the implicit assumption that possibility for existing cities is not simply coextensive with compatibility with human nature—and it has close ties to the educational and psychological theories in the *Republic*, although, for reasons of space, I will not elaborate on that claim.

The other sense of possibility is perhaps less obvious. Socrates describes the favor he is doing for Glaucon as follows: showing that the common family of guardians is *possible* (472e7-8). This might surprise us. We might have expected him to stop short of claiming that the common family of guardians is possible, since he proposes a change in existing cities that leads to a mere *approximation* of it. That is, we might have expected him to say that he is giving up on showing that the common family of guardians is possible and *instead* showing that it can be approximated. For better or for worse, this is not how Socrates thinks about it. Rather, he thinks of *being able to be approximated* as a kind of possibility.

In short, Socrates has set himself a task: to show that the common family of guardians is ideally possible—can be approximated—by proposing a change that is possible *for existing cities* and would make them like cities with the common family of guardians. What change does Socrates propose?

5 Philosopher-Monarchs

The philosopher-king is the measure Socrates proposes. He presents it *in the first instance* not as a further part of the constitution of the best city but rather as the change that (1) is possible in existing cities and (2) would make them “very near” to the common family of guardians. Although this point has often been overlooked, it is clear from the flow of the text. Immediately, following the last passage quoted, which emphasizes that the relevant change should be no larger than necessary, Socrates says that “one change” would be enough, something that is “neither small nor easy, but possible” (473c3-4). And “possible” here must mean “possible for existing cities,” because it is picking up on the sense of “possible” in Socrates’s previous speech (473b4-9). Then Glaucon asks what change Socrates is proposing, Socrates replies that he expects incredulous reactions and then utters some of the most famous words in all of Plato’s works:

Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race. And, until this happens, the constitution we’ve been describing in theory will never be born to the fullest extent possible or see the light of the sun. (473c11-d6)

To repeat, it is the philosopher-king and philosopher-queen that (1) is possible for existing cities and (2) would make them very like the common family of guardians.

To be clear: the philosopher-ruler is, of course, also a feature of the full-fledged Callipolis. And so any city that has a philosopher-monarch resembles the Callipolis precisely in having a philosopher-ruler. But this cannot be the whole story. For Socrates has promised to specify a change that would bring a city very close to the common family of guardians. So being ruled by a philosopher-monarch must also make a city resemble the common family of guardians.

Before discussing objections, let us revisit the possibility of the common family of guardians. We have already reviewed all the relevant evidence: Socrates never resumes the question whether the common family of guardians is possible. Also, unfortunately, Socrates never spells out the reasons to doubt the possibility of the proposal. But there is an easy conjecture close at hand: it is not clear that it is possible for people to care about one another in the relevant way.

The way in which Socrates explains the goodness of the common family of guardians lays the ground for doubt about its possibility. For instance, Socrates notes that every pair of guardians will see themselves as standing in some familial relation, either parent-child or sibling (463c). This is not merely a matter of using the *words* “mother,” “father,” and so on, but of acting appropriately and of having the relevant attitudes of respect, care and obedience (αἰδοῦς τε πέρι καὶ κηδεμονίας καὶ τοῦ ὑπήκοον δεῖν εἶναι τῶν γονέων; 463c-d). In other cities, the rulers consider some fellow rulers to be *their* people and other fellow rulers *not* to be their people, but in the Kallipolis all the guardians will consider all the other guardians *their own* (463b9-c5, e4-6).

Most importantly, all the guardians will feel pleasure or pain at the well-being or suffering of their fellow guardians: “Whenever a single one of its citizens suffers anything good or bad, such a city above all others will say that what suffers its own and will as a whole share in the pleasure or pain” (462d8-e2). No guardian will be indifferent to their fellow guardian or, worse, take pleasure in the other’s suffering or feel pain at their pleasure. Socrates goes so far as to say that “the city with the best government” (ἄριστα πολιτευομένη) feels pleasure and pain as one just like a single human being.

Apparently, Socrates doubts that it is possible to create such a “community of pleasure and pain” among the guardians. There are several reasons for doubt: will people feel tied to one another in the relevant way, even without biological kinship? Can so many people feel so strongly tied to so many other people? (It is unclear how many guardians there will be, but probably hundreds.) Can you prevent special ties of love and friendship from forming among pairs or small groups? (This is liable to be a special problem for the people who have sex with one another, the more so since they are supposed to be outstanding in virtue.) And can such relationships be *reliably* sustained over generations? It is, I submit, entirely reasonable for Socrates to wonder whether embodied human beings are capable of this.

And I mean precisely that it is reasonable to *wonder*. The ways in which we love and care about one another—the ways in which there are communities of pleasure and pain—are surely to a great extent the product of our upbringing, and especially our families. Both our

direct experience of family life and the culture surrounding it. Who knows what we might be capable of in an entirely different cultural context?

6 Objection: Socrates's greatest doubt pertains to the possibility of the philosopher-king

Socrates himself admits that there is doubt about the possibility of his proposals, and Book V is shot through with a recurring metaphor for that doubt—the metaphor of three waves, each corresponding to one of the three proposals, each larger than the last and thus seemingly signaling greater doubt. So it might seem to go against the text to insist that the philosopher-monarch is not only possible but is possible *for existing cities*, when it is the proposal about which there is the most doubt. Furthermore, Socrates goes on to argue for the possibility of philosopher-rulers, and this shows that he considers the possibility of philosopher-rulers to be highly doubtful.

My answer to the first objection is that the three waves do not correspond to Socrates's doubts (much less to Plato's doubts) but to most people's doubts.¹⁵ As I noted above, Socrates clearly indicates that, by his lights, the common family of guardians is the measure whose possibility is most doubtful (457d6-9). At no point does he revise this statement. I have explained why it is reasonable.

It was only to be expected that Socrates give arguments for the possibility (and goodness) of rule by philosophers, just as he did for his other proposals. These arguments speak in favor of, not against, my interpretation. Once Socrates has clarified, in the rest of Book V, just what the proposal is, by clarifying what a philosopher is, he addresses precisely this pair of questions in Book VI: the goodness and possibility of rule by philosophers *in existing cities*. After lengthy discussion, he clearly marks the conclusion of the argument by saying:

Then we can now conclude that what we are saying about legislation [νομοθεσίᾱς] is best, if it should come to be, and that it is hard for it to come to be—not, however, impossible.

We can. (emphasis corresponds to Greek particles; 502c5-7)

Having drawn this conclusion, Socrates begins new subject—how the full-fledged Callipolis can systematically and reliably cultivate philosopher-rulers in each generation. This naturally leads into questions about what knowledge philosophers have (the idea of the good) and how such knowledge can be reliably cultivated in people (the famous curriculum, including mathematics, dialectic and practical experience). The discussion up to that point had led up to the conclusion, just quoted, that rule by philosophers is best and possible. First, at 485a, he argues that his proposals are compatible with human nature. Then Adeimantus intervenes

¹⁵ When the metaphor of waves is introduced at 457a-b, it seems to be picking up on the sort of mocking incredulity that is provoked in most people by strange, new proposals—not on the well-founded doubts of reflective people. When Socrates calls the third wave “the biggest and most difficult” (472a4), this does not mean that Socrates does not have arguments to resolve the relevant doubts but that resolving those doubts is a lot of work. This is clear in Socrates's worry, immediately before mentioning philosopher-kings, about a wave of “laughter and ill-repute” (473c7-8).

(487a), prompting Socrates to give a long explanation of why philosophers are in fact useless to cities as they are now governed (487a-498d). But Socrates resumes the question of possibility at 499b-c. Why? He had already argued for compatibility with human nature in the first pages of Book VI. In this later passage, unlike above, Socrates is interested in how an existing city could be changed so as to accept the rule of a philosopher. That is why he focuses on the chance that a philosopher might be born into a royal family and not be corrupted (502a-b). The issue here is not how the Callipolis is structured, but rather how a philosopher might come to power in an existing city. The same goes for Socrates's arguments about persuading people to accept rule by a philosopher. He is clearly not presupposing the education of the Callipolis, but is rather speaking about persuading people in existing cities (501c-e). For Socrates mentions the people who were at first angry at the proposal of rule by philosophers, but who can be persuaded to accept it. The remarks about persuasion are part of the argument for the possibility of rule by philosophers: it is an argument that rule by philosophers would not necessarily prompt a revolt.

Unexpectedly, Socrates returns to the possibility of rule by philosophers one final time, at the end of Book VII. Socrates is bringing the entire discussion in Books V through VII to a close and reminding Glaucon of the important points, including the measures proposed back in Book V and, notably, the claim of possibility. In these strange lines, Socrates describes not just any way for the Callipolis to come about but the "quickest and easiest" way: sending away everyone who is more than ten years old. This has the advantage that they will raise the children away from their current character types, which their parents also have (541a2-3). Socrates surely does not mean that it would be quick and easy to send away everyone over the age of ten. Rather, he means that, once those people had been sent away, the Callipolis could be relatively quickly and easily approximated, because of the malleability of the children's character. The extremity of the scenario envisioned brings out how incredibly hard it would be to ascertain whether the common family of guardians is compatible with human nature. By the age of eleven, Socrates seems to suggest, the influence of parents on children is already so deeply engrained that it could interfere with the common family of guardians.

This passage, too, is not discussing compatibility with human nature, but rather how existing cities might be changed so that philosophers rule. And the relevant change, however extreme and unlikely, is not strictly impossible—whereas it might well be strictly impossible for people to love one another as required in the common family of guardians

7 Objection: How does the philosopher-king approximate the common family of guardians?

How does being ruled by a philosopher-monarch make a city resemble the common family of guardians? Socrates nowhere addresses this question directly. One might take his silence on the question to count against my interpretation. Or one might accept a great deal of my argument, but claim that a philosopher-monarch would not in their own right *constitute* an approximation to the common family of guardians but rather would bring about an approximation to the common family of guardians by further political reform. The objection has force, but the evidence in favor of reading the philosopher-monarch as an approximation to the common family of guardians is explicit and unambiguous. Hence the text owes us

some account of the way in which rule by a philosopher-monarch approximates the common family of guardians. And I think it does give us such an account, albeit implicitly.

The mark of the philosopher is not merely cognitive ability but the intense, passionate desire to know and understand. Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that philosophers are not merely clever, but want to have comprehensive knowledge (474c-475c, 479e-480a, 485b-e). He also repeatedly emphasizes both the beauty of what is known—for instance the splendor of the form of the good (509a). If philosophers feel *eros* for the forms, and in particular for the *idea* of the good, then it is easy to think that this supplants for them the *eros* that forces the male and female guardians to mate (458d5). To the extent that the philosopher associates with the forms and the *idea* of the good and becomes like them, the philosopher partakes, by knowing, in something unchanging. To the extent that sex and reproduction have as their end some kind of approach to the eternal and the divine, the philosopher will have a more authentic and successful way of achieving the same goal. This is not to say that the philosopher will not have sex and procreate. But it is to say that the philosopher will not have an erotic attachment to their family.

Looked at in this way, the common family of guardians presents only half of the full account of what makes the guardians good rulers. According to the first description of the common family of guardians, before philosopher-kings are mentioned, what is it that is supposed to tie the guardians to one another? What do they even *mean* by the names for family relationships? The names for family relationships do not refer to biological relations; those biological relations are precisely the relations that the guardians are not supposed to value. The office of ruler and the activity of ruling seem to be the bond among them. But ruling, as we come to understand more clearly later, is a mere chore, something that wise people do only reluctantly. It is only once the common family of guardians is *supplemented* by the erotic desire for knowledge of the forms that we see what *attractive* good is the shared value of the guardians.

A lone philosopher-monarch—who is not a member of a community of guardians—thus approximates to the common family of guardians by loving wisdom above all, and by finding connection to other people via that love of wisdom. And this is what makes the philosopher-monarch approach ruling in the just, not exploitative way, that the guardians in the common family of guardians do. For neither will consider their subjects slaves nor will their subjects consider them despots. And both will consider their subjects providers of upkeep and their subjects will consider them guardians (463a-b).

These proposals are, I admit, somewhat speculative. But they do have a basis in the text. I will consider my argument successful if I have convinced you that we have to answer the question how the philosopher-ruler approximates the common family of guardians, even if you are not convinced by the answer I have proposed.