

## Ownership, property and belonging: Some lessons to learn from thinkers of antiquity about economics and success

### ***Abstract:***

I consider the problems that arise from the current dominance of neo-liberal economics as a guide to political decisions and as a theme in electoral campaigns. I explore a radical alternative focus found in the economic theories in Plato's *Republic* and in some other ancient texts, which offer a quite different account of what it is to have a good society, with the right kind of economics guiding its priorities. In particular, the Pythagorean saying that "friends have all things in common", and Plato's proposal that citizens should all say "mine" about the same things, deserve serious attention, since they pinpoint a kind of 'belonging' with which we are all familiar, that is not the ownership of property—which is the only kind that modern economics tends to consider. This special kind of belonging, in which friends have things in common, is, I suggest, the root of all that we truly hold dear and explains why we willingly give of our best for the projects that matter to us.

### ***I. Introduction:***

In this paper I shall explore some problems arising from using neo-liberal economics as a guide for making political decisions, as a priority in electoral campaigns, and as a good account of what makes an action or policy choiceworthy. I start with a question as to whether the pursuit of money, or profit, is a rational goal, and I shall examine an argument from the first book of Plato's *Republic* that can prompt us to problematise the idea that something valuable has been achieved if one has acquired more money. Secondly I shall introduce the idea found in Plato, and probably in the Pythagorean communities in Southern Italy, that political outcomes are improved if we create a state in which (to use the traditional formulation) "friends have all things in common", and the citizens all say "mine" about the same things. These motifs deserve serious attention, I suggest, since they can help us to identify a distinctive use of the word "mine" that is not about property or ownership, and is not the same as saying "ours" about shared things. Using these examples I shall try to pinpoint a kind of 'belonging', and the corresponding ways of saying "mine", that are in fact quite familiar to us all. I shall suggest that this special kind of belonging, in which those of us who say mine about the same things are united by that shared belonging is something that we should put higher on the agenda in ethical and political analysis. Once we see the role that this kind of belonging plays in our lives, we can also explain why we willingly give of our best for the projects that matter to us, and why we are content to take economic loss and make other sacrifices, and not out of stupidity.

### ***II. Can (or should) economics guide political strategy?***

For some decades it has been common—perhaps increasingly common—in the capitalist world, to assess the value of any proposed policy or political course of action entirely in terms of its overall economic consequences. These economic

outcomes are typically assessed at a very general level, in terms of a country's gross domestic product, or per capita productivity, or its levels of recurrent debt or budget deficit, and so on, frequently without any regard to the distribution of the net gains. Even rises in living standards are usually considered as averages, so that improvements for a lucky few pull up the average income or average spending power, simply because some people have too much while others are destitute and may even lose ground.

Similarly, and possibly connected, it is commonly assumed that some kind of monetary incentive, or economic considerations, will always be sufficient to bring about a desired action on the part of intelligent agents. So for example, it is assumed that if you introduce competition, so that one energy company is offering lower tariffs than another, people will change to the company with the lower tariffs and this will bring *down* the price of gas or electricity (which again, they assume, is obviously a good thing). In such circumstances economists, or at least politicians brought up within a neoliberal ideology, are surprised when people don't act accordingly, but stick with a company that is offering the energy at the higher price. In such circumstances, finding that ordinary human beings make other choices that are not about the money, they conclude that these are irrational agents, acting in ignorant or stupid ways. Often they then conclude that there must be something wrong with the human brain—that it operates on some faulty reasoning—for reasons to do with psychology or evolution, to ensure survival in stressful circumstances.<sup>1</sup> So, for example, in the energy company case, politicians still fail to understand why I and many others might choose to go with a company that charges *more* per unit for its energy, instead of one that charges less—because, perhaps, I made my choice not on the basis of the cost, but on the basis of having assessed the company for its treatment of its workforce, its environmental impact, its customer service, its contribution to the local economy or whatever other things might matter to me.

Or take the Brexit vote in 2016. This took analysts by surprise, because if you assume that rational people make choices for self-interested economic motives, choosing to vote leave looks irrational or ignorant. Many of those who voted to leave stood to lose income, jobs, medicines and so on. Yet those who voted to leave have mostly not changed their mind, notwithstanding the evident (and acknowledged) economic damage to themselves and to their beloved country. This apparently bizarre preference confuses certain political groups, who cannot understand that people might choose something that damages their own private economic interests and prospects.

But why not? In fact, I suggest, it is perfectly rational to do so if you care about your country. Surely it is the centre-right neoliberal analysts who are ignorant and missing the point. Why should we expect that rational people are motivated by self-interest and a desire for money? For, after all, what is money for? And why would having more of it be a desirable thing?

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. we operate with “quick fix” responses that don't produce the best results, etc. The classic work is D. Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Harmondsworth, 2012).

### **III. Socrates and Thrasymachus: the money making art**

In his discussion with Thrasymachus, in the first book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates observes that when a person works at some productive activity, and that productive activity is also a means of making money, that person is exercising two separate activities, with two separate goals or intentions.<sup>2</sup> Take a doctor, for instance.<sup>3</sup> The goal of medical treatment, as Socrates and Thrasymachus both agree, is making people healthy, and that is the aim of anyone who genuinely practises the art of medicine. At the same time, the doctor may also be trying to make a living for herself. This is a separate concern, the art of making money, which has its own goals, quite distinct from the goals and aims of the medical art. Its goals are securing a personal income. So there is no contradiction or logical puzzle if we find someone who practises medicine simply for the sake of the health of the patients, on a charitable basis, but seeks no reward or income from the activity. Even if one has no need to practise any money-making art, one can still practise medicine in just the same way, and with just the same goals, as someone who makes their living that way. So we say, qua doctor, this person is concerned with improving people's health. Qua wage-earner, she is concerned with improving her bank balance. The second activity is not essential to the first nor the first to the second. It is possible to practise the art of money-making in many different ways, not all of them good or honest.

The same goes for being in charge of a train, or teaching in schools, or any other profession. The profession has its own goals, and they have nothing to do with making money. Instead they look exclusively to achieving some good results in the relevant domain. Any true craftsman cares about those goals that motivate the practice she is engaged in. The purpose of practising the craft is always to bring about something good, something worth having.

Is the art of money-making itself directed to something good that one would choose for its own sake? It seems not, for no one seeks to make money just in order to have money. There is no point. It makes sense to want people to be healthy, or to want the train to run on time, or to want the children to learn well and be happy in school. Doctors, train drivers and teachers seem to be directing their efforts to making things better for people. It makes sense to want things to be better for ourselves or other people or to prevent something bad happening. But it makes no sense to want to make money, because money has no value in itself.

Here I am departing slightly from the conclusions that the Socrates of the first book of the *Republic* defends in his conversation with Thrasymachus. There he suggests that people do want to get money for themselves, and that they have to be paid a wage for doing the professional job that they are good at, because otherwise there would be no incentive to do it. No one would willingly choose to take up a position as ruler, he says, because ruling is for the good of others, and there is no reward for the agent in that, so they need to be paid a wage. That wage might be money, or honour and prestige, or it might be avoiding a penalty for failing to do what you should do.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Plato *Republic* 346a6-c12.

3 Plato *Republic* 341c5-9, 346b1-13.

4 Plato *Republic* 346e3-347b5

Socrates then infers that *good* people, who do not have a yearning for money or honour or status, will never *want* to become a ruler, because they are not motivated by a desire for money or honour, so those incentives will not work. Hence, famously, Socrates concludes that the reluctant but good ruler will only step up to do their duty if incentivised by the fear of something worse, because the alternative is to be ruled by someone else, who would inevitably be worse.<sup>5</sup>

Here Socrates does assume (perhaps for the sake of the argument) that one must have a self-interested reason to do something that is good. He appears to assume that no one would be motivated by achieving the good end as such. This is odd given how often he takes the goal-directedness of crafts as an analogy to understand the virtuous motivation to do good for the sake of the good outcome. Although his argument works as an *ad hominem* point, bringing Thrasymachus to see that ruling is not itself a practice directed at the agent's own benefit of the agent, it curiously imports questionable assumptions on the way.

But let us return to the question of whether money is something choice-worthy, and that one might do things in order to get it for oneself. Socrates' argument in this passage appears to presuppose that it is. I am suggesting that it is not. Rather, money is valuable only as a means to acquiring something else, something that has value, and if there is nothing to spend it on, or the available things are worthless, the money is similarly worthless. Surely, Socrates should really have said that the art of money-making is not a craft or profession in the proper sense, because it is not directed to achieving an end that has value, or towards anything that we want. We don't, after all, want money, and money will be entirely useless once we have destroyed the planet in the process of making lots of money.

But perhaps in fact already there is nothing of any value that money can buy? What does money buy? Are they things that are intrinsically good? Or are they things that, like the money itself, are only instrumentally good—good insofar as they deliver something that has real value. And perhaps all the things that really matter are things that money cannot buy.

#### ***IV. Socrates and Adeimantus: the rewards for the Guardians***

Towards the end of Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates (describing his imaginary ideal city) insists that the guardians of the state and public servants must be maintained at state expense and have no access to any private property:

First, private property: none of them should own anything of their own, except what is unavoidable. Second, no house or storeroom or anything like that should be provided for any of them that isn't a place that anyone can go into at will. Third, the rations, such as would be needed by sober and dedicated men trained for war; these—sufficient for a year, with no surplus or shortfall— should be provided out of a tax levy on the rest of the citizens, in return for the protection that the Guardians provide; they'll live a communal life like soldiers, eating together in the refectory.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Plato *Republic* 347b6-c6.

6 416 d-e.

The purpose of this provision is to remove the need for these officials to have any contact with money or private property. Here in Book III, Socrates has not yet distinguished between those whose job is to defend and enforce the decisions of the rulers and the rulers themselves who are charged with deciding what should be done. That will come later when he discovers that “philosophers must be kings”. But even at this earlier stage, he is already providing safeguards against corruption on the part of those with positions of responsibility by stripping them of all material reward, and removing them from any contact with money. He continues as follows:

And we'll advise them that they have from the gods all the divine gold and silver that they need, permanently in their own souls, and they have no additional need of the human kind—indeed it is offensive for them to defile the possession of that gold with an admixture of possession of the mortal kind, because many unholy things result from the currency of the *hoi polloi*, but the gold that they do have is not debased.<sup>7</sup>

416e

The contrast between the *gold and silver in the soul* and the gold and silver that is the currency of the *hoi polloi* in their commercial exchange is not just a fanciful metaphor. Socrates prompts us to consider which kind of currency is valuable, whether in political decision-making or in our lives more generally. What do we want our leaders to value? True riches cannot be bought for money, Socrates is suggesting. I would go further. Perhaps in reality money destroys them, because the most precious things are those which are destroyed or rendered worthless by money. I will return to this issue below.

The danger on which Socrates is focusing, at this point, however, is simply that those who are placed in a position of responsibility to protect the people, might instead become their oppressors. It's as if we reared dogs to protect our sheep, but we trained the dogs to attack the sheep like wolves.<sup>8</sup> But, says Socrates,

“if the Guardians acquire private land, houses and money, they'll become hostile dictators instead of allies of the people, they'll live their whole life hating and being hated, plotting and targeted by plotters, more afraid of the enemies at home than of the enemies abroad, and running themselves and the whole city to ruin at once.”

417a-b

To combat this danger, Socrates says, we must give them no private possessions at all. At the start of Book IV of the *Republic* Adeimantus protests against Socrates' proposal. These important people are, in his view, disadvantaged by comparison with the ordinary working folk, who have private wealth and can give dinner parties and enjoy life.<sup>9</sup> Adeimantus thinks that it is bonkers to devise a city

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7 416e.

8 416a.

9 419a1-420a2.

where the leaders have far less fun than the ordinary people. Many would-be political leaders would probably agree.

But why does it seem bonkers for the public officials to receive no monetary rewards? Adeimantus suggests that the city really belongs to the rulers (or is their own property). Are they not thereby entitled to enjoy the goods it produces?<sup>10</sup> He construes the ruling relation as if it were owning and running a company or farm, where the owner would expect to reap a private profit from the enterprise. So the first explanation of why he is troubled by their lack of monetary rewards is based on this sense that it is unfair. And the second reason is that Adeimantus is supposing that the best things in life are things that you can buy for money, such as farmland, a nice house, fancy furnishings, private religious sacrifices, entertaining guests, some family silver and so on.<sup>11</sup> If these are what make for a good life, then, without money, the Guardians will miss out on them, at least in a society where obtaining these things depends upon having private wealth. I guess one could imagine a socialist society in which most of these things might be part of the universal unconditional provision for citizens, and would not require private wealth, but neither Adeimantus nor Socrates is envisaging a society like that.

Initially Socrates seems to concede Adeimantus' point, that the Guardians are getting a poor deal, as regards their personal happiness. He adds that they can't go on foreign holidays, they can't pay for courtesans, no spending money for fun things on top of the list Adeimantus had produced.<sup>12</sup> But he is not really endorsing Adeimantus's response, just helping him to make it, and to unpack its full implications. These Guardians are to have none of the things that are normally regarded as the accoutrements of power and wealth, and none of the things that people standardly associated with being well off and enjoying the good life. Yes, says Socrates, that's exactly right.

Socrates's real response comes next. It is complicated and deserves attention. The first point he makes, which I take it should really be the correct response, is that it would be no surprise if it turns out eventually that these arrangements will actually make these people the happiest people there are.<sup>13</sup> This seems to me to be what he should say and perhaps is what Plato particularly wants us to understand.

But then he offers a different response, more in tune with Adeimantus's level of understanding. In this case, he does not, as yet, challenge the thought that these people are missing out.<sup>14</sup> Instead he frames a justification in terms of the wider good for the city as a whole. The argument has two parts. In the first Socrates considers the problematic effects if you give the rulers the privileges and material rewards that Adeimantus thought they could expect. This would undermine the whole project, Socrates replies, since the point is to create the overall best city, not the city in which one group flourishes and the city as a whole fails. The Guardians would in fact fail to be Guardians, and the whole project would be ruined, if the Guardians were mired in corruption and seeking material

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10 419a3-4

11 419a5-10

12 420a3-8.

13 420b3-5.

14 420b5-421c5

gain for themselves, so it would be stupid to give them those rewards, and thereby undermine their purpose within the constitution. The point was not to make one group especially happy. This argument implies that the Guardians are in a sense missing out—that they might not be as happy in this scenario as they would in one where they had private property—but this sacrifice on the part of one group is for the benefit of the community as a whole.<sup>15</sup> In making this point he also gives a forward reference to his plan to consider what goes wrong in cities that do the opposite, and give the rulers power and privileges. This task is effectively fulfilled in the treatment of the failed and debased constitutions in Book VIII.

The second part of Socrates' argument for distributing rewards and happiness holistically rather than to one class alone consists of a comparison with a work of art, in this case a statue. The aim of the artist is to produce a beautiful work of art as a whole, in which each part is painted in the appropriate colour. The whole work will look right if the eyes are painted in sober colours, not in purple. Purple here symbolises the wealth and luxury that typically goes with being the ruler. Just because the eyes are the best and most beautiful part of the body, or statue, it doesn't follow that they would look right if daubed in purple paint. The overall result would be hideous. Here again, we are asked to consider the city holistically. Is it a good and beautiful construction? The argument is couched in aesthetic terms. We are seeking the finest, most elegant constitution, and it will not be one in which the rulers get all the purple.

Finally, Socrates generalises this point to observe that it would be similarly destructive to use purple paint (that is, offer a luxurious leisured lifestyle) for the farmers or any other productive group in the city. The city would be ruined if farmers didn't do their work. So equally, we understand, the city will be ruined if rulers don't do their work but bask in wealth and entertainment. Here the aesthetic argument morphs somewhat into a utilitarian calculation. The whole requires that each part is contributing productively. Unequal or unjustified rewards undermine that balance, letting people get away with not doing their bit. We recall that the whole structure of the city is founded on the idea that division of labour and doing your own bit is the foundation of a just and perfect community.

We can see how these answers about the general benefit to the whole, from fair distribution across groups, fit with the practical side of the original project to create a society that is simply a scaled up version of a mutual support community such as the first simple "City of Pigs". But the suggestion that there is something valuable that the rulers (and other groups) might aspire to, but are missing out on, because they are not entitled to extra wealth and entertainment is left in place (and fits with Glaucon's original complaint that the simple city was lacking in luxuries too, and fit only for pigs).<sup>16</sup>

Still it seems that Socrates' initial comment was closer to the truth of what Plato probably intends, which is that the Guardians are not missing out on anything that they would actually value. But the utilitarian and aesthetic arguments, about the wider benefit to the whole city, do provide reasons that would weigh with someone like Adeimantus, who still thinks that wealth and privileges are something desirable that is being kept from the rulers. And they do

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15 420b5-c3.

16 372c

invoke considerations that are available at this stage of the *Republic*. Since Socrates has not yet divided the gold and the silver career paths, and the physical and military training of the warriors, as described so far, is not obviously an intrinsic good such as to be a goal of greater value than anything that one would be sacrificing in the pursuit of it, it would be difficult to justify denying the Guardians any rewards for their service to the community by appeal to the thought that they are getting something much more highly prized than money or luxuries.

However, later in the *Republic*, when Plato has progressed to thinking about the gold class, who are philosophers not soldiers, the situation is rather different. The intellectual training of the philosopher kings, in increasingly rigorous and unworldly mathematical and dialectical disciplines, will clearly lead to achievements that have genuine intrinsic value, in Plato's eyes. Their experiences and discoveries are to be thrilling and self-fulfilling in a way that nothing else could ever be thrilling for them—as evidenced in the fact that they will be reluctant to return to the cave and take their turn at ruling.<sup>17</sup>

At this stage, in Book VII of the *Republic*, we can see that no monetary rewards or private property would ever be relevant or desirable for the philosopher rulers, since their desire is for the joys of intellectual enquiry. But now instead of a puzzle about whether it is fair for these rulers to be penniless, Glaucon raises the parallel and problematic question of whether it is fair for them to be forced to rule. This puzzle effectively reformulates Adeimantus's question at the end of Book 3, but it is now couched in the new values of the completed city. Now what motivates the rulers is not money and entertainment, but the intellectual life. And now the puzzle is why the rulers should forego that reward, and whether denying them access to it is a kind of injustice.

In response, Socrates falls back again on the holistic picture. The point is not to make one class happy but to make the city happy as a whole, and this is impossible if people don't contribute their respective benefits to the community.<sup>18</sup> Again we have the same utilitarian calculation, and a rather strange reference to the "law" (or custom) having engendered these philosophers for a purpose, in order that they should be useful to the city.<sup>19</sup>

Many have found this justification for forcing the philosophers back into the cave somewhat unsatisfactory. I do not intend to examine that issue today. What I am interested in is the progression from initially supposing that private property was an important good and a right, to supposing that an immaterial good, philosophical enquiry, is an important good and a right. Money and private property have now become irrelevant. The philosopher rulers are not bothered about that. What they now resent is the loss of their freedom to engage in pure thought. This represents a radical change in the value system. What is good and worth having now looks completely different. Between Book IV and Book VII Plato

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17 519D4-7. Socrates criticises what he says happens "nowadays", with philosophers getting away with remaining in the ivory tower. That will not be permitted in his ideal city, he says. It is unclear whom Plato might have in mind, as examples of ivory tower philosophers refusing to take a political role, other than Socrates himself.

18 519e-520a.

19 519e1-520a4.



has engineered a complete re-evaluation of the norms of social status and rewards.

In founding his city on the hypothesis that pure knowledge is the highest human goal, superior to all other values, Socrates has downgraded mere commodities and possessions to a purely instrumental role. He has set knowledge as the new gold, and made physical prowess and fitness a fine, but lesser, achievement as signified by the notion that it is the equivalent of silver. In a society where knowledge has the highest absolute value, it follows that one would be happy to exchange other things of value for the thing that is of supreme value. So whereas it had seemed that lacking the money to do something else left the rulers deprived of things that others would hold dear, once we recognise that the pursuit of wisdom is preferable, and that was provided without needing money to buy it, there is no longer any reason to want money.

In the *Republic*, Plato shifts the value system. We see that token money is only a means to an end, and that in order to work out what counts as a real reward we need to know what is truly worth having. Then it emerges that lacking money or private possessions, but possessing the thing that does matter, is no hardship. And then we found a new kind of hardship which was having to give up the thing of supreme value in order to make a contribution to human society, which, I suppose, Plato is also suggesting is a thing of value, and incompatible with leaving some individuals as parasites.

However, we should also ask whether Plato's hypothesis, which sets knowledge and wisdom as the supreme kind of gold, needs to be challenged. Arguably in most current societies, access to knowledge and the time to do philosophy is actually something that you can buy, and which you might value above all other pursuits to spend your money on. It could be a candidate for the best pursuit worth having for its own sake. But there are surely also other things that matter in society, which, as Plato notes, must not be bought or sold. Trust and integrity on the part of the rulers is one such thing. Another is the attitude of a craftsman, of someone who cares about the results of her work and who tries to make the best job she can of what she is making, is a fundamental part of a good society. Socrates observes that both too much wealth and too little wealth undermine craft:<sup>20</sup> if a man is in abject poverty he cannot buy good materials, and hence however good his skills and his will, the products he makes will be shoddy and unsatisfying. Though he wanted to do better, he was prevented by poverty. On the other hand, if a man has too much wealth, and comes to value that above his own products, he will lose interest in the craft and in the quality of his products; he will become lazy and unmotivated. So even among the working people excessive wealth can corrupt good intentions—even the good intentions of a craftsman who once cared about whether what he made was the best it could be. I presume that Plato means that the same would be true of bankers, investors and stock-market advisors. The ethics of careful craftsmanship, with the motive to deliver products that have genuine value, and to invest in capital projects that are genuinely beneficial and not destructive or exploitative—this craftsman mentality

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<sup>20</sup> *Republic* 421c10-e5

is easily lost, when the person's judgement is to be bought with monetary rewards that drive out ethics.

## **V. Sparta? Or Southern Italy?**

It is often supposed that Plato modelled his institutions in the *Republic* on the highly conservative and archaic institutions that survived at Sparta. Sparta was a military regime in which the elite citizens were banned from engaging in trade and commerce, and were trained for military service. The elite citizens shared a common table in their assigned regimental club. All the productive labour was done by other classes, including a subject population (the Helots).

Was Plato inspired by this military powerhouse? "Yes" is the standard answer. For instance we read on Wikipedia (fount of all wisdom) the following under "Laconophilia":

Some of the young men who were followers of Socrates had been Laconophiles. Socrates himself is portrayed as having often praised the laws of Sparta and Crete. ... Plato also, in his writings, seems to prefer a Spartan-type regime over a democratic one.

Well, indeed there are a few similarities between Plato's imaginary city in the *Republic* and the Spartan model, such as, for example the Guardians' spartan living conditions, the common refectories, and their exclusion from commerce and monetary gain. My own thesis is that this resemblance to Sparta is part of a joke on the part of Socrates the character, and of Plato as author.<sup>21</sup> Socrates cleverly captures the attention of his fictional listeners by describing a society uncannily like Sparta. The listeners (Glaucou, Adeimantus) include members of Plato's rather oligarchically inclined family, some wealthy citizens, doubtless many of them closet Laconophiles. Socrates lulls his friends into a blind alley, tempting them with a society that seems to follow the Spartan model to which they are drawn by their existing ideological preferences, only then to magically transform his regime, between Book IV and Book VII, into a philosophical one in which prowess in wisdom has replaced prowess in war as the leading measure of success. By the end of Book 7 success has been redefined. Moral and intellectual wealth, justice and trust are the things to pursue and to keep for ever. And in addition, Plato also builds in an ideal of friendship, of sharing rather than competing for advantage, which is expressed most clearly in the claim generally translated as "friends have all things in common" (κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φίλων), and that everything that is mine is yours too. We shall all say "mine" about the same things.

## **VI. Pythagoras and Southern Italy**

Was Plato thinking of any previous real society in setting up this novel kind of philosopharchy, as described in the second part of the *Republic*? One option is that he was alluding to the Pythagorean states of Southern Italy in the late sixth century. After Pythagoras fled from Samos to Croton in around 529 or 530 B.C.,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Also on the part of Plato as author of course.

<sup>22</sup> See K. von Fritz, *Pythagorean Politics in Southern Italy* (New York, 1940). The evidence comes from the historian Timaeus.

he is said to have been responsible for major reforms in the city of Croton, and some ten to twenty years into his time in Southern Italy it seems that he and his followers had come to occupy all the most influential leadership positions, across a whole tranche of cities in the region as well as in Croton itself. There is also evidence of Pythagorean societies and influence in Metapontum.

What did the Pythagorean political system look like?<sup>23</sup> Modern scholars have typically tried to characterise Pythagoras' political policies as “conservative” and “aristocratic”. But I think it is a mistake to describe the Pythagorean regime as a form of aristocracy, just as it is wrong to take Plato's rather similar philosopharchy for an aristocratic or oligarchic ambition.

In so far as we can tell, from our rather late sources, Pythagoras set up a cohesive society of young men, who handed over all their wealth to the common good, and shared a communal life, eating and studying together.<sup>24</sup> I've argued elsewhere that it is likely that it was by way of these disciples that Pythagoras gained political control of the city—that is, I suggested, he would not have gained power by way of a coup, but rather by philosophical conversion: by converting the sons of the leading families to a philosophical project, so that by the time they came to assume their traditional place with a seat in the governing council they were Pythagorean adherents.<sup>25</sup> But though Pythagoras did this by recruiting the sons of leading families, his project did not promote the idea that status comes from wealth. In fact he made wealth incompatible with status. Those with the highest status had adopted a life of austerity that was the hallmark of the community of likeminded individuals. They had, as friends, “all things in common”. There was sharing and *koinonia*, not competition.

Pythagoras seems in this way to have created an alliance of cities across the neighbouring states in Southern Italy, and all these cities were committed to making friendship the supreme value, so that competition for resources and conflict over possessions could be replaced by collaboration and mutual support. The expression “friends' things are common” (*κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φίλων*) which is used repeatedly by Plato, in the *Republic* and elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> seems to have been a Pythagorean catch phrase. Iamblichus even suggests that Socrates' proposal in the *Republic* (462c) that everyone must say “mine” and “not mine” of the same things is also copied from the Pythagorean society.<sup>27</sup> As scholars have sometimes noted, when Socrates prescribes years of training in geometry and harmonics for those who are training to be leaders in the *Republic*, he may possibly be inspired by some kind of comparable training given to Pythagorean initiates in the fifth century. Certainly Aristotle already suggests that Plato “follows the Pythagoreans in many

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23 See my treatment of this issue in C. Rowett, ‘The Pythagorean Society and Politics’, *A History of Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge, 2014), 112–130

24 Diogenes Laertius 8.10 (citing Timaeus).

25 Rowett, ‘The Pythagorean Society and Politics’, 118–19

26 *Republic* 424a, 449c5; *Phaedrus* 279c; *Lysis* 207c10; *Critias* 112e10; *Laws* 739c2-d5. Porphyry attributes the phrase both this phrase and “the friend is another self” to Pythagoras (*Life of Pythagoras* 33). See further evidence cited at Rowett, ‘The Pythagorean Society and Politics’, 115 n. 17.

27 See below. Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life* 33.

things”.<sup>28</sup> Socrates’ proposals in the *Republic* may be riddled with Pythagorean-type institutions borrowed from Southern Italy.

Did the Pythagorean project work? There seems to have been a period of flourishing political and monetary collaboration across a number of states in the region which lasted successfully for about 70 years. That is a pretty lasting peace, given the norms for neighbouring cities in the Greek world. With a few minor hiccups, the Pythagorean alliance held until the leaders were eventually assassinated in an arson attack in the mid fifth century. The coinage of the region suggests that the otherwise independent cities of this alliance were using a form of common currency and a system of mutual exchange, so the Pythagorean union of city states was a bit like the European Union and the Eurozone on a very small scale.

### **VII. The grammar of “mine”**

Whether or not these reconstructions of the basis of Pythagorean and Platonic recipes for political harmony are historically accurate (I am not here to defend the historicity of this proposal, on this occasion) they are, I suggest, good to think with.

If Iamblichus is right,<sup>29</sup> Plato was following Pythagoras when he has Socrates say, at *Republic* 462a9-c8, that what causes conflict and unease in a community is when one person is pleased and another is displeased about the same thing, when one suffers and another gains from a particular measure, and when one group is rejoicing at something that is destructive to another group. The remedy, says Socrates, is that all the people should share the same joy and the same pleasure, and this will be delivered if everyone says “mine” about the same things.

Like many a modern capitalist, Aristotle dismissed this proposal as nonsense, on the grounds that people need to own and look after their own property, rather than hold it in common. Commenting on Plato’s ideas in the *Republic*, Aristotle says “It’s always very difficult to live together and share things in common, in all human affairs, but particularly in these matters (sc. common property)”.<sup>30</sup> He illustrates this with the thought that people travelling together always get into disputes about trifling things, and that those who work together quarrel about their daily common tasks.<sup>31</sup> Instead property should be private, he suggests, because people then care about their own interests and are not so likely to get annoyed by what others are doing or failing to do about theirs.<sup>32</sup> And furthermore, he thinks of self-love as ingrained in our nature. As a result, he says, “feeling that something is your own adds an indescribable and quite distinctive pleasure.”<sup>33</sup> So, Aristotle concludes, common property won’t work. Instead one should cultivate a sort of substitute version of “friends have all things in common” whereby decent people voluntarily put their own property at the disposal of their

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28 Aristotle *Metaphysics* A ch.6, 97a29-31.

29 Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life* 33.

30 Aristotle *Politics* II, 1263a15-17.

31 Aristotle *Politics* II, 1263a17-21

32 1263a27-28.

33 1263a41-2

friends and share it as decent people would. There is, he says, a certain pride and joy in doing a service for others, for friends or guests, out of one's own resources. This is lost if you have no private resources, and the contribution you make is not your own, and not voluntary.<sup>34</sup> Excessive state communism eliminates this positive experience of being generous, he thinks.

Generations of political thinkers have taken Aristotle's critique of common property to be convincing. But perhaps we should not follow them, in supposing that Aristotle has understood Plato correctly. Is Socrates proposing common property? Shared property? Communism? I think not. Let us take a closer look at what he is saying and see how we might distinguish it from the commons, and from common or shared property.

Notice that Plato, and perhaps Pythagoras before him, does not say that everyone should say "ours" about some common shared property. Rather the formulation is that "everyone should say 'mine' about the same thing".<sup>35</sup> It is true that the alternative, of me saying mine about one thing and you saying it about another parcels things up as private to individuals, and that might include some property. But we should not infer that the only things about which we can say "mine" are property and possessions. In fact, it appears to make no sense to think of saying "mine" in common about the same possessions. If I jointly own some property with another person the normal expression would be "ours".

What are the things about which I and others sometimes say "mine" in unison, and what are they if not property? Let us think of some examples where we use "mine" in just Plato's way. First, we typically speak of "my team" in referring to the football team that we support. Here we belong to a large group of fans who cheer on and support the football team in whose success we delight (all of us, at the same time) and in whose disappointment we share (all of us at the same time). This is a clear example where we all say "mine" together, and the joys and pains are shared, and these shared joys and pains bring us together in unity and shared hopes and shared fears. We are also likely to root for our club, and perhaps even wear the scarf to declare our belonging. The "mine" of "my team" is not an exclusive "mine" and it is not a kind of property. It is, I shall suggest, a kind of belonging.

A second example is "my university", "my school", "my alma mater". Here too we have a shared sense of belonging, and we are likely to feel an affinity with another person once we find they have been to the same institution. Again, the "mine" in "my alma mater" is not ownership or possession. There is no suggestion that I have bought the place. That would be nonsense. I might, however, be sending money to it, to support the current students and provide scholarships. Here too, the shared belonging brings a sense of friendship and affinity among those who all say mine about the same institution, and rather than rendering us less likely to care about and support the institution, we are actually likely to send voluntary donations to ensure that it continues the good work. This conflicts with the idea that we work only for the good of ourselves and care only about what is our private property. But then what we are looking at here is not property and is

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34 1263b

35 *Republic* 462c2-4.

now ownership. It is not *idion* in Aristotle's terms. But it is not shared property either.

A third example is our family members and relations. I and my brothers both say "my mother", "my father", "my aunt", and "my cousin" about the same people. My children say "my mother" about me. Being one person's mother doesn't stop me from also being another person's mother, and they are not disputing over who owns her when each one says mine. The expression is "mine too", which is a uniting expression, whereas in the case of private property the expression is "no, not yours, mine". Which is a disuniting expression. So the "mine" in all these cases is not about property, and it is not shared ownership. It has a different grammar, and it has different ethical implications.

One further crucial difference is that when something belongs to me, or is mine, in this way, it is not something that can be bought and sold. My aunt is not mine to dispose of or sell, although she does belong to me and I care about her. This is why it is so horrific for a parent to have to sell their child into slavery: because these things that are ours are not for buying and selling. So too, my country is not my property. I may feel patriotic and sing about how much I am devoted to my country. If I sell it, I am a traitor. One's country is not one's own to sell. It is not anyone's property, but it is the country to which we belong and which belongs to us and all our compatriots.

I suggest that we might also find that there is the same logic to the expression "my body", and that this raises important issues about whether it is a mistake to build our feminist responses on the claim that we own our own bodies as property. That is a matter for another paper, I think.

And finally we should also realise that our planet earth and our environment are like our country and our body. It is mine, and yours, but it is not ours to sell or to exploit.

When two or more of us identify something as "mine" in this way, we generally tend to care strongly and altruistically about the thing to which we both feel an attachment. We typically put time, effort and resources into tending it, nurturing it, rooting for it or funding it. In addition, we also care for each other, for the group of us who feel mutual concern for the same thing. In these cases we are pleased, not offended, by finding someone else who says "mine" of the same football team or is an alumnus of the same university, whereas when someone else says "mine" of our private property we become possessive and deny that it is theirs at all.

So two quite different kinds of possession or belonging can be expressed by the term "mine", one of which is the exclusive "mine" of property, where what is mine is not yours, and we are in competition; the other is the "mine" of belonging, where what is mine is also yours and we are in a situation of friendship and mutual love for the same thing to which we are both warmly committed. There is a massive difference between these two notions, as regards the respective effects of those relationships for cohesion or rivalry and dissent among the group. And the second kind is also quite different from common property, shared property and (arguably) from the commons, although in the last case also we might think that selling it and turning it into property is offensive—but perhaps for different reasons from the reasons that are associated with things that are mine, as distinct from "ours" or "no one's" or "God's".

Our shared loyalty to something that we both call “mine” typically motivates us to a joint endeavour to support, protect and care for it, whatever it is. It does not lead us to compete, nor does it provide any incentive to withdraw and leave it to others. We do not withdraw our loyalty to the football team just because someone else is also a keen supporter. These kinds of belonging draw us by the heart strings, as it were, not by a desire for personal gain, nor by a quest for some abstract or theoretical calculation of the utilitarian best outcome. The collective love and commitment to something whose interests we share in the way that we share our own mother is a powerful force, and should not be neglected or belittled in politics or in philosophy. There is a trend towards supposing that emotional attachments such as love and friendship are irrational and detract from sensible decisions, but that is not so. Decisions made without any attention to people’s feelings and to what they hold dear are dangerous and out of touch.

Arguably there are limits, as explored by sociologists, to the size of the group that can feel shared belonging while still maintaining an energetic and self-sacrificial level of commitment. Some might say that such loyalty can only be preserved when there is a perceived enemy against which one stays loyal to the cause. But I think that we can see that the enemy need not be external, but can be those among us who are heedless of the importance of some value that we hold dear. For instance, in coming together to save the planet from destruction by globalised forces whose purpose is the exploitation of the finite resources in the interests of profit for a small elite, we see the whole world population and all the non-human inhabitants of our planet as “us”, and the profit-hungry corporations as the enemy. My “home” which is where I belong is then a home that is also “my home” for millions of others, and is often seen as a mother for whom we feel individual as well as collective responsibility.

This phenomenon of collective belonging and care for something that is not of material value provides a counter-example to the claim, regularly reiterated from Aristotle onwards, that the only thing that motivates us to commitment and enthusiasm is private ownership and individual rewards or benefits. In fact the institutions to which we feel this kind of loyalty, such as a team or a school or a parent, are not owned at all by the group who regards them as “mine”. And the same goes for “my country” and “my religion”. Yet they are typically things into which one is willing to put some, or indeed all, of one’s private wealth.

We should therefore do well to take note of the need to engage the heart and not just the head, and to find a way to ensure that what is genuinely the object of our love and loyalty is not betrayed in the false narrative of fear and hatred that is being pushed by dark forces of populist rhetoric, or by the rationality that supposes that all that is of value can be bought and sold. I think Plato’s message has never been more timely or needed. The Pythagorean formula, that friends have all things in common, is a worthy motto for the future. Our friends are, however, all over the globe, and most of all they include those who are potentially harmed when we take resources at their expense, and deny them access to the good things that we share.

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