

## Kallipolis, Competition, and the “Noble Lie” in Plato’s *Republic*

The *Republic*’s Kallipolis is not simply a utopian construct; Socrates’ “city in speech” is deeply intertwined with the competitive ethos of historical Athens. For instance, in urging Socrates to stay in Piraeus, Adeimantos mentions the attractions of a nighttime torch race conducted from horseback (328a1-4). In evaluating the psychic and social effects of tragedies, Socrates and his interlocutors metaphorically adopt the role of chief archon, deciding who should and should not receive a chorus (383c2). And the philosophical activity they undertake (and commend) is linked to democratic spectatorship (Monoson 2000; Nightingale 2004).

Kallipolis nevertheless takes a dim view of competition in general. Its civic unity rests on a tiered socio-political system whose citizens are to mind their own business (443a8-9). Its guardians and auxiliaries derive from eugenic unions and receive appropriate training, like horses or dogs (e.g. 451c6, 459a-b). To justify these arrangements Socrates reforges various elements of the Hesiodic “myth of ages” (*Works and Days* 109-201) into a “noble lie” (414c-415c). He thereby rehabilitates aristocratic notions of heritable excellence (Rose 1992) while rejecting the “new” sorts of politicians created by sophistic education and democratic rivalry (Connor 1992).

Socrates’ appropriation of Hesiod is significant (O’Connor 2007). In *Works and Days*, even the ‘good’ Eris produces anger and envy (καὶ κεραμεὺς κεραμεῖ κοτέει καὶ τέκτονι τέκτων,/ καὶ πτωχὸς πτωχῷ φθονέει καὶ ἀοιδὸς ἀοιδῷ, 25-6). Kallipolis therefore seeks to eliminate competition across occupational groups, and reduce it within groups. By outlawing private property and families among the guardians, Socrates in effect removes the allure of the sorts of prizes traditionally awarded to victors (e.g. valuable objects, money, marriages). And by

requiring those who are chosen to return to the cave and rule, he makes victory itself undesirable (Heinaman, 2004).

Despite its critique, Kallipolis cannot fully dispense with competition. Its leaders emerge from continuing rounds of training, observation, and selection (δοκεῖ δὴ μοι τηρητέον αὐτοὺς εἶναι ἐν ἀπάσαις ταῖς ἡλικίαις, 412e5-6). The mention of ἡλικίαι recalls one of the important features of Greek competitions, namely segmentation of contenders by age. Shortly thereafter Socrates underlines the agonistic nature of the guardians' education by using phrases taken from competitive contexts: τηρητέον δὴ εὐθὺς ἐκ παίδων προθεμένοις ἔργα (413c8), ἀγῶνας αὐτοῖς θετέον (413d3-4), ἄμιλλαν ποιητέον 413d8). And still later he favorably compares the lives and triumph (νίκη, 465d6) of the guardians to those of Olympic victors (465d2).

Socrates' adoption of the "noble lie" reflects Kallipolis' simultaneous antipathy towards and dependence on competition. Although the guardians resemble victors selected in agonistic fashion, they are encouraged to forget the entire experience and treat it instead as a series of dreams (ονειράτα, 414d5; Schofield 2007). But Socrates' rewrought myth has an unintended consequence: it reinscribes the distinctions it seeks to efface. Under its terms, all Kallipolis' citizens are subject to the process of βασιανίζειν. Put differently, they must be tested, measured against external standards, and graded accordingly; they prove either gold, silver, bronze or iron (413e5-414a2). And as Kurke has shown, imagery involving the purity of ores and their refinement has enduring links to "a triple discourse of status, place, and self" (1999: 48). Moreover, Greek sport was likewise all about the creation and elaboration of difference (Golden 1998), which epinician poetry frequently expressed in the language of metals (e.g. ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ, ὁ δὲ χρύσος . . . , *Pi. O.* 1.1.). Plato's Socrates is keenly aware of the civic risks posed by anger and envy, and tries to structure Kallipolis accordingly. Yet while competition may be a

powerful source of *stasis*, in the end even the most just city cannot function without it. And that ongoing tension animates “the noble lie.”

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