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Volume VII Issue 2

Summer 1986

THE 'STRAUSSIAN' INTERPRETATION OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC**

George Klosko

A few years ago *Political Theory* published an exchange between Dale Hall and Allan Bloom, concerning what can only be called the 'Straussian' interpretation of Plato's *Republic*.¹ In both his response to Hall (hereafter referred to as the 'Response') and the 'Interpretive Essay' contained in his edition of the *Republic*,² which the 'Response' is intended to defend, Bloom cites his debt to Leo Strauss' 'authoritative discussion of the *Republic* in *The City and Man*'.³ That the 'Straussian' interpretation of the *Republic*—and much else in Classical political theory—has become influential and widespread is seen by looking at the articles on ancient political theory published in American political science journals in recent years, which have been heavily Straussian. It seems to me that the works of Strauss and Bloom are often insightful and perform the valuable service of forcing the reader to reconsider many of his deepest convictions concerning Plato. However, I believe that their interpretation of the *Republic* is seriously flawed. Because of the influence it has attained, it should be examined closely.

In this essay I attempt to do something which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been done previously. Basically, I attempt to sort out and distinguish various claims about Plato's *Republic* presented by Bloom and Strauss, and some other scholars as well, and to examine the arguments put forward to defend them. My intuition concerning the works of Bloom and Strauss is that, since their conclusions are highly improbable, the arguments they present to support them must be flawed. But I have found that, because of the nature of their writings, it is often difficult to make out exactly what their explicit claims are or to determine the precise structure of their supporting arguments. I think it is important to attempt to unravel these matters here, because once their claims are clearly identified and their supporting arguments seen, the overall weakness of their case becomes apparent.

* Note on text and translations used: Plato is quoted from the edition of J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera* (5 vols., Oxford, 1900–7); I use G.M.A. Grube's translation of the *Republic* (Indianapolis, 1974).

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this journal for helpful suggestions.

¹ D. Hall, 'The *Republic* and the "Limits of Politics"'; A. Bloom, 'Response to Hall': *Political Theory*, 5 (1977).

² Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York, 1968).

³ Bloom, *Republic*, p. xx; and see 'Response', p. 315 ('Author's Note'); L. Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, 1964).

I should indicate at the outset that my concern in this essay is with a specific interpretation of the *Republic*, not with the scholars who uphold it. I refer to the view that I examine as 'Straussian' because its most prominent proponents are Strauss and Bloom. Throughout this essay I also discuss the works of other scholars who present similar interpretations of the *Republic*. But the fact that a given scholar supports the Straussian interpretation of the *Republic* does not necessarily imply that he supports others of Strauss' and Bloom's views; i.e. it does not necessarily imply that he is a 'Straussian'. The works of these other scholars are of interest here only for what they can tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of this particular interpretation of the *Republic*.

Now, it is evident that Bloom's and Strauss' interpretation of the *Republic* cannot easily be discussed in isolation from their views concerning Classical Political Theory as a whole and the distinctive methods they bring to their analyses. But because of limitations of space, I must narrow my focus to their account of the *Republic*, which I will approach mainly through Bloom's 'Response'.⁴ I will supplement my analysis of this piece with frequent references to Bloom's 'Interpretive Essay', and to works of additional scholars including Strauss. I think it will be seen that all these works contain a coherent body of arguments, which will be seen to be defective in a few basic ways. Though I cannot discuss this here in detail, it seems to me that flaws similar to Bloom's are encountered throughout this entire body of works, because they are integral to a certain way of analysing Plato—and perhaps other political theorists as well. My major reason for relying so heavily on Bloom's 'Response' is that the limited space available to him in this piece forces him to present a compressed version of his basic theses, with the result that his main arguments are readily identifiable. The main arguments are less easily construed in Bloom's 'Interpretive Essay' or in Strauss' account of the *Republic* in *The City and Man*, or in Strauss' Chapter on Plato in Strauss and Cropsey's *History of Political Philosophy*.⁵ But since the overall thrust of all these pieces is clearly similar, Bloom's 'Response'—supplemented as indicated—can be taken as presenting the 'Straussian' interpretation of the *Republic*, and many points made below in reference to Bloom alone could be seen to hold for other scholars as well.

In this paper I do three things. After briefly outlining the main features of Bloom and Strauss' account of the *Republic*, in section I, I devote section II to a brief discussion of some methodological questions raised by their

⁴ The essence of Strauss' teaching, including the central role accorded his interpretation of the *Republic*, is explicated by M.F. Burnyeat: 'Review of Strauss (posthumous), *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*', in *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985. A bibliography of Strauss' work in Classical political theory and its many critics is found in *Polis*, 3 (1979–80).

⁵ *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (Chicago, 1963), pp. 7–63.

treatment of Plato. Sections III and IV are then given over to a detailed examination of Bloom's arguments in support of their interpretation.

I

Strauss' general position in regard to the interpretation of the *Republic*, and other works of Classical political theory, is summed up in his essay 'On Classical Political Philosophy'. According to Strauss, for reasons that cannot be discussed here, the Classical political philosophers were led to separate political ends and means. They came to realize that the ultimate goal of political life required knowledge of the nature of virtue, which could not be pursued by political means, but only by a life devoted to contemplation, to 'philosophy'. Consequently, according to Strauss, 'political philosophy transforms itself into a discipline that is no longer concerned with political things in the ordinary sense of the term'.⁶ The view that the Classical political philosophers were led to turn away from ordinary political activities can be referred to as the 'separation thesis'. Presumably, the political activities they rejected are those commonly regarded as such—e.g. activities employing coercive power, related to governmental institutions, etc.

Closely related to the 'separation thesis' is the 'limitation thesis', the view that the Classical political philosophers recognized severe restrictions upon what could be accomplished by traditional political means. Given these limitations, they believed that philosophy and politics were not easily to be reunited. According to Strauss, the Classical political philosophers realized that political reality is intractable, that it must resist attempts to shape it after some preconceived blueprint or pattern. Political idealism, the desire so to shape reality, is therefore a fruitless urge, which can potentially cause great harm. According to Bloom and Strauss, Plato realized this truth and expounded it in the *Republic*. I quote from Bloom's 'Interpretive Essay':

Socrates [i.e. Socrates in the *Republic*] constructs his utopia to point up the dangers of what we would call utopianism; as such it is the greatest critique of political idealism ever written.⁷

The striving for the perfectly just city puts unreasonable and despotic demands on ordinary men, and it abuses and misuses the best men. There is gentleness in Socrates' treatment of men, and his vision is never clouded by the blackness of moral indignation, for he knows what to expect of men. Political idealism is the most destructive of human passions.⁸

⁶ Strauss, 'On Classical Political Philosophy', in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Essays* (New York, 1959), p. 91.

⁷ Bloom, *Republic*, p. 410.

⁸ *Ibid.* Similarly Strauss: 'Certain it is that the *Republic* supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition.' (*City and Man*, p. 65; and see p. 127).

Putting the two theses together, we have the distinctive 'Straussian' conception of Classical political philosophy. According to Strauss and his followers, Classical political philosophers ultimately advocate a form of political activity that is conducted without direct relationship to political institutions, because they realize the limitations upon what such means can accomplish. We find conclusions concerning the *Republic* that are consistent with the two theses in an article by Arlene Saxonhouse:

For Socrates, it appears, the true pursuit of politics must be practiced outside any political organization, whether that of the *Republic* or that of Athens. True political activity occurs not in the highly organized communistic utopia founded in Cephalus' house, but in the private discourse of a few individuals engaged in intellectual inquiry and philosophic endeavor, recognizing their deficiencies, their distance from perfection . . .⁹

Thus, the Straussian interpretation of the *Republic* is in keeping with the limitation and separation theses. The *Republic* is of course generally read as propounding the idea that a perfect political order can be realized only if it is ruled by philosophers, who attempt to shape their city according to the divine truths which they alone perceive. But according to Strauss and Bloom, the ideal state sketched in the *Republic* must be recognized as a facade for the dialogue's 'real teaching', the impossibility of ideal political arrangements. The surface of the *Republic* must be peeled away in order to reveal an inner message that is quite the opposite of what the *Republic* has been generally taken to convey for hundreds of years.

II

Before we examine Bloom's specific arguments, we must discuss a few points concerning his method. Though a full account of Bloom's and Strauss' method cannot be presented here, it must be noted that they stand in an uneasy relationship to the main tradition of Classical scholarship. They rarely cite the voluminous scholarly literature on Plato and rarely discuss many of the traditional difficulties associated with studying Plato, such as the authenticity of various disputed dialogues, the question of the development or unity of Plato's thought, and the 'Socratic problem'. Their lack of such discussion seems to me to be a serious shortcoming, for their positions on some of these questions, though not explicitly stated let alone argued for, often seem to be controversial. For instance, Strauss unquestioningly cites such works as the *Minos* and the *Rivals*, which are not believed to be genuine

⁹ A. Saxonhouse, 'Comedy in Callipolis: Animal Imagery in the *Republic*', *American Political Science Review*, 72 (1978), p. 900.

dialogues by the overwhelming majority of Classicists.¹⁰ Elsewhere Strauss quotes from Plato's *Second Epistle*, another disputed work,¹¹ though he seems not to realize how seriously the acceptance of Plato's *Epistles* undermines his view of the *Republic* (see below, p. 292). Similarly, Strauss and his followers take an uncritical attitude towards the Socratic problem, apparently regarding all accounts of Socrates in the extant literature as consistent and reliable.¹²

Leaving aside questions such as these—though they are far from unimportant—we will examine what is most striking in the Straussian method. This is their attribution of great significance to apparently trivial details in the texts they examine. I quote Bloom:

[In Plato's dialogues e]very word has its place and its meaning, and when one cannot with assurance explain any detail, he can know that his understanding is incomplete. When something seems boring or has to be explained away as a convention, it means that the interpreter has given up and has taken his place among the ranks of those Plato intended to exclude from the center of his thought.¹³

Taken in one sense, what Bloom says is trivially true: one has not understood a Platonic work *entirely* unless one understands every detail. But Bloom's implication is more radical: one has not understood a Platonic work *at all*, i.e. one has not understood its *real meaning* (the 'center' of Plato's thought), unless one understands every detail. This principle is highly questionable. It rests on a number of assumptions about the nature of Plato's texts, which to the best of my knowledge have never been spelled out or defended in detail. Considerable historical evidence would be required to demonstrate that Plato elaborately hid the true meaning of his works from all but those able to unravel their apparently minor details. Such evidence has not been produced.

¹⁰ The *Minos* is cited on, e.g. *City and Man*, pp. 56, 77; the *Rivals* on, e.g. *ibid.*, p. 51. For references concerning the authenticity of these works, see P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1933), pp. 659, 663.

¹¹ Strauss quotes from the *Second Epistle* on, e.g. *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York, 1966), p. 3. For a discussion of its authenticity, see G. Morrow, *Plato's Epistles*, (Indianapolis, revised edn., 1962), pp. 109–18; cf. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (6 vols., Cambridge, 1962–81), Vol. IV, pp. 65–6. Guthrie reports that he has been able to discover eight scholars who accept *Epistle 2* and twenty-two who reject it; this is in comparison to thirty-six scholars who accept *Epistle 7*, the most widely accepted of the *Epistles*, and fourteen who reject it (Vol. V, p. 401).

¹² Similar criticisms of Strauss are found in T. Irwin's review of *Xenophon's Socrates*, *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974).

¹³ Bloom, *Republic*, p. xviii; similarly, Strauss: *City and Man*, p. 60. On Strauss' underlying principles, see esp. *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill., 1952); these are well discussed by Burnyeat, 'Review of Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*'.

Various followers of Strauss defend their method by referring to a few passages in the *Phaedrus* (and sometimes in *Epistle 7*) where Plato casts doubt on the effectiveness of the written word as a vehicle for communicating one's highest thoughts.¹⁴ Exactly what Plato means in these passages has never been settled, and their precise implications for interpreting the dialogues have never been satisfactorily explained. Thus the only secure conclusion one can draw from Plato's remarks is the importance of maintaining a tentative, self-critical attitude in pursuing one's analysis. But Strauss and his followers take precisely the opposite tack. They use Plato's doubts as a licence to pyramid their readings of isolated details into elaborate interpretive edifices.

An additional methodological point concerns a particular, recurrent flaw found in Bloom's writings, and those of other scholars as well. The fallacy called *secundum quid*, or more precisely *a dicto secundum quid, ad dictum simpliciter*, involves illegitimate transitions between qualified and unqualified terms. Two distinct fallacies are commonly referred to as *secundum quid*. One can move from the qualified to the unqualified, e.g. from (a) 'he is a good tennis player' to (b) 'therefore he is good (i.e. a good man)'. Or one can move from the unqualified to the qualified, e.g. from (c) 'the cat is striped' to (d) 'therefore its teeth are striped'.¹⁵ In this particular instance the fallacy is illegitimately assuming that all attributes of the whole also apply to each of its parts. It seems to me that *secundum quid* and related flaws abound in Bloom's and Strauss' writings. In reading many of their works one is struck by the proliferation of abstract nouns: 'the city', 'the philosopher', 'politics', 'nature', 'convention', 'philosophy', 'the body', 'ancient political philosophy', 'modern political philosophy', and many others. Terms like these are of course vague. Unless they are carefully defined, their meanings have a tendency to shift from page to page, from paragraph to paragraph. The danger is that, unless he carefully avoids doing so, a commentator might easily prove some thesis about (say) 'the city' in one stage of his argument but then take 'the city' in quite a different sense in a later stage. Most often he would argue some point about a particular city or one particular aspect of all cities, but then state his conclusion in terms of 'the city', thus falling victim to a form of *secundum quid*. As we shall see below, this sort of thing is a regular feature of Bloom's and Strauss' writings.

¹⁴ See, e.g. J. Kayser, 'Noble Lies and Justice: On Reading Plato', *Polity*, 4 (1973); and see note 13, above.

¹⁵ Moving from unqualified statements to qualified ones is *a dicto simpliciter, ad dictum secundum quid*. For Aristotle's discussion of *secundum quid*, see *Sophistici Elenchi*, 166b38-167a21.

III

Bloom advances two distinguishable arguments to defend his interpretation of the *Republic*. These can be sorted out and examined in detail. The first is the unlikelihood that the central institutions of the ideal state—especially the equal treatment of women and the community of the family—could ever work in practice. The point to be established here can be formulated as follows:

- (1) The central institutional structures of the ideal state could not work in practice.

The second argument is an attempt to untangle the relationship between the *Republic* and certain works of Greek comedy, especially the political satires of Aristophanes, mainly the *Ecclesiazusae*. This argument helps to explain the apparently odd fact that Plato constructs his ideal state around unworkable institutions. The conclusion here can be formulated as follows:

- (2) The institutional structures presented in the *Republic* are not intended as serious political proposals but as comic satire, and are intended as a direct response to the *Ecclesiazusae* (or others of Aristophanes' plays).

(1) and (2) give us an interpretation of the *Republic* according to which Plato's views are consistent with the limitation and separation theses.

Different authors regard (1) and (2) somewhat differently. Bloom tends to give them equal weight in his 'Interpretive Essay', though in his 'Response' he is forced by the task at hand to stress (2). Strauss emphasizes (1) much more than (2),¹⁶ while other scholars, e.g. Saxonhouse, emphasize (2). (1) and (2) are of course closely related. I will discuss them in turn.

(1) is probably the more fundamental and more important. I think it is clear that we should prefer (what we can call) the traditional interpretation and take Plato's institutions at face value—as serious political proposals—if this is at all possible. Thus showing that the institutions are absurd and unworkable is a necessary precondition for feeling impelled to present an alternative explanation of them. But it should be pointed out that it is not enough merely to show that the institutions would not work. It must be shown that *Plato believed* that they would not work. Since Plato has been dead for thousands of years, and since we have no independent way of knowing exactly what he believed, it must be shown that the institutions are so far beyond the realm of possibility that we can take it for granted that Plato was aware of their absurdity. If Plato *could have been* serious about

¹⁶ Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 61, 116.

them, the traditional account should obviously be preferred. Thus to accomplish what he wishes to achieve with (1), Bloom must prove something stronger than (1); he must demonstrate:

(1.a) The central institutional structures of the ideal state are so absurd that Plato could not possibly have taken them seriously.

(1.a), as it seems to me, is surely incorrect. The very fact that the traditional account has become traditional, i.e. that Plato has been generally regarded as serious about his institutions, shows that (1.a) is wrong. I do not contend that the institutions would be likely to work in practice (well or at all), nor is this necessary. All that my argument requires is that Plato *could have been* serious about them, and this strikes me as evidently true. But I will return to this point and discuss the possibility of the institutions in more detail in the next section.

To some extent Bloom's claims about the comic nature of the *Republic* rest on (1), but they also have independent support. There is strong evidence that the *Republic* bears some relationship to Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, and perhaps to others of his plays as well. As Bloom says, simply reading the *Republic* and the *Ecclesiazusae* together makes this difficult to doubt.¹⁷ In drawing attention to the relationship between these works, Bloom performs a valuable service, and also helps to counter the exaggerated notions of Plato as an academic philosopher writing for other academic philosophers that are current in many circles. Bloom's argument here consists of three elements. It requires that he demonstrate: (a) a relationship between the *Republic* and the *Ecclesiazusae*; then (b) a particular account of the main themes of the *Ecclesiazusae*; and finally (c) that Plato crafts the *Republic* as a development and elaboration of Aristophanes' themes. We will discuss these contentions in turn.

To begin with, as we have noted, there is some relationship between the *Republic* and the *Ecclesiazusae*. In this play Aristophanes satirizes the Athenian democracy by depicting the disastrous results of taking its principle of equal distribution to its logical conclusion by instituting community of property and of the family. There are similarities of language as well as theme between this work and the *Republic*. These have been recognized for more than two hundred years, though scholars have not been able to agree about what to make of them.¹⁸ However, the interesting question is the precise nature of the relationship between the two works. Possibilities range from Plato's (i) merely alluding to Aristophanes, to (ii) taking his objections

¹⁷ Bloom, 'Response to Hall', pp. 324 ff.

¹⁸ A judicious appraisal of the evidence and the scholarly controversy surrounding it up to the beginning of this century is given by J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1902), Vol. I, pp. 345–55.

seriously and trying to deal with them, to (iii) more or less centering his entire discussion upon the *Ecclesiazusae*. This last is an extreme position. It holds that Plato introduces community of property and of family into the *Republic* mainly to answer Aristophanes. Bloom believes that this is the case.¹⁹ His grounds are the absurdity of Plato's institutions and his allusions to Aristophanes. We will look at Bloom's handling of the latter first, postponing further discussion of the absurdity of the institutions until the next section.

I quote from Bloom's 'Response':

I shall not enter into the discussion as to whether Socrates really refers to Aristophanes' play. It is too evident to need discussion, and only lack of attention or the desire to quibble could cause one to deny the relation.²⁰

We should note that Bloom's remarks here show only that there is a relationship between the *Republic* and the play. However, Bloom takes this as establishing the extremely close relationship mentioned above. He does present additional support:

The writer of the *Ecclesiazusae* is deemed worthy of a response in both the *Apology* and the *Symposium*. Why not in the *Republic*?²¹

This, however, is weak. It establishes nothing but merely raises a possibility.²² Unfortunately for Bloom's thesis, there simply is no historical evidence that Plato created the central institutions of the *Republic* mainly to respond to Aristophanes. Bloom's shift between a relationship between the *Republic* and the *Ecclesiazusae* and this extremely close relationship is a clear instance of *secundum quid*.

¹⁹ Bloom says that *Republic* V 'can only be understood as Socrates' response to his most dangerous accuser, Aristophanes, and his contest with him' (Bloom, *Republic*, p. 380).

²⁰ Bloom, 'Response to Hall', p. 324.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

²² This sort of argumentation is frequently seen in Strauss' writings. A case in point is Strauss' central contention that the dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors that makes up Books II–X of the *Republic* is conducted obliquely to reveal the impossibility of the ideal state, and thus to wean Glaucon from political ambition. Strauss 'argues' for this point as follows: 'We cannot exclude the possibility that [Socrates] descended to the Piraeus for the sake of Glaucon and at the request of Glaucon . . . Plato's Socrates' *may have* descended to the Piraeus together with Glaucon who was eager to descend, in order to find an unobtrusive opportunity for curing him of his extreme political ambition. Certain it is that the *Republic* supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition.' (Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 65; my italics) In subsequent discussion, Strauss takes it as established that Socrates has gone down to the Piraeus for the sake of Glaucon. Compare Bloom: ' . . . if we were to suppose . . .'; ('Response to Hall', p. 320). A piece that is especially marred by this sort of reasoning is Kayser, 'Noble Lies and Justice'.

Having seen, then, that Bloom does not establish the necessary relationship between the *Republic* and the *Ecclesiazusae*, let us turn to his interpretation of the *Ecclesiazusae*. Basically, according to Bloom, one of Aristophanes' main purposes in the *Ecclesiazusae* is to lampoon glaring flaws in the Athenian democracy. Aristophanes would agree with Plato's assessment that democracy unfairly distributes a kind of equality to equals and unequals alike.²³ By showing what results when this feature of democracy is taken to an extreme degree, Aristophanes unveils its inherent absurdity. Thus Bloom understands Aristophanes' strategy in the *Ecclesiazusae* as follows:

[(3)] Aristophanes extends the principle of Athenian democracy to the extreme and shows that it is absurd, and thereby shows the limits, or the problem, of that regime. Athens is ridiculed, not some anonymous political projector.²⁴

Aristophanes' target is the democratic principle of equal distribution. This is shown to be absurd in two of the play's key scenes. In the second scene an Athenian, Chremes, gives his property to the state, while it is made clear that others won't comply. The conclusion Bloom draws from this scene is:

[(4)] Hence, inequality and selfishness would seem to be necessary concomitants of any political order.²⁵

In the third scene community of family is shown to lead to a handsome young man's having to sleep with a series of horrible old hags. From this scene Bloom draws the following conclusion:

[(5)] This powerful and unsurpassedly ugly scene lays bare the absurdity of trying to make politics total, of trying to make an equal distribution of all that is rare, special, and splendid, of allowing nothing to escape or transcend the political order. It reveals the tension between *physis* and *nomos*, nature and civil society.²⁶

Bloom sums up Aristophanes' message as follows:

[(6)] By hypothesizing a perfect social union, Aristophanes lets his audience see for itself that it would be a hell, that some things must remain private and that men must accept the inconsistencies of a community which leaves much to privacy.²⁷

²³ *Republic*, 558c.

²⁴ Bloom, 'Response to Hall', p. 325.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

I believe that Bloom's interpretation is questionable. As we have seen, Aristophanes' satire has a specific target, the Athenian democracy. This is clearly recognized by Bloom in (3).²⁸ But this specificity is lost in the course of Bloom's exegesis. In showing that community of property would not work, in the second scene, Aristophanes is satirizing democracy. But in (4), without argument or any attempt at justification, Bloom takes this to apply to all regimes. Similarly, in (5) and (6) Bloom applies Aristophanes' satire to all political regimes without argument or defence. This extended application is a form of *secundum quid*. It seems clear that Aristophanes believes that equal distribution of political rights and privileges has not worked well in democracy and would not work elsewhere either. Similarly, it seems clear that Aristophanes believes that extension of this principle to property and family in a democracy or elsewhere would be disastrous. But it is important to ask—what Bloom fails to ask—why this is so. Presumably, the answer is that Aristophanes believes something along the lines of:

(7) Democratic distribution (or democratic equality) conflicts with the basic facts of human nature.

It seems to me that Bloom unquestioningly extends the application of Aristophanes' satire to all political regimes, because he tacitly attributes a principle like (7) to Aristophanes, and perhaps also believes that (7) is true himself. More important, Bloom also apparently attributes to Aristophanes a principle along the lines of:

(8) Human nature is fundamentally immutable.

(8) has an alternative formulation:

(8.a) Human nature must be as it is found in the Athenian democracy.

Though (8) and (8.a) are vague, their general thrust should be sufficiently clear for our purposes. Obviously, were man's nature malleable, people could be shaped to meet the constraints of a society dedicated to perfect equality in all respects. Thus in order to use (7) to justify the impossibility of communism in all regimes, it must be taken to rest upon a more basic proposition, such as (8) or (8.a). Bloom and other followers of Strauss probably believe that (8) and (8.a) are true, as is seen in their frequent references to 'nature' and certain institutions and practices as being consistent or inconsistent with 'nature'. But whether or not (8) and (8.a) are true is not the crucial issue here. What concerns us is whether Plato believes that they are true.

²⁸ This is also evident in *Ecclesiazusae*, lines 407–26.

Bloom's reading of the *Ecclesiazusae*, summed up in (6), is a crucial link in his interpretation of the *Republic*. As we have noted, he believes that Plato's purposes in writing the *Republic* are largely governed by the desire to respond to Aristophanes. He holds that Plato basically agrees with (6) and uses the *Republic* to communicate similar concerns. Thus Plato, like Aristophanes, introduces communism in order to point up its absurdity. However, there are crucial differences between Plato's communism and Aristophanes' which Bloom does not discuss. As we have noted, Aristophanes' satire is directly concerned with democracy. In order to apply it to all regimes, one must assume that Aristophanes believes (7) and ultimately (8). However, while Aristophanes probably subscribes to both these principles, it seems that Plato does not.

Regardless of Plato's views concerning (7), there is powerful evidence that he does not believe (8). Though it is difficult adequately to discuss Plato's views on fundamental questions of his political theory in this limited space, the key consideration is the amount of attention he devotes to education. Surely, Plato would not build the ideal city in the *Republic* upon an elaborate programme of total education and conditioning, unless he believed that people were highly susceptible to such means. Though there are definite limits to the extent to which people can be shaped—especially the three classes into which they naturally fall—within these limits they can be moulded.²⁹ In reading the *Republic*, it is well to bear in mind Plato's views in the *Laws*, where he insists on beginning the process of conditioning the citizens of the 'second-best' state before they are born.³⁰ At the very least Bloom and Strauss must attempt to counter this evidence. They must demonstrate that Plato's discussions of education are not intended seriously, that Plato (like Aristophanes) does not hold that human nature can be shaped. But as far as I am aware, they do not undertake this task. Bloom does not attempt to isolate the underlying psychological assumptions of his argument, let alone explore their implications.

It seems to me that Plato would draw quite different conclusions from Aristophanes' critique of democratic distribution. Rather than believing that Aristophanes had established the impossibility of all ideal states, I think Plato would infer the impossibility of constructing an ideal state simply by extending democratic institutions, without attacking the more basic problem of people's characters.³¹ He would infer the necessity of constructing an

²⁹ Plato's views on education in the *Republic* and their underlying psychological assumptions are discussed in detail in G. Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (New York, 1986), Ch. 8.

³⁰ Esp. *Laws*, 789a ff.; discussed in Klosko, *Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Ch. 12.

³¹ We find an argument along these lines at *Republic* 425b–27a; see also *Epistles*, 7, 330c–31d.

ideal state around a concerted effort to educate and improve people—to the extent that this is possible. Of course, according to the traditional reading of the *Republic*, this is exactly what Plato does—which explains the great concern with education we have noted.

IV

In this section we will examine the alleged absurdity of the ideal state's political institutions, though reasons of space make a complete discussion impossible. Bloom argues basically that the ideal state is absurd because of Plato's treatment of three specific matters, corresponding to the three waves of criticism introduced by Socrates' interlocutors in *Republic* V: the equal treatment of women; community of the family; and the question whether the state can be brought into existence. I will discuss these in turn. Throughout this discussion it should be borne in mind that, as we have seen, the burden of proof Bloom must meet is severe. He must show not only that these institutions are absurd, but that Plato believed they were. Bloom presents a battery of arguments to show that all these matters make the state absurd, but I must confine attention to what appear to be his most important arguments. Because Bloom treats these matters only briefly in his 'Response', we will also examine portions of his 'Interpretive Essay'.

In his 'Response' Bloom concentrates mainly on the equality of women. This is said to be absurd because of the humorousness of seeing men and women exercise naked together and because Plato overlooks the significant biological differences between men and women. It should be pointed out that in the *Republic* Plato anticipates these two objections and presents his own responses. He argues that the sight of naked women exercising may be ridiculous 'as things stand now (*en tō parestōti*)',³² but with changes in practice attitudes will change also. As Plato notes, it was not long before his time that the sight of men exercising naked was considered ridiculous. To Plato only what is harmful or base is truly ridiculous.³³ Bloom fastens upon the fact that Plato minimizes the difference between women and men, that Plato compares this to the difference between baldness and long-hairedness. I quote from Bloom's 'Response':

I do not think it is just my ethnocentrism which gives me the impression that it is absurd for Socrates to found his argument on the assertion that the difference between male and female is no more to be taken into account than the one between bald men and men with hair.³⁴

³² *Republic*, 452b.

³³ *Ibid.*, 452a–e.

³⁴ Bloom, 'Response to Hall', p. 324.

Here Bloom not only argues fallaciously—using *secundum quid*—but does so against Plato's express warning not to ignore important distinctions.³⁵ Plato's analogy depends upon the fact that, just as the difference between baldness and long-hairedness has little bearing on one's ability to function *as a carpenter*, so being female or male has little bearing on one's ability to function *as a ruler*. Plato writes: 'we did not fully consider their same or different natures in every respect, but we were only watching the kind of difference and sameness which applied to those particular pursuits'.³⁶ Since we have little reason to doubt that Plato believed some women to be naturally qualified to fulfil the functions of Guardians, it seems clear that Bloom is unsuccessful in his attempts to prove that the equal treatment of women is absurd.³⁷

The community of the family concerns a more outlandish set of institutions, and here, perhaps, Bloom's criticisms have more bite. Bloom's most serious argument, upon which we shall concentrate, is that Plato's proposed communism places an impossibly heavy burden on the inhabitants of the ideal state. The Guardians not only must renounce property but families as well, and the possibility of ever knowing the identity of their children. Plato holds that the emotional energy individuals presently focus on these concerns can be transmuted into a powerful attachment to the city as a whole—which is of course one of his main reasons for proposing this set of institutions.³⁸ But Bloom believes this to be impossible. He holds that the desires for family and property are ineradicable. Because these urges are associated with each person's self, with his body, Bloom argues that, in overlooking these, Plato 'forgets the body'.³⁹

The obvious counter to Bloom here is Plato's belief in the educability of the ideal state's inhabitants. Perhaps Bloom is correct that the desires for property and family are ineradicable. Something along these lines has been argued by many influential philosophers, including Aristotle and Hegel. But the point at issue is whether Plato believed in their ineradicability, and this Bloom has not demonstrated. Once again, Bloom must show that Plato does not take his discussion of education and its potential seriously. But again, he does not directly address the question.

³⁵ *Republic*, 454a–b.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 454c–d.

³⁷ See also S.M. Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1979), p. 307. I do not discuss Bloom's argument concerning the licentiousness that would result from the public nakedness of men and women (Bloom, *Republic*, p. 383). This is adequately countered by Hall, 'The *Republic* and the "Limits of Politics"', p. 297; see also Okin, *Women*, pp. 306–7.

³⁸ See esp., *Republic*, 463a–e, 462b–e, 464b–d.

³⁹ Bloom, *Republic*, pp. 385–7; similarly Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 116–17.

Bloom's discussion of the institutions in Book V—and the similar accounts of other scholars—reveals further shortcomings of his method. His discussion of 'the body' in the *Republic* in terms of a body-soul dichotomy⁴⁰ neglects many complexities in Plato's moral psychology. Plato's attitude towards the body and its desires in the *Republic* is far more moderate than in the *Phaedo*, an earlier dialogue, in which virtue is discussed in the context of a body-soul dichotomy, and in which the virtuous life, the life of the philosopher, does not include the body's desires at all. Philosophy in the *Phaedo* is described as a 'preparation for death'; the philosopher must make every effort to free himself from the body and its desires, thereby approximating the complete freedom from corporeality achieved only in death.⁴¹ In the *Republic*, however, Plato recognizes the legitimacy of the body's desires. According to the doctrine of the tripartite soul, introduced in *Republic* IV, such desires are given a psychological status and situated in the appetitive part of the soul.⁴² In addition, another important advance over the *Phaedo* is the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires introduced in *Republic* VIII.⁴³ This distinction is important, because in the *Republic* the necessary desires are recognized and assigned a place in the complete life. They are not only not to be extirpated, but Plato goes so far as to say that they must be fostered.⁴⁴ Accordingly, any adequate discussion of 'the body' in the *Republic* must take into account Plato's important distinctions. But these matters are not appealed to in Bloom's—or other scholars'—discussions of Plato's view of 'the body'.⁴⁵

Aside from the difficulties we have seen in Bloom's arguments, I believe an additional consideration shows that Plato is quite serious about his treatment of women and the family. The point to note is that Plato limits the application of his proposals to the Guardians. The lowest class in the state is

⁴⁰ Esp. Bloom, *Republic*, pp. 386–7; Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 116–17; an especially egregious example of this sort of argumentation is Saxonhouse, 'Comedy in Callipolis', pp. 898–900.

⁴¹ See esp., *Phaedo*, 66b–69e.

⁴² See esp., *Republic*, 437b–39d. For Plato's greater moderation towards the body in the *Republic*, see T.M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology* (Toronto, 1970), pp. 55–8. The moral psychology of the middle dialogues is discussed in detail in Klosko, *Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Chs. 5–7.

⁴³ *Republic*, 558d–59c.

⁴⁴ *Republic*, esp., 589a–b, 586d–e. For the different kinds of virtue in the *Republic* and the role played by the desires in each, see Klosko, 'Demotike Arete in the *Republic*', *History of Political Thought*, 3 (1982); *Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Chs. 5–7.

⁴⁵ Concerning the feasibility of the sexual restrictions imposed on the Guardians, see Okin, *Women*, p. 36. Bloom also makes much of Plato's apparent disregard of various stipulations of the incest taboo, which he calls abhorrent to 'most men' (Bloom, *Republic*, p. 385). But he does not demonstrate that the practices in question are abhorrent to Plato.

surely to retain some semblance of the traditional family, while the reason for this is, presumably, that their inferior natures could not tolerate the demands that community of the family would impose upon them. Along similar lines, Plato takes into account the fact that sexual deprivation must give rise to hostility even among the Guardians. He deals with this problem by instituting a rigged lottery system that is designed to lead the frustrated Guardians to focus their hostility on chance instead of on their rulers.⁴⁶ Surely, if Plato had wished to create a system of institutions that could not possibly work, he would have created it for the entire population of the state—as Aristophanes did in the *Ecclesiazusae*—and not confined it to those individuals he believed to be naturally suited.

The final feature of the ideal state to which Bloom appeals to show its absurdity is Plato's discussion of the possibility of the philosopher-king. Plato defends himself against the third wave of criticism set forth by Socrates' interlocutors by introducing the philosopher-king. He does not argue that the state is likely to be realized in practice, but only that some approximation of it⁴⁷ is not completely beyond the realm of possibility.⁴⁸ The state will be realized in practice if philosophic wisdom and political power can somehow be united in the person of the philosopher-king. According to Bloom and Strauss, however, this is an impossible ideal. Even if someone with the potential to be a philosopher-king should arise, he would not willingly leave his life of philosophical contemplation in order to rule. To force the philosopher to rule would be to commit an injustice against him, and so the ideal state is impossible because its existence must rest upon an injustice to the philosophers.⁴⁹

The argument of Bloom and Strauss here points to a conflict in the *Republic*, which has been much discussed in recent years.⁵⁰ On the one hand, Plato argues that a given society cannot have a good form of government unless its rulers know of something better than ruling and so rule unwillingly, as something that must be done, not something from which they hope to derive personal profit.⁵¹ According to this line of reasoning, the philosophers would prefer not to rule. But on the other hand, Plato's attempt to

⁴⁶ *Republic*, 459c–60a.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 472b–73c.

⁴⁸ For detailed discussion of the possibility of the ideal state, see Kosko, 'Implementing the Ideal State', *Journal of Politics*, 43 (1981); and 'Plato's Utopianism: The Political Content of the Early Dialogues', *Review of Politics*, 45 (1983).

⁴⁹ Bloom, *Republic*, pp. 407–10; Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 124; I have replied to these arguments in an earlier article ('Implementing the Ideal State', p. 370); I draw on that discussion here.

⁵⁰ Numerous references are found in T. Brickhouse, 'The Paradox of the Philosopher's Rule', *Apeiron*, 15 (1981).

⁵¹ *Republic*, 519c–21b.

prove that justice 'pays' in the *Republic* commits him to the position that someone who behaves justly is better off than someone who does not. Since Plato says that it is just for the philosophers to rule⁵²—as it is just for each class in the state to perform the task to which it is naturally suited—it seems that he is committed to the view that the philosophers are better off ruling than not.

Though the formal contradiction is inescapable, too much should not be made of it. A number of factors soften the pain caused by the rulers' sacrifice. The most obvious consideration is raised by Plato in *Republic IV*. The ideal state is designed not to make any one class happy, but for the good of all.⁵³ In Plato's ideal city, as in all political arrangements, each individual must make sacrifices for the good of the whole. In Book I we are given an additional reason why the philosophers must make this particular sacrifice. If they refuse to rule, they will be subjected to the severest penalty, being governed by others less suited to rule, who will not rule justly.⁵⁴ In addition to their extremely close ties to the other citizens, which would make the rulers more willing to make sacrifices on their behalf,⁵⁵ Plato believes that attaining knowledge of the Good—upon which the philosophers' wisdom is of course founded—has profound effects upon their psychic makeup. For Plato, the highest form of knowledge is inseparable from the highest form of love—that described in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*.⁵⁶ Thus an inescapable concomitant of knowing the good and the nature of true virtue is the desire to inculcate that virtue in others.⁵⁷ The philosophers satisfy this urge by ruling. Their main task is to make their fellow-citizens as virtuous as possible.⁵⁸

It follows, then, that though there is a formal contradiction in Plato's arguments in the *Republic*, there are also strong reasons for his view that the philosophers can be persuaded to assume the burden of ruling. Bloom and Strauss make no attempt to anticipate let alone to defuse these reasons. In his 'Interpretive Essay', Bloom fastens on the philosophers' unwillingness to

⁵² *Ibid.*, 520e.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 420b–21c.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 347c–d.

⁵⁵ See esp. R. Kraut, 'Egoism, Love, and Political Office in Plato', *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973).

⁵⁶ See esp. F.M. Cornford, 'The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*', in *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950); also Kosko, *Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Ch. 6.

⁵⁷ Esp. *Symposium*, 212a2–5; see T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford, 1977) pp. 169, 239–43; L. Kosman, 'Platonic Love,' in *Facets of Plato's Philosophy, Phronesis Supplementary Volume*, 2, ed., W.H. Werkmeister (Assen, 1976).

⁵⁸ Esp., *Republic*, 590c–91a.

rule; in his 'Response' he interprets this as an elaborate reworking of themes in the *Ecclesiazusae*.⁵⁹

It is in regard to Bloom's belief that Plato is not serious about the idea of the philosopher-king that the authenticity of the *Epistles*, especially the *Seventh*, becomes important.⁶⁰ In the *Seventh Epistle* Plato describes how, out of disillusionment with both the reign of the 'Thirty Tyrants' and the restored Athenian democracy, he came to invest his hopes in the union of political power and philosophy—in the idea of the philosopher-king.⁶¹ In this *Epistle* Plato says that he had formulated this idea by the time he first travelled to Sicily.⁶² Scholars generally date this journey around the year 388. Given that the composition of the *Republic* is generally placed around the year 374—which is Guthrie's estimate⁶³—if the *Epistle* is authentic, it must be admitted that Plato had nursed and developed the central theme of the political theory of the *Republic* for some fourteen years before writing the great work. This fact would seem to do considerable damage to Bloom's contention that the philosopher-king is no more than an elaborate literary conceit.⁶⁴ The question of the authenticity of the *Seventh Epistle* is thus directly relevant to the validity of Bloom's reading of the *Republic*. Unfortunately, in Bloom's discussion of the *Republic* the connection is not directly made, and the question of authenticity is not discussed.⁶⁵

Reasons of space preclude further discussion of Bloom's demonstration of the absurdity of the ideal state. Though the above discussion is only a sketch, it should be clear at this point that, while Bloom presents an assemblage of arguments of varying worths, none meets the heavy burden of proof that his case demands. It seems to me that Bloom's interpretations are generally superficial. He continually abstracts features of the ideal state from their

⁵⁹ Bloom, *Republic*, pp. 408–10; 'Response to Hall', pp. 327–8.

⁶⁰ The authenticity of the *Seventh Epistle* is stoutly defended by Morrow, *Epistles*, pp. 3–16; see also note 11, above.

⁶¹ *Epistle* 7, 326a–b.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 326b.

⁶³ Guthrie, *History*, Vol. IV, p. 437; for Plato's first visit to Sicily, see Morrow, *Epistles*, pp. 146–55.

⁶⁴ For the process through which the idea of the philosopher-king developed out of Plato's earlier, Socratic political ideas, see Klosko, 'Plato's Utopianism'; and 'The Insufficiency of Reason in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Western Political Quarterly*, 36 (1983). It is clear that Bloom and Strauss misunderstand this aspect of Plato's political thought. See esp. *Apology*, 29e–30b; compare Bloom, *Republic*, p. 436 with *Apology*, 34e–35a; compare Strauss, 'On Classical Political Philosophy', p. 91 with *Gorgias*, 521d; this is discussed in Klosko, 'Plato's Utopianism', pp. 506–8. Cf. the (extremely unusual) 'Straussian' account of Socrates' mission given by T. West, *Plato's Apology of Socrates* (Ithaca, 1979), pp. 166–80.

⁶⁵ Among other self-proclaimed Straussians, the *Seventh Epistle* is accepted by Kayser, 'Noble Lies and Justice', to name one.

overall context in Plato's thought—both their context in the *Republic* and in Plato's thought as a whole. He focuses on contradictory elements—many only apparent contradictions, others minor—while making little effort to see how they tie together or how they fit in with fundamental aspects of Plato's philosophy—especially questions concerning his basic psychological views.⁶⁶ It is not surprising that the end result is so improbable.

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⁶⁶ Note also Bloom's completely inadequate discussion of the theory of Ideas (mainly Bloom, *Republic*, pp. 393–4, 401–3); cf. the accounts (in the admittedly longer works) of R. Cross and A.D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* (London, 1964), Chs. 7–10; and J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford, 1981), Chs. 8–11; compare also the discussion of Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 119–21.