Plato’s *Republic* V: The Problem of Women and Philosophy
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Abstract

If we take the hermeneutic challenge of Socratic irony seriously, what are we to make of Socrates’ proposal in the *Republic* that the women of the guardian class are to be educated and rule alongside the men (451c-457c)? Historically, the proposal has inspired controversy, whether as too great a departure from the customary, or as insufficiently just to woman-kind. But Socrates’ proposal is only the first of a trio of plans, known as the Three Waves, an image for the waves of laughter Socrates fears will greet them. His second proposal recommends that the guardians be bred together, with children raised by all in ignorance of their parents; the third proclaims the rule of philosophers as kings. Readers usually link the first two, insofar as both involve plans for women. But while the discussion of the Second Wave is spurred by Socrates’ interlocutors, Socrates introduces the First and Third Waves on his own initiative. The aim of this study is to argue that the First and Third Waves have the deeper connection: the political problems of women and of the philosopher share a common pattern, as Socrates’ image of philosophy as a maiden in distress illustrates (495c). Both women and philosophy exist in tension with the city under its customary laws, and Socrates’ solution for both, namely rule of the city and education at its hands, is likewise the same. My interpretation of the First Wave seeks to take seriously its seriously funny aspects, such as naked exercise for both sexes, together (452a); but this must be taken alongside the appeal of Socrates’ corresponding recommendation that women be clothed in “robes of virtue” (457a). By examining such aspects of the women’s law, and suggesting how they shed light on the philosopher-king, this study aims to do justice to the irony of Socrates’ “best city in speech,” recognizing both the appeal of his proposals and the political problems they make manifest.
On the other hand, it is inherently improbable that so interested an attitude toward our problem will benefit it: the ascetic priest will hardly provide the best defense of his ideal, just as a woman who tries to defend “woman as such” usually fails—and he will certainly not be the most objective judge of this controversy. Far from fearing he will confute us—this much is already obvious—we shall have to help him defend himself against us.

Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* III.11

What’s the most ridiculous thing you see among them? Or is it plain that it’s the women exercising naked with the men in the palaestras, not only the young ones, but even the older ones too, like the old men in the gymnasia who, when they are wrinkled and not pleasant to the eye, all the same love gymnastic?

*Republic* V.452a-b
Introduction

The Republic, as everyone knows, is a remarkable book; no less so because of its strange power to repel the reader, nearly as much as it attracts him. The work draws the reader over a remarkable variety of terrain, in its pursuit of Justice in itself; it is, as Stanley Rosen justly remarks, rather like a modern novel, not unlike Joyce’s Ulysses in its depth and breadth of subject: a self-contained aporetic argument on the question what is justice, a lengthy description of the details of several versions of the best city, a plan for philosophic education and the nature of knowing and philosophy, a discussion of imperfect regimes, two separate critiques of the poets, and a remarkable closing myth of a living man’s journey to the underworld—all conducted in the space of one evening’s conversation.

Now, many have found its discussions of the best city to be of themselves grounds enough for polemic—among whom Karl Popper is merely the most infamous in recent memory. But one section stands out from the rest of the work, in its ability to inspire controversy and interest: Book V, the content of which has been often found so strongly objectionable, that some translators have even refused to touch the Republic at all, as in the case of Leonardo Bruni. What could give rise to such a reaction? In Book V, Socrates makes three escalating proposals: first, that women in the guardian class should be given the same education as the men, and do all in common; second, that the guardians be consciously bred together and children raised by all in ignorance of their parents; and finally, that unless philosophers rule as kings, or kings become philosophers, there will be

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1 Melissa Lane, in her study of responses to the Republic in the 20th century, notes that while Popper among 2 Italian humanists in the Renaissance, a particularly influential time for Plato’s reputation in the West, were particularly egregious in their treatment of Book V; see James Hankins, Plato in the Italian Renaissance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 126-139. For an overview of the history of scholarship of the Republic since 1870, see Natalie Bluestone Harris, Women and the Ideal Society: Plato’s Republic and Modern Myths of Gender (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 23-73.
no end to evils for human kind. The first two proposals run sharply against reigning customs of longstanding authority, and the third is so uncustomary as to be positively outlandish. Small wonder that Socrates hesitates before proposing them, and describes the probable reaction as a wave of laughter that threatens to overwhelm him (457b); his image is conscripted by scholars to christen each proposal as the First, Second, and Third Wave respectively.

But what of reactions in our own day? One might imagine, given the revolutions in customs our own age participates in, particularly with respect to the race or *genos* of women and their political standing, that we would have more charity for Socrates’ first and second proposals; but such is not necessarily the case. Even apart from the 20th century’s preoccupation with justice, power, and politics as hermeneutics, the *Republic* itself engenders in us an intensity with respect to all questions of justice: one admirable if potentially tedious trait, for such readers as remain inspired by Glaucon and Adeimantus’ search for perfect justice in itself without regard for consequences, is to therefore consider each detail of Socrates’ civic construction in the light of whether any given law or arrangement would be perfectly and thoroughly just. Such is peculiarly the case with the proposals of the First and Second Waves; and so the question 20th and 21st century scholars frequently ask is this: has Plato done justice to women? The current consensus is, no, Plato has not, not nearly enough; the real variation in judgment arises over the extent to which we are willing to be magnanimous towards his imperfect efforts. To those who consider Socrates as Plato’s more or less convenient mouthpiece, perhaps this conclusion is satisfying enough.

But what of Socrates’ famous irony? While the notion that Plato’s dialogues, given their conversational form, are in some sense dramatic, or rhetorical, or ironic—a notion never wholly without advocates in the centuries since the book was written—was often at issue in 20th century scholarship, a basic sense of the importance of Plato’s preferred

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literary form has become uncontroversial enough. What if Socrates’ penchant for irony is at work here, in his proposals for women and philosophy in Book V of the Republic? If so, we no longer can simply say whether or not any justice has been done; in an important sense, we don’t even know what is being said.

In the second half of the 20th century, there was much debate among readers of Plato dedicated to what Jacob Klein called the dialogues’ dramatic or mimetic character and Leo Strauss called Socratic rhetoric, and what this meant for such as could be said to be Plato’s thought, political or otherwise, in his magnum opus the Republic. Part of the debate was externally focused and very publicly visible, as in Allan Bloom’s attempt to defend the ironic status of the city in speech against Dale Hall and others; part of it was internal, with some readers using the Republic as a way of thinking through the nature of Plato’s whole thought, with intriguingly different results, as in the case of Seth Benardete, Eva Brann, and Stanley Rosen. In an important sense, the Three Waves of the Republic became the place to question the nature of the Platonic project itself: does Plato mean us to take Socrates’ proposals and words seriously or not? Ironically or not? Is the city in speech meant to be a golden standard, a blueprint for the best city, or a kind of ugly warning? Is Socrates capable of irony on such a subject? For Leo Strauss, in his essay The City and Man, perhaps the most crucial question is, whether the city in speech, the just city itself, is possible or impossible. To be sure, these questions are the more pressing, since to

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6 Jacob Klein remarks: “…answers can be given in a written text by the very action it presents. That is what usually happens in Platonic dialogues and what constitutes their dramatic or mimetic quality (A Commentary on Plato’s Meno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 17; while Strauss has it: “The most perfect product of Socratic rhetoric is the dialogue” (On Tyranny (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 26.
8 Leo Strauss has this to say in his essay on the Republic: “The just city is against nature because the equality of the sexes and absolute communism are against nature” (“On Plato’s Republic,” in The City and Man (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 50-138; cited in the text as CM. For a detailed consideration of Strauss’ argument, see Chapters 1 and 5.
know just what the limitations of political life might be, sheds light in turn on the scope of political philosophy or philosophy itself. Among the readers in this tradition, while the question of whether the tripartite arrangement of the city offers some desirable alternative for the arrangement of the soul remains a point of contention, none would argue that Socrates’ three proposals in Book V are straightforwardly possible for real, live cities, or desirable arrangements for political life as stated; from whence we may safely conclude that Socrates is being ironic, and so the drama and the rhetoric of the dialogues are secure.

To give the Three Waves this sort of responsibility, however, gives our questions about them a certain momentum or direction: it tends to push the question of why Socrates’ proposals are ironic or funny to the side, in the necessity of showing that they are. But we who begin with a firm reliance on Socratic irony hardly need additional proofs of the man’s daimonic qualities; if we are convinced of the inevitability of Socratic irony, not to mention the caveats and hesitations with which the Three Waves in particular are surrounded, the question of paramount importance is not whether the waves are ironic, but why? Just what is the force of irony for each Wave in turn, the First, the Second, and the Third? Again, in a sense, it’s no longer of first pressing importance to argue whether each wave is in fact ironic; not only because of the greater acceptance of the mimetic character of Socratic dialogue, but also because the appeal of living in common with no private property is at a lower ebb, its dangers requiring less lengthy dramatization at present. And indeed, dialogues other than the Republic might well

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9 For instance, Brann concludes that justice in the soul, as achieved by philosophic education and sight of the Good, is the primary rhetorical and paedeutic function of the city in speech (“Music of the Republic,” 96, 157, 242), while Benardete considers that Socratic philosophy as such treats of the political (SSS, 152; see also Michael Davis, “Seth Benardete’s Second Sailing: On the Spirit of Ideas,” (The Political Science Reviewer 32 (2003): 31). Rosen considers the city to be Socrates’ own best solution, and the irony to be Plato’s alone (PRS, 4-8); also to be considered is Strauss’ influential notion that only the philosopher’s soul can be said to be ordered (CM, 109), which Benardete also holds (SSS, 181); even the ground of the tripartite arrangement is questionable, as Ronna Burger argues in “The Thumotic and Erotic Soul: Seth Benardete on Platonic Psychology,” Interpretation 32, no.1 (2005): 57-74.

10 Bloom perhaps does this most obviously (IE, 380, 411), but he’s not alone; such is the force or telos of Arlene Saxenhouse’s and Stephen Berg’s work on the subject; see Arlene Saxenhouse, “The Philosopher and the Female in the Political Thought of Plato,” in Feminist Interpretations of Plato, ed. Nancy Tuana (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 67-85; Arlene Saxenhouse, “Comedy in Callipolis: Animal Imagery in the Republic,” The American Political Science Review 72, no. 3 (1978): 888-901; and Stephen Berg, “The ‘Woman Drama’ of Republic Book V” in Nature, Woman and the Art of Politics, ed. Eduardo A. Velásquez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 53-72. Likewise, the Strauss quotation cited above, precisely displays the formal problem at work (CM, 127). While this is not Strauss’ only reasoning, the sentence’s influence in later scholarship is understandable.
provide a better rhetorical introduction to the irony of Socrates. When we ask why each Wave might be impossible, we’re asking a question more interesting in its very structure, turning from a matter of fact to real inquiry.

Likewise, when we ask not whether each wave is amusing or funny—since after all, Socrates tells us he expects waves of laughter—but why, the different sorts of humor involved for each proposal likewise become apparent. While the Second Wave approaches slapstick with its secret rigged lottery for the breeding of the best, the humor of the Third has a darker element—since, as Glaucon notes, it will be met not only with laughter but with pitchforks (474a). The humor of the First Wave is particularly strange, since while Socrates seems rather in on the joke of the Second, to argue at length, as Socrates does, that common naked exercise for men and women is only funny because of our attachment to the customary—opens the possibility that the joke is on him.\footnote{Carl Page notes that Socrates speaks dismissively, even “abusively” of the guardians in the Second Wave in “The Truth about Lies in Plato’s Republic,” Ancient Philosophy 11 no.1 (1991): 28n25. Page’s work on the Republic strikes a rare but harmonious balance between acknowledging a debt to Strauss, while retaining a broader philosophic allegiance.}

Furthermore, this way of reframing the question draws out several other crucial differences among the trio; as I will argue in the first chapter of this study, while the Second Wave is Socrates’ response to Adeimantus’ specific request, both the First and Third Waves are Socrates’ independent addition to the argument. While it’s usually assumed that the first two Waves form a natural pair, I will argue that the First and the Third Waves exhibit the deeper similarity, in action, subject, and dramatic function. But the real question is, is there some underlying reason for these intriguing parallelisms? I will argue that, in a non-trivial sense, the political problem of women and of philosophy is the same, as Socrates’ image of philosophy as a maiden in distress suggests (495c). Both women and philosophy exist in tension with the city under the customary laws, and Socrates proposes that the solution for each is to give them an uncustomary public political position. But Socrates’ strange laws for the best city can’t do away with the root of the problem, and the human evils Socrates proposed to solve once and for all, remain without final resolution.

But is this reframing of the basic question asked about the Three Waves of the \textit{Republic}, or this connection between the First and Third Waves for that matter, really
useful, beyond a mild footnote to the purpose? Is there really anything that such an
approach could add to our basic sense of the fundamental flaws of the best city? To be
sure, this approach makes the most difference for our interpretation of the First Wave,
which tends to garner less attention than the Second. It’s simply easier to explicate the
irony of the Second Wave than that of the First, in this day and age. I see the problem as
this: does Socrates really mean to say that the best women should be educated in the best
city, and make up part of the pool of potential rulers? Irony forces us to consider the
possibility that he, or perhaps Plato, does not consider it desirable or even in some sense
possible. Part of the interest of the question, I take it, is the resonance the First Wave has
to our own laws, whether we blame Socrates’ proposal for women as insufficiently just in
comparison to our own provisions, or whether we wish to employ its irony to illuminate
the errors of our modern projects. But irony is a tricky quality: as paramount as it is to
Socrates’ character and Plato’s project, it’s hardly a pedestrian hermeneutic principle. Its
untrustworthy character ought to caution us over what we can easily conclude about
Socrates’ ostensible recommendation that women should guard alongside the men and do
all in common in the best city; since only the weakest sort of irony merely indicates the
opposite of what is said. And yet, this is certainly the conclusion of more than a few
readers of the Republic; Bloom, of course, is perhaps the most vocal proponent of this latter
interpretation, but versions more or less nuanced than his do not depart overmuch from
his main point; and given the influence and even primacy of oral as well as written
tradition in these matters, it’s not uncommon to hear such an argument expressed in
speech.\textsuperscript{12} Again, with irony, all things are possible, and even our own customs might well
bear scrutiny when we allow the dialectic Socrates recommends for this very problem, at

\textsuperscript{12} Bloom’s notion, which I will discuss in Chapter 4, is that because the custom of wearing clothes is a
direct expression of something natural, or what the natural requires, and indeed, is specifically
representative of what women’s nature requires, the abandonment of clothes by the lady guardians therefore
ironically represents the unnaturalness, and so the undesirability of Socrates’ plans for women in the First
Wave (IE, 382-4); likewise Stephen Berg argues that because clothes, and therefore shame, are crucial to
the political project, therefore shame is in some sense natural, and therefore likewise women’s customary
political position is natural (“The ‘Woman Drama,’” 68). Saxenhouse (“Comedy in Callipolis,” 888) and
Mary Nichols in \textit{Socrates and the Political Community} also consider that something crucial about nature is
being transgressed in the First Wave (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 106. The keenest
interest in all of this is, of course, that if the natures of men and women differ after all, and differ in this
way with respect to shame, then Socrates’ argument for the same education for both sexes, and most of all,
for philosophic education as described in the \textit{Republic}, no longer obtains; and this is the crucial oral
tradition to consider.
454a in the First Wave, to have its sway. But there is one thing we should keep in mind: as Leo Strauss reminds us, the city is highly invested in the sanctity of its customs, and it is the job of convention to obscure nature; the philosopher as such would be, on this score, the first discoverer of nature in opposition to the city’s account of the world.  

If this is a just observation, we would do well not to consider the customary as the first authority on female human nature, either the customs of the present age or of ages past.

Now, to be sure, in any discussion of the First Wave, the temptation to make claims about the nature of the female genos is strong, but hardly elegant, at least in this context; one might argue that the Republic, given its civic concerns, is not the dialogue to turn to for accounts of the natural as divorced from the political.  

While the text often speaks of various desirable qualities of soul, it never makes any division of qualities by sex, unlike, for instance, Aristotle’s record of Pythagoras’ Table of Opposites in Metaphysics I.5. As the reader knows, the only explicit discussion of such matters in the Republic argues for no sex-based difference in quality at all (454d); in an important sense, the text doesn’t give us any help for such an argument, desirable as it might be. But what is germane and beneficial to the project is to consider just what was customary for Greek-speaking women in the Attic polis; as I will discuss in Chapter 4, to wrest our sense of Grecian custom away from what the scholars of the Enlightenment were eager to portray is of the first utility. For instance, the reader may be surprised to learn that naked exercise, as well as common tables, were part of religious rituals for women in both Athens and Sparta; Socrates is not departing from custom so much as shaping it for his own ends. Furthermore, the customs of Greek religious cultus are ordered by several different varieties of female character. From the perspective of the customary, there is not a unified idea or ideal, and this has immediate

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13 In Natural Right and History, Strauss seems to say that custom or convention stands in opposition to nature in a way that obscures nature: “the distinction between nature and convention implies that nature is essentially hidden by authoritative decisions” (91); in fact, natural capacity made a right would destroy civil society, which depends upon the conventional in some important sense: “natural right would act as dynamite for civil society” (153). But strikingly, Bloom considers this question of common naked exercise, to be one where custom reveals nature (IE, 382-3; likewise Stephen Berg, “The ‘Woman Drama,’” 68); this striking contradiction ought to give us pause. For a consideration of Benardete’s notion of law, which I will discuss in Chapter 6, as that which reveals human nature, as, crucially, something more complex than the dichotomy of nature and nomos would allow, see Ronna Burger, “Definitional Law in the Bible” in The Eccentric Core: The Thought of Seth Benardete, eds. Ronna Burger and Patrick Goodin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015), 9.

14 Strauss remarks, “The theme of the Republic is political in more than one sense, and the political questions of great urgency do not prevent delay” (CM, 106).
practical ramifications for daily custom; while certain of Hera’s festivals require public tables for adult women, the worship of Artemis in Athens required naked dance for the parthenoi or maidens. Likewise, again, while to reason from the masculine and/or feminine as such is certainly a tantalizing possibility, we have to keep in mind that Socrates’ provisions are for female human beings, not the feminine as a quality; we want first to consider the political place and political problem of human women, rather than the feminine as such. Why should Socrates make his argument more difficult for himself, by adding on the unnecessary and highly nettling proposal that women should be educated and share in all the tasks of the guardians? After all, the Second Wave deals with Adeimantus’ concerns and provides the necessary comic signaling. We have to look for a stronger reason or temptation on Socrates’ part, than that which is suggested by the 19th c. German classicist Karl Nohle, that the only reason Socrates introduced the First Wave was to provide breeding partners for the men.

Finally, it’s important to recall that both the Athenian Stranger of Plato’s Laws and Aristotle in the Politics speak of the political goods of some form of education for women; the Stranger even recommends they share in civic administration. Once we consider Socrates’ proposals in the light of those of more civic-minded lawgivers, the peculiarity of his project becomes more apparent: Socrates’ interests are not merely the political as such, but the place of philosophers and philosophy in civic life, and beyond it. We need to consider Socrates’ interest in his own suggestion: if, as Strauss argues, Socrates has constructed a city that “regards the proper upbringing of the philosophers as its most important task,” it should not be completely surprising that Socrates, as a lover of philosophy, would wish to recruit his guardians from as broad a pool as possible—even if to do so puts the prosecution of ordinary human life in jeopardy.

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15 Walter Burkert describes public tables and naked exercise for women in his seminal work Greek Religion, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 151, 244. For a longer discussion, see Chapter 4.

16 Bluestone Harris (Women and the Ideal Society, 41). After all, even education is hardly a requirement for such. This argument, interestingly, is alive and well in oral tradition. Bluestone Harris notes that Bloom appears to agree with Nohle (ibid., 49).

17 Aristotle, Politics, I.13; Plato, Laws, 759b, 794, 784,795d, 781a-c. For a discussion of these passages, see Chapter 4.

18 Strauss (CM, 125). Likewise, Bloom describes Socrates’ city as a solution to the customary need of philosophers to “steal the sons of the city away” in order to recruit them to philosophy; the city in speech is the happy land where this is no longer necessary (IE, 468).
Again, our current task as readers is to reframe the question with which we approach the Three Waves of the Republic, to better understand the real force of the political problems displayed therein; to ask, just what might be deeply problematic about Socrates’ proposals to end the miseries of mankind, and why. More specifically, why does Socrates choose to have the subject of the First Wave inaugurate his set of escalating proposals that culminate in the rule of philosopher-kings? What does this choice display about the political problems of women, and the political problems of philosophy? It’s worth noting that even as this question frees us from the limitations of simply asking whether Socrates has done justice to women—since to do so passes over whether justice itself has limitations—it also makes the limitations of the best city and the rule of philosophy immediately more prepossessing, when one is no longer required to prove the final Wave at the expense of the first. Again, while the first two Waves appear to have the common ground, in that both speak of the genos of women, I will argue in Chapter 1 that the First and the Third are linked in argument, action, and dramatic structure. Both Waves introduce the rule of a genos whose political ascendancy is deeply surprising to the customary ear; the First Wave argues for education with the implication of rule, while the Third Wave argues for rule with the consequence of philosophic education. That Socrates, within the boundaries of the city in speech, does intend to argue for ruling women, as he clarifies in Book VII (τὰς ἀρχόσας, 540c), and that women are to be educated not in only in music and gymnastic, but philosophy proper, will have to be argued for in Chapter 2, since this is not always the conclusion the reader draws from the text; likewise the relation between the guardians and the rulers must be gone into, as well as the possibility for the rule of philosophers at all.

Furthermore, it will prove crucial to take into account all the relevant arguments and images that form the substance of the First Wave, and not merely the practice of common naked exercise for the guardians. The First Wave is often thought of primarily in terms of the common naked exercise that Socrates recommends at 452a; and make no mistake, I will certainly argue for the larger importance of this detail for the Wave. It is not, for instance, as some have argued, merely a minor detail that more practical minds easily amend. But such a practice needs to be taken in conjunction with Socrates’

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19 As Drew Hyland recommends in “Plato’s Three Waves and the Question of Utopia” (Interpretation 18,
corresponding recommendation, that women wear virtue as a robe (457a). This intriguing Socratic image is not often discussed, but it will prove crucial to a thorough understanding of the section, as I will argue in Chapter 4. Such a robe is a necessary and even appealing attempt to solve the problem women’s privacy poses for their Socratically-altered place in the city. Likewise, we have to consider the force of Glaucon’s contention at 451e that women be taken as weaker and men as stronger. This principle, frequently cited as the reason for Plato’s injustice to women, is first voiced by Glaucon and brought back into the argument only after Socrates has embarrassed Glaucon by forcing him to admit he’s contradicted himself in argument, recommending common education for men and women without a corresponding belief in the similarity of their natures (453c-d). As I argue in Chapter 2, Glaucon’s principle is Socrates’ “dolphin rescue” to the argument (453d), and Glaucon’s attachment to his own genos, as well as the attachment of readers of the opposite genos to their own, give this principle its infamous character.

Likewise, Socrates’ initial description of the partnership of men and women as a “common hunt” has to be investigated; examining the rather frequent references to hunting in the dialogue will prove necessary to understand the transition from the description of women and hunting in the fevered city of Book II, to Socrates’ plans for women in Book V; this forms the argument of Chapter 3. Women aren’t present in the most necessary city despite being highly necessary the city’s posterity (369d); they come in only as courtesans and nurses in the feverish city (373a-c), and they only participate in the purification of such as that which will be in common as the things of friends are (423e). These three moments display the basic problem the Athenian Stranger speaks of, that to leave the women unregulated by the laws, as laws customarily do, is one of the gravest dangers the lawgiver faces—a fact which most lawgivers are in ignorance of (Laws, 781a).

Socrates’ action in some sense purports to tame the women, by claiming that the customarily intemperate sex can be educated. But as a consideration of the trope of hunting in the Platonic corpus shows, to tame as hunter is only ambiguously to tame.

Finally, a just appreciation of irony demands that we should take care lest we take for granted the right and goodness of the rule of the wise: Strauss argues that it is the
grave fault of the pursuit of justice without consequences that is responsible for the
distortion of human life witnessed in the Three Waves; but it’s necessary to add to this
some measure of blame on the part of philosophy. Following Rosen’s discussion of this
point in *Plato’s Republic: A Study*, I will argue initially in Chapter 1, and at length in
Chapter 5, that despite the desire of philosophers merely to philosophize and avoid rule
at all costs, philosophy and its orientation towards truth, which Socrates speaks of in Book
VI, possesses nevertheless a certain lordly character. Rosen remarks that “truth, by its
nature, intends to suppress falsehood;” given this orientation, philosophy, as presented in
the *Republic*, might nevertheless find itself in danger of tyrannizing over the merely human
things, and be willing enough to distort the city for its own ends.

Once these important aspects of the First and Third Waves have been re-grounded,
the parallelism I’m after starts to bear weight. Just as philosophers are said to resist being
dragged from their tasks into care for the city (519c, 515c), likewise, following a passage in
Plato’s *Laws*, women resist being dragged from their customarily private realm with
strength and shouts (781a). Socrates’ dialogic action with respect to women and
philosophy is the same: on the one hand, both have to be compelled to rule. But as
argued above, philosophers nevertheless are tempted to regard their own rule as in some
sense naturally right; human women likewise possess a certain desire for rule. In fact, each
possesses a certain inner disharmony, caught between the desire not to rule, and yet to
rule. To make matters worse, both women and philosophy exist in tension with the
customary laws of the city: the intemperance or wildness of women is met with suspicion
from the upstanding city (*Republic* 395c), while famously, philosophers are threatened by
death, no less than by laughter. As Socrates’ image of philosophy as a friendless virgin
displays for us (Book VI, 495c), the political problem of women and philosophy is the
same; both are in one sense at the mercy of the city, without a ratified public place in it,
and correspondingly, lack much sympathy for the enterprise. It should come as no
surprise, perhaps, that both pose a danger to the city in terms of their private influence.

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20 “The just city holds no attraction for anyone except such lovers of justice as are willing to destroy the
family....” (Strauss, CM, 127).
Rosen, PRS, 6.
22 I am indebted to Stanley Rosen for this phrase, which he uses to describe the position of the philosopher
(PRS, 166); this study makes the corollary application of the phrase to women.
23 Ronna Burger’s work on the Bible gracefully accounts for the presence of this danger; see “In the Court
Into this web of troubles steps Socrates, with his proposals that women and philosophy should rule and be educated. In Chapter 6, I will argue that Socrates offers the same solution to the same problem: both women and philosophy shall be taken out of private life and made to rule, ostensibly for the good of the city, but not without some proposed measure of benefit to the practice of philosophy. But Socrates’ attempt to solve these problems contains a similar flaw: once in the public eye of the city, the potential for each genos to flourish there is problematic. Each needs the city for subsistence, but neither is willing to acknowledge their dependence. Each desires in some sense recognition and rule, but the assertion of the natural right of each causes ruptures in conventional order. Philosophy would sacrifice the fabric of ordinary human life for the pleasures of the dictates of reason, while women would jettison the integrity of the civic realm, including that of the household, for the temptations of natural skill or natural offspring, or for the prosecution of their own desires. But just as the rule of philosophers is not without appeal or even merit, so too the re-writing of women’s place in the polity possesses a certain appeal; yet our discomfort at both as written, ought to remain. The Three Waves of the Republic display for us the irony of Socrates’ spirited attempt to solve human problems by means of philosophy; so to propose is to display at once our desire for a solution, the solution itself, what the underlying problem is, and the inevitability of the solution’s ultimate failure. That Socrates should try and fail is deeply funny; yet in some sense to display this for us takes the sting out of our laughter, the sting that Socrates confessed he feared.

One final note to the reader: beyond the ever-present danger of trying to tell the point to a joke, perhaps one of the most strongest temptations we have as readers of the Republic is to attempt to understand it in the light of images—images, that is, made by ourselves, rather than the images made by Plato. While I hope that the structural parallelism I detail between the First and Third Waves proves to be useful to the reader’s sense of the dialogue as a whole, to consider this approach exhaustive or even in some sense essential, would be folly approaching chicane. Yet, whatever the ultimate teaching of an Oriental Despot: The Book of Esther” (public lecture, Tulane University Judeo-Christian Studies, New Orleans, March 12, 2014).

24 Strauss’ phrase is that “natural right would act as dynamite for civil society” (Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 153).
25 For this guiding maxim, I am indebted to Carl Page.
or meaning of the dialogue as a whole, there are crucial things to be recovered in our sense of Socrates’ plans for women in the Republic which throw light on his plans for philosophy and philosophers; despite the real interest in the concerns of the former, the desire to illuminate the latter is no less my pressing desire.