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**Joshua Mitchell: Plato's Fable**

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION



Unless philosophers become kings of our cities or unless those who now are kings and rulers become true philosophers, so that political power and philosophic intelligence converge . . . there can be no end to troubles, my dear Glaucon, in our cities or for all mankind.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE PREVAILING opinion about the character of reason renders this Platonic paradox quite unthinkable today. Philosophers, we learn in Plato's fable, are ruled by reason; yet in what sense could it possibly be true that reason is necessary to *save us*? As a fantastic artifice we may perhaps be entertained by this bald assertion, but to understand it as something more useful requires resources that we scarcely possess. Why this is so, and what those resources might be, is the question that concerns me here.

Wishing to defer for a time even more vexing problems, and in order to begin to understand just what might be at issue in the claim that reason is necessary to *save us*, let me offer a few thoughts about what will turn out to be a central concern of my analysis here, namely, the significance of imitation in mortal life. By way of anticipation, I suggest here that the problem of imitation turns out to be what reason saves us from; and that we are well served by reading Plato's fable in that light.

#### Imitation in Mortal Life

In light of the scant attention imitation receives today, and in light of the predominant contemporary understandings of Plato's *Republic*, it may well be asked why imitation need be invoked at all in an exposition of this sort. Among most political scientists and many political theorists, for example, imitation is scarcely a subject of serious debate, because human beings are considered first and foremost to be rational beings, not imitative beings. Yet this prejudice is a relatively recent one, as a perusal

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), Book V, 473c–d.

of the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Tocqueville, to name only a few of the more prominent, attest. Reason is, of course, a central concern in all of their reflections; but whatever their conclusions may have been about it, fidelity to their subject matter as a whole entailed a consideration of the significance in imitation in mortal life as well. Today, the need for this conjoint attentiveness to reason and imitation has not been the starting point for political theorization. Indeed, the two most prominent devices in political theory during the past quarter-century—Rawls’s veil of ignorance<sup>2</sup> and Habermas’s ideal speech situation<sup>3</sup>—deliberately rule out imitation altogether, since all things inherited purportedly sully reason’s acumen.

Fortunately, however, Rawls and Habermas are not our only resources. With a view to exploring the alternatives to this one-sided emphasis on reason, what I do in what follows immediately below is provide a synoptic historical overview of two contemporary tropes—namely, “socialization” and “identity politics”—that concern themselves with the theme of imitation. I should note right at the outset that my purpose in exploring these two tropes is specify how, as “ideal types,” socialization *underestimates* the problem of imitation, and “identity politics” *overestimates* the problem of imitation. Said otherwise: The former is too optimistic, and the latter is too pessimistic.

To be sure, there have been attempts, especially in the last decade, to invoke “identity politics” in such a way as to suggest that the difficulties implied by its typological expression are not fatal.<sup>4</sup> It is not by accident, however, that such treatments of “identity politics” achieve the purchase they do largely within the Anglo-American world, which has a long history both with pluralism and with absorbing emigrants from different nations and which, consequently, invites the conclusion that “identity politics” need not be characterized in the stark way I describe it here. This dubious conclusion has given rise to a strategy, adopted largely by the Left, of *leveraging* an already intact pluralism, with a view to elaborating new criteria for political inclusion, since relying explicitly on

<sup>2</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Part 1, ch. 1, sec. 3, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> For an early iteration of this idea, see Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p. 17, where he invokes the phrase, “the logic of undistorted language communication.” The clearest statement of the idea occurs in Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 86–94.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Iris Marion Young, *Democracy and Inclusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the liberal paradigm of interest alone would render “this” or “that” political “identity” invisible. Historical good fortune, however, should not be confused with theoretical clarity. That pluralism may be leveraged through the invocation of “identity politics” for the purpose extending the franchise in novel ways is a tribute not to the happy implications of “identity politics,” but rather to the robustness of pluralism itself. If recent disaffection with the Democratic party platform of the 2004 election is any indicator, the attempt to leverage pluralism in this way may well have already reached its apogee; and the Left, in order to recapture its position of political prominence, may be better served, as Rorty has suggested,<sup>5</sup> by returning to the category of rhetoric and thought that is native to the Anglo-American world and that underwrote the Progressive era, namely, pragmatism.

### *The Disappointments of Reason*

Against the backdrop of what notion of reason can we understand the tropes of socialization and “identity politics”? A good place to begin is with the early progenitors of the liberal paradigm, who were usually nominally or once-removed Reformation Christians—a fact that will become relevant as our discussion proceeds. By the liberal paradigm I mean nothing more complicated here than the sort of thing elucidated by Madison,<sup>6</sup> which persists under the rubric of pluralism. Most important for our purposes, reason is taken to be a faculty of preference formation,

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Robert Scigliano (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 60: “The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.” So imbued is Madison with this liberal paradigm that he renders landed property in terms of “interest” (*ibid.*, p. 56) rather than the aristocratic term “rank,” on which Tocqueville surely would have relied. See also Federalist No. 51, p. 334: “Whilst all authority in [the federal republic of the United States] will be derived from society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority. In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other in the multiplicity of sects.”

which deliberates among goods that are *scalar*—that are sufficiently commensurable so that by some evident or liminal calculus “this” can be *preferred* over “that.” Politics works because these preferences, when represented in elected assemblies, with the appropriate checks and balances, can be mediated without the sometimes enduring acrimony that arises when differences of language, race, ethnicity, religion, and, more recently, sexual orientation obtrude and overshadow the scalar logic of preferences.<sup>7</sup>

There has, of course, always been a measure of dissatisfaction with this pluralist model. In the last generation, this dubiety clustered in domains of research that sought to address the pressing domestic issues of the Cold War period. While the civil rights era might have been the occasion for the emergence of “identity politics,” at the time the idiom of preferences and interests largely prevailed, because there was optimism that if the federal government successfully supervened over the “coarser elements [in local communities],”<sup>8</sup> as Tocqueville called them, then the pluralist model would be vindicated. Had this occurred, race would not have shown itself to be an intractable problem to which the scalar logic of preference had no answer. Needless to say, the subsumption of much of the contemporary research on the politics of race within the category of “identity politics” confirms that pluralism has, on this count, largely failed.

It was, however, feminism, rather than race, that raised the first serious philosophical questions about pluralism in mainstream, secular political science.<sup>9</sup> If women were not just another interest group, with differing preferences, then the justification for this would have to be that the difference between men and women was not scalar, but rather incommensurable. Women would have to be *different* in a way that the deliberative faculty of reason could not mediate. The use of the term “sex” seems rather out of place, I recognize, but replacing it with “gender” specifies the problem in a much less contentious way, and indeed

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that whatever fault may be found with quantitative research in political science in America, its methods are eminently applicable to a polity of citizens who evince the sort of scalar preference formation that liberal thought supposes. Quantitative research endures because the political world it measures is based on the measured and measuring deliberations of reason.

<sup>8</sup> See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), vol. I, part I, ch. 5, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> An important reason why race did not immediately raise the sorts of questions that sex did was that the problem of race in America was comprehended by many not only in terms of pluralism, but also, significantly, in the religious and covenantal terms. Not so with feminism, which, when pushed up against the limits of the liberal paradigm, turned toward the alternatives provided by the Continental tradition. The rhetoric of feminism did not, in other words, draw on religious resources.

partially masks the difference, since a difference that is merely “socialized” is one that is much more readily altered—and subsequently mediable—than one that is always-already-there, as sex is.<sup>10</sup> Feminism occupies the space between the always-already-there character of sex and the always-alterable character of gender. From the former, feminism derives its leverage *against* pluralism; from the later, it derives its leverage *within* pluralism. As such, feminism is located in the boundary between pluralism and “identity politics.” Because there are respects in which men and women are completely alike *and* respects in which they are completely different, this liminal position is inevitable. Feminism verges on “identity politics,” but does not wholly arrive there. It straddles two worlds.<sup>11</sup>

### *Hegel and the Origins of “Identity Politics”*

“Identity politics” may not immediately seem to oppose Madisonian pluralism, but it bears no family resemblance to it, and that fact itself is telling. Madisonian pluralism emerges out of the Anglo-American tradition; “identity politics” is of Continental origin and can trace its proximal roots to Hegel’s claim that in the course of the march of world history, Absolute Knowledge subsumes all “difference.”<sup>12</sup> *Religiously* expressed, this is a claim that God uses the oppositions between good and evil in order to redeem a fallen world,<sup>13</sup> at the end of history. “Dif-

<sup>10</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 47: “Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal.”

<sup>11</sup> The ambiguous status of feminism in the current debate around identity politics has brought forth, among others, responses by Seyla Benhabib (*Democracy and Difference: Contesting Boundaries of the Political* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996]) and Nancy Frazier (*Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the “Post-Socialist” Condition* [New York: Routledge, 1997]).

<sup>12</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), para. 808, p. 492: “This Becoming [in history] presents a slow moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of substance. . . . In the immediacy of [any] new existence the Spirit has to start afresh to bring itself to maturity as if, for it, all that preceded were lost and it had learned nothing from the experience of earlier Spirits. But recollection, the inwardizing, of that experience, *has preserved it and is the inner, and in fact the higher form of the substance*” (emphasis added). For Hegel, all residual historical antecedents are incorporated into the current incarnation of Spirit. Nothing is lost or left incomplete.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), vol. 7, book XI, ch. 18, pp. 213–14: “God would never have created a single angel—not even a single man—whose future wickedness He foresaw, unless, at the same time, He knew of the good which could come of this evil. It

ference” and historical existence are coterminous here, though with the important addition that a promise of a *final* unification is held out as the substance of faith.<sup>14</sup> Philosophy, however, has no place for either God’s providence or for faith, since such religious notions are merely the “picture-thinking” version of what unmediated thought can know by and in itself.<sup>15</sup> In Hegel’s thought the insight about the relationship between historically inevitable difference and final unification that Christianity proffers is appropriated, though purportedly on the higher ground of pure philosophical thought. What Christians relegate to God, Hegel relates to *Geist*. At best, this is dubious theology; at worst, it is a theory of historical meaning that all but invited the response it received.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that “identity politics” is the response of the Hegelian Left to the notion that difference is subsumed by the Absolute. “Don’t be a chump” may be the highest ethical imperative of rational choice theorists; “let the different remain different” is the call of those who champion “identity politics.” Difference can *never* be subsumed; identity remains intransigently self-same.

We should not be confused about what this intransigence means for the prospect of mediation across the boundary that separates differing identities. “Identity politics” supposes not only difference, which pluralism acknowledges, but also difference of a sort that is not mediable through the scalar calculus of preference. Said otherwise, *identity is not a preference*. Preferences, because scalar, can be quantified; “identity” must be qualified.

By this I do not mean that identity can be comprehended by a *constellation* of empirical attributes which, taken in sum and properly configured, serve as a ready indicator of “this” or “that” identity. Quantitative research has certainly sought to proceed in this manner, but this method

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was as though He meant the harmony of history, like the beauty of a poem, *to be enriched by antithetical elements*” (emphasis added). Throughout this work I will first cite the more authoritative Deferrari edition (as *City of God* in *Writings*), and subsequently cite the page or pages to which it corresponds in the more readily available Bettenson translation (New York: Penguin, 1972) as *CG*—in this case, *CG*, p. 449.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, in *Writings*, vol. 6, book I, preface, pp. 17–18: “[The future security of the City of God is that] goal for which we patiently hope ‘until justice be turned into judgment,’ but which, one day, is to be the reward of excellence in a final victory and a perfect peace. The task, I realize, is a high and a hard one, but God will help [us]” (*CG*, p. 5)

<sup>15</sup> See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, para. 765, p. 463: “*This form of picture-thinking* constitutes the specific mode in which Spirit, in [the religious] community, becomes aware of itself. This form is not yet Spirit’s self-consciousness that has advanced to its Notion qua Notion: the mediation is still incomplete. . . . The *content* is the true content, but all its movements, when placed in the medium of picture-thinking, have the character of being uncomprehended” (emphasis in original).

seems rather blind to what identity involves, since those who claim to be members of an identity group purport to speak authoritatively not on the basis of a constellation of empirical attributes, but rather on the basis of a *constitutive experience* that outsiders cannot know. The scalar preferences acknowledged by pluralism are, in principle, capable of being deliberated over by any and all citizens. Identities, on the other hand, are *confessional*, monological. About identity citizens cannot really deliberate, since the locus of its authority is not the faculty of reason. Identities are their own authority and provide their own authorization. They are self-same, immune from the possibility of appropriation and, therefore, incorporation; and bequeathed by the accidents of birth<sup>16</sup> or the calamity of violence.

This harsh picture will no doubt be contested. I provide it, however, with a view to the original problem for which it was an answer, *viz.*, the subsumption of all difference, the elimination of any *remainder*, in the system of Hegel's thought. Comprehended politically, "identity politics" is a strategy of resistance, a manner of declaring independence from a corrosive and dehumanizing logic of history. Indeed, that was its place in the anti-Colonialist literature.<sup>17</sup> That is, perhaps, its virtue. Its cost, however, is precisely the mediation of difference that the liberal paradigm purports to make possible. The very strategy of resistance that is at the heart of "identity politics" yields a stubborn intransigence whose imitation assures that patterns of human thought and action are unlikely to change—or to be overwhelmed from without. "Identity politics," in sum, *overestimates* the problem of imitation, and this because it is a response to the impulse toward totalization that is at the heart of Hegel's project, and not his alone.

### *Rousseau's Gentler Form of Imitation*

You will recall that the subject before us is the proximal source of the two tropes by which imitation is understood in contemporary thinking about politics. "Identity politics" is a particularly strong version, since its claim is that differences whose warrant is the always-already-there character of identity, and which are imitated from generation to generation, are not amenable to conciliation—or usurpation—by reason and its cognates, "preference," "choice," and so on. Identity remains what it is, not because of reason, but in spite of it.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche's rejection of the idea that the faculty of reason hovers without connection over the body—a thought that suffuses all of his writing—led him at times to offer the rather chilling formulation that the vitality of a people is predicated on their blood line. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), first essay, sec. 5, pp. 28–31.

<sup>17</sup> See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963).

A much gentler trope through which imitation is understood is found in the idea of socialization. The idea of socialization is not to be confused with Aristotle's account of the formation of character (*hexis*),<sup>18</sup> which presumes that man has a "nature" (*phusis*) that establishes the boundaries of such formation at the same time that it establishes man's end (*telos*)—considerations that have no unambiguous equivalents in the literature of socialization. Aristotle has no direct bearing here.

The idea of socialization, like "identity politics," emerged *in opposition* to another idea, the pedigree of which we scarcely remember today. Curiously enough, both ideas emerge out of the Reformation tradition, though from different wings of it. "Identity politics," I noted, emerged in opposition to Hegel's philosophical project—which Hegel himself thought was perfectly consonant with Luther's own religious reflections.<sup>19</sup> The idea of socialization, however, emerged in the thought of Rousseau, which is notable, among other reasons, because of Rousseau's opposition to the conclusions of that other citizen of Geneva about whom we know, namely, Calvin.

To put the matter succinctly: Hegel's reworking of Luther's incarnational and eschatological theology, on the one hand, and Rousseau's response to Calvin's ruminations on the depravity of man, on the other, are the occasions for the emergence of "identity politics" and the idea of socialization, respectively.

Let us briefly consider the theoretical relationship between Calvin and Rousseau, with a view to illuminating the question for which socialization—*rather than original sin*—is the answer. In Calvin's *Institutes*, we find one of the clearest formulations anywhere of the contested

<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. II, book II, 1103a34–b6: "[M]en become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator."

<sup>19</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), part IV, sec. III, ch. I, p. 415: "Luther's simple doctrine is that the specific embodiment of the Deity—infinite subjectivity, that is true spirituality, Christ—is in no way present and actual in an outward form, but as essentially spiritual is obtained only in being reconciled to God—in *faith and spiritual enjoyment*" (emphasis in original). The inner truth of Christianity, for Hegel, was subjectivity. In his introduction to G.W.F. Hegel's *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), Richard Kroner notes, "[The] philosophic decision [to deny knowledge of things as they are in themselves] and the method of reflective subjectivity which it entailed are, according to Hegel, fruits on the tree of Protestantism. The reformers made an end to the confident rationalism of the Scholastics. They cut the bond between knowledge and faith, between human intellect and divine revelation, between the temporal and the eternal. By denying philosophy the power of penetrating into the essence of things, Kant and his disciples gave their blessing to this separation" (p. 37). Kant and Hegel are the outworking of Lutheran categories of thought.

issue on which Reformation Christianity has taken one side, and Rousseau and his heirs have taken the other. Consider the following remark, which is found in a section entitled “Original sin does not rest upon imitation”:

Adam, by sinning, not only took upon himself misfortune and ruin *but also plunged our nature into like destruction*. This is not due to the guilt of himself alone, which would not pertain to us at all, but because he infected all his posterity with that corruption into which he had fallen.<sup>20</sup>

What Calvin understands is that in order to account for sin in the world (or, if you wish, wickedness), there are really only two alternatives available: Either it is “original” or it comes by way of what he calls imitation. Either it is always-already-there in everyone by virtue of Adam *standing for* all or it is passed along, now here, now there, by imitation—in our contemporary idiom, by socialization.

On the imitation hypothesis, wickedness—not sin—is carried forward by socialization. On the original sin hypothesis, sin is anterior to any occasion for socialization, because while socialization occurs *in* time, if sin is “original,” then it is already present “before” any and all descendants of Adam live out their lives. Sin is a constitutive condition of human life in time, not an accident of socialization. When Calvin calls sin a “hereditary depravity,”<sup>21</sup> he cannot, in other words, mean what Darwin meant some three hundred years later by the term “heredity.” Sin is hereditary not by imitation—not by the transfer of genotypic and phenotypic configurations and markers from one generation to the next—but by virtue of being, again, “original.” When Calvin says of children that “they descend not from their parents spiritual regeneration but from their *carnal generation*,”<sup>22</sup> and hence are suffused with original sin, he does not mean by this what immediately comes to mind for us in the post-Darwin era, *viz.*, that it is “genetic.” That would be imitation, not *original* sin.

Rousseau, whose turbulent history with Calvin’s Geneva is well known, recurs instead to the category of socialization in order to understand the origin of wickedness. Indeed, he seems to have the idea of original sin very much on his mind when he takes this other path that Calvin lays out, the path of imitation.

Rousseau, in fact, offers a vivid explication of this path in two distinct idioms: phylogenically in the “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men” and ontogenetically in his *Emile*, a passage from which is provided below.

<sup>20</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. I, book II, ch. I, sec. 6, p. 249 (emphasis added). The entirety of secs. 5–9, pp. 246–53, is worthy of careful study.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. I, book II, ch. I, sec. 8, p. 251.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. I, book II, ch. I, sec. 7, p. 250 (emphasis added).

[When a child cries at] one time we bustle about, we caress him in order to pacify him; at another, we threaten him, we strike him in order to make him keep quiet. Either we do what pleases him, or we exact from him what pleases us. . . . Thus his first ideas of are those of domination and servitude. Before knowing how to speak, he commands; before being able to act, he obeys. . . . It is thus that *we fill up his young heart at the outset with the passions that we later impute to nature and that, after taking efforts to make him wicked, we complain about making him so.*<sup>23</sup>

The child is not born depraved, he says, but is rather *made* so by the wicked patterns that we impute to our children—in short, by our socialization of them.<sup>24</sup> The project of *Emile*, therefore, is to educate children in such a way that the corrupting patterns are not imputed in the first place. Similarly, the project of the *Second Discourse* is to trace out the historical lineaments of our defection from nature, the source of which defection is purported to be the establishment of the institution of private property<sup>25</sup>—a thought not subsequently lost on Marx.

In Rousseau's thought we have all the trappings of the now familiar response to Calvin's understanding of original sin: first, sin—or rather wickedness—is not original, but comes by way of socialization; and second, that in order to avert its peril we must alter our institutions—economic, political, and social. America may have started out indebted to Calvin, but its reflexive response to wickedness is now decidedly weighted toward Rousseau. Whether in domestic or foreign policy, though, the sentiment is the same: Wickedness is not indigenous, but is rather caused by an outside influence that we can, should, or should have controlled.

On first blush it might be thought that the responses that we are considering to Hegel (the Lutheran) and Calvin, respectively, might offer

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), book I, p. 48 (emphasis added). See also book II, p. 86: “[W]hen children’s wills are not spoiled by our fault, children want nothing uselessly.”

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau’s insight about the power of discipline and the malleability of the infant body are cast in a different light by Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995). There, instead of Rousseau’s claim that the body needs to be disciplined so that the soul may subsequently be free, Foucault denies that that freedom subsequently emerges at all.

<sup>25</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men,” in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), part II, para. 1, p. 164: “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simply to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared [if this imposter had not been listened to].” (Hereafter, *Second Discourse*.)

remedies that are proportional to the illness they purport to cure. But this is not so. Luther's Christian, whom Hegel thought was the basis of modern "subjectivity," is ill with an affliction that only Christ's imputation can cure. For Calvin, this same claim obtains, though the emphasis now lies on the inscrutability of God the Father, *who may not cure that illness at all*, if He does not wish. Here, the mortal condition is far more dire than it is in Luther. Yet if we attend to "identity politics" and the literature of socialization, we find that the relationship between the two responses is reversed. "Identity politics" leaves no room for conciliation, and in its response to Hegel adopts a quasi-Calvinist notion of the "total depravity of reason." The literature of socialization, in turn, leaves no room for the intractability of all things "original," and in its response to Calvin adopts a quasi-Hegelian notion that all "differences" can be overcome.

*Beyond the Reformation Categories of  
"Identity Politics" and Socialization*

Aside from a few introductory comments, I have avoided the use of the term "mimesis" in my discussion of "identity politics" and of the idea of socialization. My intention was to return to the historical source of these tropes, with a view to illuminating their Reformation origins. Doing so, I believe, allows us to begin to clear the way for an understanding of a relationship between imitation and reason that is available in Plato's *Republic*, which long predates the tropes we have inherited from the Reformation and its outworkings. These inherited tropes are being played out, I suggest, in the debates about the tension between pluralism and "identity politics," on the one hand, and in the literature of socialization, on the other. My analysis here attempts to move beyond—or rather *behind*—that entire constellation.

Grant, then, that neither "identity politics" nor socialization is quite what I have in mind when I invoke the term "mimesis." Recall, as well, that the impetus for clearing the way for an alternative treatment of mimesis in *Plato's Fable* is the impasse to which each of these tropes has brought us: Imitation under the rubric of "identity politics" puts little stock in the arbitration of reason, since there is either no need (or no possibility) of being drawn beyond what has *already* been established; imitation under the rubric of socialization assumes that what has been already established can be *easily* altered, using "incentives" to which (calculating) reason attends.

Imitation under the rubric of mimesis—the Socratic provocation as it is set forth in the fable of the *Republic*—precedes these two understandings of the relationship between imitation and reason. It neither brings

us to the impasse to which “identity politics” has surely brought us nor does it trivialize, as the literature of socialization does, the durability and depth of what in this book I will call “mortal patterns.” Said otherwise, Plato’s fable reveals an understanding of the relationship between imitation and reason that is not indebted to debates that developed as a consequence of the thinking of either Hegel or Calvin, but which rather turns us in another direction and, in so doing, provides us with a more profound understanding of that relationship—and *reestablishes philosophy as the preeminent task of politics*. The many pages that follow will, of course, be necessary to direct our attention toward this other understanding. For the moment, however, let me offer the following brief formulation: Mimesis, unlike “identity politics” or socialization, supposes that mortal patterns are durable and deep *and* that they can be changed only by reason—though not by reason as it is conventionally understood. To that subject, I now turn.

### Reason Revisited: Plato’s Critique of “Rationality”

Since the Reformation has been lurking in the background in our discussion of “identity politics” and of socialization, we might wonder whether the notion of reason with which these tropes are in tension itself emerges from Reformation categories. Notwithstanding the claim that “identity politics,” socialization, and reason are purely analytical and not quasi-religious terms, might there be evidence to the contrary, which should cause us to pause?

We might ask, for example, whether the predominant idea of reason today is itself the outworking of Reformation thought, or even its latest—or last—incarnation. Religiously understood, we would note the following loose parallels: The locus for salvation is the person and not the Church (“methodological individualism”); the will that each person wills is not the will that comes to pass (“unintended consequences”), especially in communities (“collective action problem”); persons are prideful (“self-interested”); God does not reveal His essence, but rather is known through what He *shows forth* (“positivism”); reason is sufficiently corrupted, and the world sufficiently contingent, that wants shift to and fro (“preferences”); the problem of debt suffuses all aspects of life (“calculation”); and human beings have only their private conscience (“values”) on which to rely in a world where God is now silent. That positivism has not, to this day, really penetrated Roman Catholic universities in America or elsewhere is suggestive that something is at work here to which we have not given sufficient attention.

But perhaps this sort of playfulness is out of place. Moreover, even if it

were true that the conventional notion of reason adopted by political scientists was genetically linked with Reformation thought, why not concede, as Weber did with respect to modern-day capitalists, that we are only occasionally haunted by the religious ruminations that gave rise to the present situation?<sup>26</sup> We are, consequently, seldom prompted to ponder the linkage. Indeed, since Plato's *Republic* is what largely concerns us here, it seems hardly fitting to do so.

Instead of darting in and out of the shadow of the Reformation, then, let us venture on another path. Let us ask, instead, what Plato's fable might tell us about the contemporary understanding of reason? What advances, if any, have we *really* made by setting up mortals to be rational actors—rational, that is, in the way that is supposed in the sort of models set forth by political scientists?

When such models suppose that human beings are *substantively* rational in the way that economic science in the narrowest sense would predict, they do no more than echo Socrates' claim that *when the love of wealth rules*, reason (*logistikon*) "crouch[es] on the ground . . . and calculates [*logizesthai*],"<sup>27</sup> for the purpose of feeding a certain *narrow* set of appetites, while repressing others. Alternatively, when such models purport to become more subtle and suppose that human beings are *instrumentally* rational in ways that economic science in the narrowest sense cannot predict, they do no more than echo Socrates' claim that *when the love of equality rules* (by which he means the equality of all appetites), reason crouches down to calculate how *an enlarged* domain of appetites may be gratified. In either case—whether human beings are understood to be substantively rational with respect to the univocal scale of wealth or instrumentally rational with respect to multiple though commensurable possibilities—reason still crouches! That is, reason *calculates*; it weighs and measures.

Let us call the model that is content with the view that *substantive* ends can be rendered exclusively and exquisitely in terms of wealth the *oligarchic* model of human behavior. Let us call the model that is comfortable with the view that human beings are *instrumentally* rational toward different ends, up to the point of including all the appetites they have while they are awake,<sup>28</sup> the *democratic* model of human behavior.

<sup>26</sup> See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), part II, ch. V, p. 182: "In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, *stripped of its religious and ethical meaning*, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport" (emphasis added).

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book VIII, 553c–d.

<sup>28</sup> The distinction between appetites human beings have while they are awake and while they are asleep is as central to Plato's analysis as it is to contemporary understandings of

This is Socrates' usage in Book VIII of the *Republic*, and elsewhere, as we shall see; and it will serve us well in due course.

In either case, however, these models in no way comprehend reason *philosophically*, and in failing to do so, they suppose without question that the appetitive part of the soul rules in human affairs. *The tacit understanding in political science is that reason is a servant to human appetite; and the debate, insofar as there is one at all, is whether reason should be understood narrowly (under the oligarchic heading) or more broadly (under the democratic heading).*

Within political science proper today, there is no vantage point from which to see beyond these two alternatives of oligarchy and democracy. However diverse the *objects* of appetitive desire may be, they remain steadfastly colored by the (appetitive) principle that gave rise to them. Money, analogously, may purchase many different things, but when money is the only measure, we become suspicious that all the variety we witness falls, monotonously, under that category of "consumerism." So, too, with the multiple objects that the soul ruled by appetite wants: the appearance of their variety, fecundity, novelty, and so on, belies their singular source. While it appears that political science can account for the entire spectrum of human possibilities (in all times and in all places) under the rubric of appetitive rule, such a view is monological, since the totality of human desire is comprehended under the category of the appetites.

### *Honor's Place*

There are, however, two alternatives to this prevalent opinion. The first of which I will briefly consider is the rule of *honor*. The rule of honor is not yet the rule of reason (in Plato's sense), which is higher still than either the rule of the appetites or of honor. But let us pause for a moment to consider honor.

In the first and second sections of conclusion, I suggest that this prejudice toward rule by the appetites is inscribed into what is called "the fable of liberalism." Political science today remains under the spell of this fable, which depicts the rejection of the honor-loving "fathers" by their wealth-loving oligarchic "sons." (This is Socrates' usage, so let us "say a prayer"<sup>29</sup> and follow his lead.) In so doing, the rulership of the

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reason. For Plato, the appetites that appear in sleep are tyrannical. (See Plato, *Republic*, Book IX, 571c–d.) Here reason no longer crouches, but is narcotized and idly watches as one appetite after another overwhelms the soul. In the human sciences, this domain falls under the category of madness, the unconscious, the irrational, etc.

<sup>29</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, 432c: "I am only your follower [Socrates], with sight just keen enough to see what you show me. Well, say a prayer [Glaucon] and follow me."

appetites replaces the rule of honor, and we move from what we would call the aristocratic age into the modern world.

Within political science proper there is little talk today of the rule of honor. How, after all, can honor be measured? Wealth and freedom, yes; but not honor. Dispensing with honor altogether, however, and comprehending politics under the guise of either *resources* (the oligarchic fixation) or *freedom* (the democratic fixation) leads to serious misunderstandings—and faulty predictions—about the prospects for justice, since all that would seem to be needed on this account is that everyone be provided with adequate resources or freedoms. This is fancy. Honor cares only provisionally about resources or freedom. Honor is, among other things, concerned with leaving behind the memory of one's name through glorious deeds. Above all, it means a willingness to die, which belies any calculus of preference of the sort that the oligarchic "sons" endorse. Because of this, political science will always be caught off-guard when honor makes an appearance. Political science, because it is under the spell of the fable of liberalism, will therefore never be able fully to comprehend war—and some of its practitioners are apt to conclude that the cause of war is that nations with resources and freedoms are themselves responsible for the wars that do emerge, because in having acquired resources and freedoms for themselves, they have kept them from others. This sort of idea emerges predictably out of the fable of liberalism. Whether one endorses this particular view of the political Left, and concludes that war is caused by capitalism, or adopts a free-market conservative version, and concludes that war is caused by *not enough* capitalism, the result is the same: War remains uncomprehended because honor is either ruled out entirely or erroneously subsumed under the calculus of "preferences."

The place where honor *does* appear in political science today is in the study of the history of political thought. One can hardly read that history without encountering authors who bristle at the thought that the rule of the appetites might replace the rule of honor: Aristotle, any number of Romans (above all the Romans, as Augustine points out),<sup>30</sup> Aquinas, Rousseau, and, in his own way, Nietzsche, to name only a few, all are dubious about the rule of the appetites. If there is a haven for

<sup>30</sup> See Augustine, *City of God*, vol. 6, book V, ch. 15, p. 277: "[The Romans] subordinated their private property to the common welfare, that is, to the republic and the public treasury. They resisted the temptation to avarice. They gave their counsel freely in the councils of state. They indulged in neither public crime nor private passion. They thought they were on the right road when they strove, by all these means, for honors, rule, and glory. Honor has come to them from almost all peoples. The rule of their laws has been imposed on many peoples. And in our day, in literature and in history, glory has been given them by almost everyone" (CG, pp. 204–5).

honor-loving souls, then the history of political philosophy is surely it; and this no doubt accounts for more than a little of the tension within political science departments around the country. This tension, moreover, is not simply between old guard conservatives and those whose social scientific research originates, wittingly or not, from within the fable of liberalism. Since the end of the Cold War, the Left has found solace in the writings of Arendt and Foucault, who are no less hostile than old guard conservatives, really, to the fable of liberalism.

The fugitive shadow of honor, then, appears here and there in political science. It never appears, however, *as honor itself* (since this would require action and not just idle talk *about* action), but as a *longing* for honor and a contempt for the fable of liberalism. This talk takes the form of a politicized vision of the future where *all* are emancipated from the heteronomy of wealth, provided we understand and combat the forces of “oppression,” on the Left, and a melancholy, though sometimes Stoic, vision of a pristine past where *a few* lived out their lives with honor, on the Right. Meanwhile, mainline political scientists continue to work within the fable of liberalism, rightly judging that the rule of honor as it has been explicated by those who study the history of political thought (on the Left or the Right) cannot much help them. War, as I mentioned, alerts them that the fable of liberalism is blind to honor and its motivations. But if war is an *interruption* in an overall march toward peace, as the fable of liberalism suggests, then that need not disturb them in any fundamental way. Political scientists are, therefore, correct in their assessment that the rule of honor is inadequate. In the *Republic*, Socrates tells us that the oligarchic “sons” are not entirely wrong in rejecting their honor-loving “fathers.”<sup>31</sup> Political scientists are these oligarchic “sons.” There is indeed an alternative to appetitive rule, but the love of honor, which is a shadowy thing, cannot provide what is needed.

### *(Divine) Reason*

Let us now turn to the alternative that is set forth in Plato’s fable: reason, or rather, *divine* reason, as it is often called—and not unwittingly. I will make no pretense here, or anywhere else, to be able to say what divine reason *is*; but what *can* be spoken of is what it is juxtaposed *against*, and why. In Plato’s fable, human beings are mimetic: They dwell in a generative world where patterns reproduce themselves in their own image—a sort of Watson and Crick genetic code writ large. These patterns, however, are defective, more or less; and so the “patterns” that the “sons”

<sup>31</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book VIII, 553b–c.

inherit from the “fathers” are never quite what the “sons” truly need—witness the failure of the argument about justice that Polemarchus inherits from his father, Cephalus, at the outset of the *Republic*. The problem, moreover, is that these patterns are not easily altered; and when they are, the new pattern adopted is usually more defective than the one renounced—thus Book VIII of the *Republic*. What saves the “sons” from this never-ending generative irregularity, from which issues their unhappiness, is a turning away from “mortal patterns,” from the defective patterns that constitute the world of coming-into-being-and-passing-away, and a turn toward the divine pattern (*paradeigma*) that “can be found somewhere in heaven for him who wants to see.”<sup>32</sup> The mortal alternatives are not *whether* to imitate patterns, but rather *which* patterns to imitate: mortal or divine, defective or perfect.

The “turn” (*periagōgē*), as Socrates calls it,<sup>33</sup> away from defective patterns involves the awakening of reason from its drunken slumber. For while it remains in a languorous state, reason cannot rule and will instead crouch down and serve one or the other of two parts of the soul, either the honor-loving or the appetitive—be it oligarchic (substantive rationality) or democratic (instrumental rationality). Yet not honor nor wealth nor freedom will save us. In Plato’s fable, the oligarchic and democratic “sons” from which political science currently takes its cue are drunk, poisoned, and without an antidote to help them shake off their stupor. They seek wealth and freedom to feed their ever-expanding appetites, but know no surcease. What awakens reason *to the discovery of its own divine nature* is something itself divine: the Good, the source of all things. And since philosophy is implicated in this awakening, it can be said that philosophy is bound up with things divine.

Only by the light of the Good—a divine gift, as it were—can human beings be freed from the defective “mortal patterns” that are otherwise their lot. *This* is the meaning of the saying, “only philosophy can save us.” Mimesis is the *intractable* imitative patterning for which divine reason alone is the cure, which divine reason is *not* to be confused with the inebriated reason that calculates, of which the oligarchic and democratic sons boast. Awakened reason does not boast at all, for it is not a possession but a gift. But more on this in due course.

My invocation of divine gifts will no doubt dishearten those who think I have wandered into theology. It is true that many interesting comparisons between the *Republic* and biblical theology can and will be noted in what follows. The affinities between the two are not, however, intended to specify the distance or proximity between them, which is a never-

<sup>32</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book IX, 592b.

<sup>33</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, 518d, 518e, 521c.

ending source of debate; but rather through such affinities to indicate a larger genus within which they may both be placed, the defining characteristics of which are, first, an understanding that mortal life requires divine interruption for it to go well, and, second, an understanding that this requirement obtains because of the mimetic character of human life. This book is concerned with both moments, and invokes comparisons between Plato's fable and biblical theology for the purpose of illuminating the genus itself, within which the two species can be found. My focus here is on the mimetic aspect of human life—its durability, its near intractability—and the sort of thing that may be needed to overcome it. Whenever I invoke the term “divine gifts” in the context of the *Republic*, then, think of this locution as *a-breaking-in-from-elsewhere*, a performative *deus ex machina*, which reconciles a predicament for mortal man that would otherwise remain irreconcilable. Since Socrates almost always ends his conversation with an aporia, this is perhaps the preferred way to proceed. What cannot be forgotten, however, is that mimesis confronts mortals with a predicament that they cannot, *without philosophy*, resolve. Political science may wish to reject this sort of analysis—and it will, unless what is meant by “philosophy” is made clear. But in doing so it falls back on a notion of reason proffered by a fable of liberalism, against which imitation appears under the *utterly* intractable guise of “identity politics” or under the cheery and naïve guise of socialization. My thesis here is that the bridge across the present impasse in political science between either the substantive or instrumental model of rationality and political philosophy can be built on a more profound understanding of imitation than is available through “identity politics” or the idea of socialization. It can be built on an understanding of mimesis. *This* notion allows us to understand the mortal illness for which philosophy alone is the antidote. The fable of the *Republic* is concerned with *this* problem.

### The Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times

Having now introduced the problem of imitation in mortal life, and made a few tentative comments about the “divine gift” of reason, I should make clear that the fable I am going to rehearse is a less than tidy story about the clean victory of things divine over things mortal. On the account provided here, the mortal condition of living in the shadows is one for which there is an antidote. The invocation of this medical metaphor, I note, is not an accident, since the presumption throughout Plato's fable is that human beings *are* ill or, to recur to an earlier metaphor, inebriated—in any case, poisoned. As such, they require an antidote to heal them, which the philosopher-doctor purports to provide with his

noble lies, his fables. There can be no cure, however, unless the patient is first ill, and so it behooves us to consider the sort of illness that mortal man has contracted.

Since the first significant reference in the *Republic* to illness pertains to “a city in a state of fever [*phlegmainousan polin*],”<sup>34</sup> let us briefly focus there. The reference is to a condition in which the appetites are not moderate, but rather excessive. That Plato’s fable begins in earnest on *this* foundation of “appetitive transgression,” of unbounded appetites, is worth noting. Human health may entail “rendering each its due [*to ta opheilomena hekastō apodidonai dikaion esti*],”<sup>35</sup> but such rendering is not possible unless at the outset the mortal condition is diseased. Only from here, from appetitive transgression, can the spirited part of the soul emerge, which is not afraid of death. And only *after* the spirited part emerges can the philosophic part that *practices death rightly* see the light of day and supersede the spirited, honor-loving part.

This seemingly incongruous relationship between disease and health, between immoderation and balance, and therefore between appetitive transgression and divine reason, should not be forgotten. It is an unwarranted simplification to say that Socrates shuns illness, so that he may embrace health.<sup>36</sup> It would be more accurate to say that in beginning with illness, the way to health opens up before him. The sort of health he has in mind is divine, to be sure, since it is predicated on the awakening of divine reason. Health is achieved, however, by beginning with appetitive transgression, which knows nothing of the domain of which it is the necessary predicate. In ancient religious terms, Plato’s fable conforms to three distinct phases of the ascent of the soul: the first involving *illness* or

<sup>34</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book II, 372e.

<sup>35</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book I, 331e.

<sup>36</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1966), preface, p. 2: “Let us not be ungrateful to it, although it must certainly be conceded that the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors so far was a dogmatist’s error—namely, Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and the good as such. But now that it is overcome, now that Europe is breathing freely again after this nightmare and at least can enjoy a healthier sleep, we, *whose task is wakefulness itself*, are the heirs of all that strength which has been fostered by the fight against this error. To be sure, it meant standing truth on her head and denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life, when one spoke of spirit and the good as Plato did. Indeed, as a physician one might ask: ‘How could the most beautiful growth of antiquity, Plato, contract such a disease? Did the wicked Socrates corrupt him after all? Could Socrates have been the corrupter of youth after all? And did he deserve his hemlock?’” (emphasis in original). See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), book IV, sec. 340, p. 272. Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 118a: “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.”

impurity (Book II, 372e), the second involving *purification* (to Book VI, 501a), and the third involving *illumination* (to Book IX, 592b). Politically, this insight raises the provocative question of whether the most defective types in Plato's fable, namely, democratic and tyrannical souls, in which appetitive transgressions abound, are evidently those most capable of being doctored to health in the highest, philosophical, sense.

Without illness, there can be no health.