

THE CRIB AND THE COSMOS IN PLATO'S LAWS

A WORKING PAPER

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We all praise a noble beginning...in fact, in my view, the beginning is more than half [of the whole] and no one has bestowed enough praise on the beginning that is noble.

– Plato, *The Laws* (754a)¹

This essay is concerned with beginnings – not only of cities (which is a given for any study on Plato’s *Laws*), but on the equally important beginnings of persons. It focuses on an under-appreciated, little recognized, and often academically neglected person: the baby.

When called upon to address General Grant’s troops, Mark Twain rose to the podium with these words: “It is a shame that for a thousand years the world’s banquets have utterly ignored the baby, as if he didn’t amount to anything.” Anyone who has had one, he continued, knows that they amount to an awful lot. His address would rectify this neglect. “[The baby] is enterprising, irrepressible, brimful of lawless activities... Sufficient unto the day is one baby.” Great beginnings are the cause of glorious ends, and Twain assures the troops that the celebrated grit of their commander, General Grant, was no doubt first forged in his peerless perseverance in attempting to “get his big toe into his mouth.”² Through Plato’s *Laws* runs a similar theme: the truth that there are few human concerns greater than giving things a noble beginning, especially the public life of a polis, and the life of a person. This essay seeks to investigate the relationship and tension between these two beginnings, and praise what is noble in each in such a way that the Athenian Stranger (and Mr. Twain) would be well-satisfied.

¹ All subsequent quotes from *The Laws of Plato*, translated by Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

² Mark Twain, *Speeches* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publisher, 1910), pp. 67-68.

The Beginning of the Polis

The task of the Legislator is beyond that of the great artist. Sculptors and poets pour their vision into shapes and words; each works in mediums that are ready to obey the skill of their master. But the Legislator's craft requires the conformity of willful living things – and not only that, but the highest and most divine of living things. Thus, we can say that the Legislator is not engaged in myth-making in the same manner as Homer; instead the generation of a city is in itself mythic, the kind of Herculean labor which inspires artists to reflect its greatness in verse and stone. Founders generate something much greater than themselves: they are mortals who give birth to something semi-divine. It is an awful prospect, and one worthy of the dialogue between the three old Greek men that we find in the *Laws*.

And yet, in spite of the god-like stature of the Legislator and the divine nature of foundings, the frustrating fact remains that the Legislator is not divine in the full sense. The humanity of the Legislator is ineradicable, though myths might be carefully wrought to at least partially conceal this truth. This is the great weakness which cowers in the heart of every city. The Legislator cannot create *ex nihilo*. His laws are not obeyed the way that nature's own dictates are. He cannot bid the sun to change its course any more than he can speak a blade of grass into being. There is always something artificial, something secondary and particular, about the laws of a city, and this vulnerability is most evident (and thus most dangerous) in the founding. No long tradition of established practices exists to create the verisimilitude of eternity that good laws require. A good law should be intrinsic to a people. It should be not so much a

law as simply “what is.” The people should be so predisposed and acclimated to the law that it is as self-evident in their eyes as the existence of the world itself.³

Nothing, then, is more important to the Legislator’s task than marrying the laws of his city to the eternal, or at least to the nearest thing to the eternal within his grasp: the customs of the people. These “ancestral customs” are

the bonds of every regime, linking all the things established in writing, and laid down, with the things that will be set forth in future, exactly like ancestral and in every way ancient customs; if nobly established and made habitual, they provide a cloak of complete safety for the later written laws, but when they perversely stray from the noble they are like props of the walls of houses which buckle in the middle and cause the whole edifice to fall (793c).

A reciprocal relationship exists: the laws must be wed to custom in order to carry legitimacy, but they also must refine the customs if their long-term survival is to be guaranteed. For the laws depend on the nobility of the customs, and if these “ancient things” collapse, the laws will come tumbling after them. If the ancient things are praiseworthy, they will offer a “cloak of safety” for the written laws. Always rightly haunted by this relationship, the good Legislator will neglect “neither the great nor small aspects” of the habits and customs of a people (793d).

The most formative and taken-for-granted of these ancient customs must be those which bind together the family. It is here, in the home, that the discerning Legislator’s eye should linger longest. The Athenian Stranger tries to prepare Kleinias and Megillus with the sobriety proper to such a subject, warning them that “[u]nless private homes within cities are correctly regulated it is vain for someone to suppose the common things will stand on firm legal footing” (790b). It is for this reason that midway through Book VII – after the Athenian Stranger has led us through a dialogue exhilarating in its scope and size, leaving a grand city already half-built in the minds of his companions – he pauses and bids us to turn down a much humbler street. This

³ Every would-be founder, in contemplating the colossal task before him, must be tempted to sigh with the Athenian Stranger for the fixity of Egypt, where the same songs have been sung for ten thousand years (656e).

vast project of a founding – a task which in speech Plato entrusted to three old men on a pious pilgrimage outside of their city walls, and which in deed has been realized only by the strongest and most ambitious of men, giants on the order of Lycurgus and Moses – comes to rest on the shoulders, or more accurately in the arms, of the mothers of the city.

Virtue and “The Initial Sprouting” of a Human Being

And so, the three old men find themselves talking in great earnest on the subject of the baby. The Athenian stranger labors to impress upon his companions that the two beginnings, that of the city and that of the citizen, are tightly wound together in their fates. “For in everything that grows the initial sprouting, if nobly directed, has a sovereign influence in bringing about the perfection in virtue that befits the thing’s own nature” (765c). That which begins crooked, we are told, is loathe to be made straight again. The Jewish proverb hits the spot: “When a fool throws a stone into a well, a hundred sages cannot get it out again.” In Proverbs, we find the same principle expressed in its positive form, as it exhorts listeners to “[t]rain up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (KJV, Prov. 22:6). It is during one’s earliest years that the capacity to receive virtue is developed, and if such an education does not take place, there is no easy return to the path of virtue.

This being so, the earliest education of the city’s smallest members – their pre-education, we might call it – is of the utmost importance to the city. “The lawgiver must not allow the upbringing of children to become something secondary or incidental” the Athenian Stranger cautions (766a), and even the smallest aspects of infancy should be investigated and monitored by the wise Legislator. In this pre-education “pleasure and liking, pain and hatred, become correctly arranged in the souls of those who are not yet able to reason” (653a). Later,

these carefully trained passions “can in consonance with reason affirm that they have been correctly habituated in the appropriate habits” (653b).

If some private customs cannot be shaped by law directly, being too private to be reasonably regulated, the Legislator should take care to influence them indirectly in every way possible. His hand must be in among the chatter of the nursemaids, the pride of fathers, and the play things of the mewling infant. The Athenian Stranger warns twice (789e; 790a) of the laughter such an undertaking is likely to provoke in common folk. “Do you want us to go ahead despite the laughter and set forth laws” for running the nursery, he asks his companions? (789e). (Perhaps this is also a tactic to hold at bay the laughter of Megillus and Kleinias by intimating that they are above what is “common”?) But surely he also knows that such laughter is a reward: it is a sign that the Legislator has hit upon the most deeply binding of all unwritten customs. Only something so primordial, so warm and everyday as pregnant mothers and crying babies, could invoke the laughter of the people when juxtaposed against the cold and impersonal face of the law. Within the walls of the nursery, mothers are the unquestioned tyrants. Such pre-legal things which defy legislation, these very places where any legislation would be “unthinkable,” are the very ones the Legislator must worry most about. Laughter, then, is a sign that the Athenian Stranger has struck bedrock.

The Baby: What Is It?

What do we find, here in the bedrock of human custom and at the beginning of the human soul? What kind of thing is a baby?

The human being, we assert, is tame; nevertheless, though when it happens upon a correct education and a lucky nature, it is wont to become the most divine and tamest animal, still, when its upbringing is inadequate or ignoble, it is the most savage of the things the earth can make grow. (765d)

What is striking about human babies is that when they first enter the world, they give off little hint of either their potential divinity or savagery. Instead, the Athenian Stranger tells his interlocutors, human beings seem utterly helpless and “completely mad” upon their arrival. He proposes that in all beings the level of intelligence at birth is inversely related to the degree of intelligence which the creature will attain once fully developed (672b). Thus, baby sea turtles have not yet even fought their way out of their egg before pointing themselves toward the sea and instinctively journeying into the waves to fend for themselves. At the very least, baby humpback whales are born able to swim, and elephants will begin walking within just a few minutes of being dropped into the world. But human babies have no such capacity: they are passive in their own birth, utterly dependent for their nourishment, and, for all practical purposes, immobile in the face of necessity or danger.

Not only is the infant vulnerable, they are also cantankerous far beyond what we find in other newborn creatures. After warming to the subject, the Athenian will conclude that the human infant is “the hardest to handle of all beasts,” as it possesses a “not yet disciplined source of thought” (808d). We find here an interesting addition to Aristotle’s famous passage in the *Politics* which echoes Plato’s argument. A grown man divorced from justice and the city is the “worst of all,” and most imprudent of all beasts, but what is the baby who is not yet cognizant of the city or justice?⁴ Plato sees in babies the chaos of a new soul filled with passions that are yet to be ordered by a still germinating reason. This chaos prompted Saint Augustine to gravely observe that “none is free from sin, not even the infant which has lived but a day upon the earth”; he further seeks to disenchant his readers of any foolish sentiment they might have concerning

⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 1253a30.

the angelic nature of babies by informing us that it is “the weakness of the infant’s limbs, and not in its will, [that] lies its innocence.”⁵ Though nature does not furnish newborn humans with the same level of instinct, initial prowess and even docility as other animals, neither are the other animals in possession of free will, nor do they have a capacity for virtue as the infant human being does. In the meantime, it is up to the family and the city to shape the “nursling” (or “fetter it with many bridles” as the Athenian says) in preparation for the later attainment of the virtue proper to it (808d). As if on cue, Kleinias asks the critical question of the Athenian: “how then ought the city as a whole bring up those who cannot speak or partake of the rest of education?” (791e).

To satisfactorily answer Kleinias’ question, the Athenian must take his companions all the way back to the pre-natal training of the good citizen.

The Education of a Fetus

The Athenian bids his friends to go back with him before the human being has formally arrived in the world to consider its conception, where each person’s disposition toward virtue and vice is first shaped. Again we find ourselves in a place so overwhelmingly private that formal law cannot intrude, but good men can set an example through their blame and praise. What would be the praiseworthy circumstances proper to the act of conception? Above all, the Athenian tells us, it is sobriety. “Children shouldn’t be made in bodies saturated with drunkenness. What is growing in the mother should be compact, well attached, and calm but someone who’s been drinking carries himself and is carried every which way, raging with frenzy in body and soul” (775d). Such a beginning would “necessarily stamp these effects on the souls

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Volume I (New York: Cosmio Books, 2007), 48.

and bodies of the embryos, and create children who are in every way inferior” (775d). Parents are instead to strive to be moderate in all things during the time of possible conception, and mothers in particular are to live a life that is “gracious, even and gentle” throughout their pregnancy (792b).

This passage at first may gall our modern prejudice toward individualism and against such a “primitive” (even eugenic) idea as inherited traits of the soul. But a closer look would find that the gavel of practical wisdom (if not biology) certainly has fallen consistently on the side of Plato. Contemporary pregnant women are more likely than those of any other time to listen to the soothing strains of Bach, take pregnancy-oriented yoga classes, refrain from alcohol (and jalapeños, for that matter), and avoid scented detergents all for the purpose of reducing fetal stress. If anything, there is more witness to Plato’s at first barbarous sounding pronouncement today than there was in his own time.

Such practices are not recommended solely on practical grounds; the Athenian would also have us look to higher things. He tells us that to treat conception lightly, to be immoderate or imprudent, is an offense against the gods (who tread freely the paths that lead into the deepest places of the souls of men while the formal law looks wistfully on). Procreation is a sacred business: “for the beginning, which among human beings is established as god, is the savior of all things—if She receives her proper honor from each of those who make use of her” (775e). The creation of a life is something which has been deemed among the divine things – “established as a god” – and must be honored accordingly. As Wisdom Herself says in Proverbs: “I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.” For this reason, Wisdom says: “hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways.” (Proverbs 8, 23-24; 32, KJV). All beginnings are connected to the Absolute – which perhaps is what small children

are *really* asking when they inquire about where babies come from. Biology can never compete with the wonder of metaphysics. Of all human acts, procreation surpasses even worship in its closeness to the divine.

How should the fetus, this new life imbued with a piece of the solemnity and awe surrounding the first creative act, be educated while in the womb? As the dialogue develops, we learn that the expectation that mothers are to be “even” and “gentle” is not an exhortation to lethargy. Rather, the Athenian obtains Megillus’ and Kleinias’ agreement through recourse to a strange example of raising fighting birds⁶ that “all bodies benefit from the invigorating stir produced by all sorts of shaking and motions” (788a). Moreover, bodies need such exercise in proportion to the speed at which they are growing—meaning, of course, that the fetus is in the greatest need of the benefits of gymnastics. But how shall such a thing be realized? What would this rigorous “Fitness for Fetuses” consist of? A perplexed Kleinias is satisfied by the Athenian Stranger’s explanation that this would be achieved through the practice of constant walking on the part of pregnant mothers.

Again, this practice is not valued for the health of the body alone, nor is that the sole worry of the mother or the the city even at this early stage. For “an upbringing that is complete in every way must manifest the power to make bodies and souls the most beautiful and the best possible” (788c). Though the Athenian Stranger begins with the body, the need for a “straight posture” and robust limbs, he is building a case for the development of the soul through the

⁶ Considering the ready agreement gained from this tactic, maybe the Athenian Stranger judged the character of his companions rightly: both have more experience in gambling than in midwifery. Kleinias is the perennial reminder of the humanity of the Legislator throughout the *Laws*. He shows us again and again the limits of philosophy in the practical realm through displaying his obtuseness and his common prejudice for the goods of the body rather than the goods of the soul. Though open to philosophy’s influence, Kleinias is often seen to be utilitarian and small in his understanding—yet, it is he whom fate has chosen to take on the task of a founding. He is the constant check on the Athenian Stranger’s city in speech.

body, an idea that echoes his earlier assertion that all beginnings are divine and therefore require the rituals proper to mysticism.

Ritual and Motion tame Terror and Madness

The importance of ritual, the repetition of physical actions which shape the soul, comes into greater relief as the Athenian Stranger sets pre-natal education to one side, and addresses the infant proper.

“Presumably every newborn animal customarily gives forth cries from the moment it’s born, and this applies not least to humankind...it is more given to tears as well as cries than the others” he tells us (791e). The defining act of infancy is perpetual crying “in a disorderly way” (672b). This “way of communicating that is not at all fortunate” endures for roughly three years (792a). What does this proclivity toward tears tell us about the human person? What is the cause of this crying? Besides being a means of communicating what the infant loves and hates to those around them before he has use of language – like the infant Augustine, who reports having regularly “avenged myself on them by tears”⁷ – the Stranger explains that this crying is also the result of the nursling’s experience of all kinds of terrors, terrors which originate from “some poor habit of the soul” (791a). Infancy is a period of intense habit formation and is a particularly vulnerable time, as every motion and impression has free reign over the little soul. The infant has few virtues yet cultivated which can withstand such motions, and even less use of reason to assess the true level of danger that they may pose.

In order to elucidate more clearly what kind of thing this terror is, the Athenian Stranger provides Kleinias and Megillus with a parallel image or likeness. The terror that unsettles infants

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 47.

is compared with the madness that overcomes adults. The Athenian refers to the “mystery rite cures of the Corybantes” which, according to Thomas Pangle, was a Bacchic-like sect that sought to cure those suffering from manic-depressive disorders through frenzied dance (790e).⁸ Madness, whatever particular form it takes, exhibits a certain attitude of the soul that is divorced from reality in some foundational way; the souls of the mad are marred or misshapen in some way. Similarly, we find that the baby, who cannot yet grasp the full reality (or even the knowable reality) of his or her’s own existence, is vulnerable to poor habits of the soul. But how is either the madness of an adult or the terror of an infant to be “ordered” rightly? No madman is aware of his madness precisely because he is mad. His madness cannot be “reasoned” away from him because unreason is reason to him. As G.K. Chesterton memorably wrote, a madman “cannot think himself out of mental evil; for it is actually the organ of thought that has become diseased, ungovernable, and, as it were, independent. He can only be saved by will or faith.” Because of this, “[c]uring a madman is not arguing with a philosopher; it is casting out a devil.”⁹ Madness is a defect in one’s reason (to begin reasoning, for example, upon the conviction that one is a cow), but it is not in the same category as a defect of reasoning (to reason about actual cows but with mistaken facts, e.g., that they produced tea rather than milk). The latter can be corrected through receiving more and better information; the former cannot. One’s default settings are askew (or for the baby, not yet in place). Madness, then, is better understood as a *motion* or a being-moved which seizes the soul and places one’s reason on a false footing.

Therefore, madness is not turned into sanity by means of rational argument, but it must be overcome and overpowered by a *motion* of rationality, so to speak. The insane require a physical and spiritual epiphany rather than a mental one—which is precisely why the mad were

⁸ Thomas Pangle, Interpretive Essay in Plato’s *Laws*, 529-530.

⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 37.

sent not to schoolmasters or philosophers, but to partake of the wild rites of the Corybantes. It is the motion and harmony of ritual that make us sane.

Just as these insane persons find relief for their madness in ritual dancing before the gods, so is the terror of the infant soothed by being constantly rocked by its mother or nurse. The rhythmic motions of the mother are akin to the ritual enchantments of the priestess. “When someone brings a rocking motion from the outside on such passions, the motion brought from without overpowers the fear and the mad motion within” replacing the “wild fluttering” of the heart with a “calm stillness” the Athenian tells us (791a). The disorder inside the soul is soothed by a greater ordering motion external to it and acting upon it, and the once terrified babe now sleeps. The stranger calls this alternately a “cure” and a “charming” – reminding us that the only medicine for madness is the enchantment of reality (790e).

A full enchantment however, also requires song: the Athenian observes that mothers “rock [infants] constantly in their arms, and not with silence but with some melody” (790e). Song works even more directly than physical motion does on the soul, and is likened to the aulos-playing that soothes Bacchic revelers. If rocking instills in the infant the knowledge that the world is ordered, song begins to tell him something about the beauty of the gods behind that order.¹⁰ Through the melody of song, the mother is telling the child a myth about reality, and at the same time is pulling the infant into that reality. Both infants and mad men can only be saved through white magic.

¹⁰ Rocking and singing thereby release the soul from terror, and at the same time train the soul and body for music. The danger of being unmusical can be fatal not only to the soul, but to the city as well. The Athenian later explains the proper relationship between the ruling and the ruled, the most elementary of which is the right of parents to rule over their children, and the finest of which is the rule which bids “the ignorant to follow and the prudent to lead and rule” (690b). One of the gravest threats to an order in which the young willingly follow the old and the foolish willingly follow the wise is “the dissonance—which we have asserted to be the greatest ignorance but which seems to be wisdom—corrupted everything, through discord and a shrill lack of music” (691a).

Perhaps the importance of such ritual soothing in infants is most evident, as are so many primal things, in its absence. One testament to the humanizing role of mothers is the perennial damage seen in children whose infancy is largely passed in isolation and the resultant extreme detachment disorders that can take place. Another, less extreme but more pervasive example, is the contemporary self-help industry which has risen to riches by pumping out psychological soothing for adults who were raised under the shadow of Dr. Spock.¹¹ To one degree or another, each case represents an early education which sowed poor habits in the soul that later kept it from reaching its full beauty and excellence.

The mother not only acts as a kind of priestess; she also takes on a substitutionary role. The baby, like the mad person, is afflicted, but unlike the mad person, is unable to enter into the rituals necessary for healing through their own will or power. The mother acts on the infant's behalf, performing the ritual for the child much in the same way that the city provides for the citizens the traditions and temples by which they can access the gods. Mothers grow us into our humanity by offering us their own. This also serves as a reminder that we depend on the city to attain the fullness of our humanity.¹²

¹¹ An even more compelling example might be found in disorders such as autism, where the child does not receive the rituals and motions of its parents in the same way as a healthy child would. Terrors that would be confined to infants in such cases are then spread into childhood and beyond; irrational fears perpetuate themselves and attack larger, stronger bodies. Thus, long after most persons have begun to shape their passions mostly through their reason, autistic middle schoolers and even adults require extreme physical rituals to subdue their anxiety (being wrapped in weighted blankets, banging their heads, constant rocking). Specialists call this an inability to mutually regulate emotions: the child is unable to receive "regulation" from the outside.

¹² This has special significance in the final book of the *Laws* where the punishments of the city are discussed. In the case of a suicide, the body is buried outside of the city in a desolate place (873c-d). Such an act severs the person from the life of the polis, and presumably from the gods of the polis as well—penalties the offender is worthy of.

The Sea and the Divine

The Athenian then gives us an intriguing picture of the best possible babyhood in its totality: the newborns would live “as if they were always on a ship at sea” (790c). In fact, he tells us that this would be good for all of us, but is especially beneficial for newborns. “In the very young nursing and motion should be as continuous as possible, the whole night and day” the Athenian instructs (790c). The soul of the child is being trained in some great harmony of motion and rhythm that is as everlasting as the tides. This motion takes on the weight of ritual; it contains a participatory and petitionary transcendence.

The sea as a metaphor mirrors this relationship of physical motion connected to a divine power or ordering hand. The sea conjures up divinity in its seemingly eternal presence and breadth. Water and life, everywhere and at all times, are inextricably tied together. Even the devastating flood discussed in Book III of the *Laws* acts as a creative new beginning. Though the sea invokes the power and perfection of the gods, it also stands apart from divinity in critical ways. Its very motion, the quality which is of vital importance in ordering human things, ties it to the physical world. This divinity is not the still, perfect and eternal end conceived of by the philosophers and urged by Plato; it is instead more akin to the earthy gods of Homer who often reach out their hands to play with human things. As much as Plato may be suspect of the evils that the tales of meddling and capricious gods may wreck upon the city, here we find a concession to the necessity for some kind of motion on the part of the gods as a mercy to those who are unable to use their reason. A dangerous proposition, but Plato, in looking into the beginnings of human beings, is treading into the loamy, rich and dark things that are so great that they cannot be anything but dangerous.

The sea as a metaphor, however, also provides some protection from the capriciousness of the Homeric deities. Its waves only appear unruly when observed in isolation of the greater unity of its tides and the constancy of its depth. The sea then shares in the eternal fixity that is requisite of all truly divine things, and yet exists in time and is thus able to affect the human soul through the body. Contemplation works the opposite way, shaping the most divine part of the soul from within, while something like the motion of the waves of the sea works from without: the body speaks to the soul. Such motions, in the end, teach the souls of those incapable of contemplation how to be still. In this way, rocking a newborn is their first lesson in theology, taught in the only way that a newborn soul could receive it.

Terror and Courage

Babies who are nurtured in a way that constantly reinforces such rhythmic motions and harmonies, who live as if they are at sea, are predisposed towards courage. For, as the Athenian Stranger explains, courage “consists in triumphing over terrors and fears that come upon us” (791c). The motions and melodies of the mother, the constant walking, carrying, singing and rocking which she employs, are all constantly repeated rituals of victory over fear. A corrupt infant education, one in which the child is not perpetually reassured by the rhythmic motions administered by his mother, would produce the opposite character: “every soul that dwells with terror from the time of childhood would be especially likely to become accustomed to feeling fear; and presumably everyone would assert that this is practice in cowardice rather than courage” (791b).¹³

¹³ Considering the current orientation of early childhood education – which emphasizes self-soothing (adults are not to pick you up when you fall down, etc.); independence (at the preschool my mother works and you are not to teach the child to say “thank you” or “I’m sorry” because that reinforces what society pressures children to be, rather than

The kind of courage that should be instilled in these young souls has none of the characteristics of what might be called modern or nihilistic courage, wherein the lone individual, having been abandoned and deceived by all his kith and kin, takes a devil-may-care leap into the existential void yawning before him out of spite for reality. Rather, we see a courage that mirrors the seamless unity and determined purpose characteristic of the phalanx formation; rather than total, even wrathful, independence, we find that courage is integrally tied to trust for the ancients. The heart (the *cour* from which the word courage comes in Latin) of the individual trusts in the goodness of the household, the city, and even the cosmos. That trust is the germ of all courageous actions. All the virtues of the individual human heart connect man to the city and to the gods of the city. We see none of today's nihilism or extreme Enlightenment individualism in Plato's discussion of the practice of virtue in infancy. Or maybe infancy shows us nothing of nihilism and little of Enlightenment individualism?¹⁴

their allowing their authentic selves to shine through); and self-esteem (no model is to be given for art projects because that would set a standard which might challenge the worth of the child's watercolor, and so every picture is highly praised scribbles). Small wonder that modern adults in the West are consuming an unprecedented amount of anti-anxiety medication. Perhaps unknowingly they have been practicing cowardice; they live with little true community and the virtues that come from it, and much terror.

¹⁴ Then again, modern thinkers such as Martin Heidegger have invested much careful thought into the human phenomenon of anxiety, the terror each person experiences in light of their "thrownness" into the world. The terror of the infant might have been interpreted by him as a true experience of Dasein, of the child's experience of the never-to-be answered question of his own being. Human beings are defined by their perpetually unfinished and unrooted state. "It is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that there is *constantly something still to be settled*," Heidegger wrote. Anxiety is the most authentic response to being-in-the-world, because as long as Dasein is, it is "not yet." Adults, through the shared stories of public discourse, run away from the anxious reality of their own being and looming death. From Heidegger's perspective, the problem may not lie with infants or with madmen, but with the rest of us. *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 1962), 287; 279.

Seth Benardete reflects on this passage in a similar way, defining this terror as an anxiety about one's own being. "The terror, then, is that there is no ground for one's being, for the annihilation is coming from within. The cure consists in attaching the terror outside oneself to a god to whom one can sacrifice and appease. The god then proves to be gracious through the alteration of disordered motions and cries into ordered song and dance." Children's lullabies and prayers all seek to transfer these terrors from inside to something outside, something which can be appeased or offer comfort. Seth Benardete, *Plato's "Laws": The Discovery of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 193.

Pleasure and Moderation

If terror is the first enemy of the infant which must be overcome, pleasure is the first temptress. Hand in hand with courage, the infant must also be taught the beginnings of moderation. Such early training in pleasure and pain lays the foundation for the whole tenor and strength of one's later character: "The absence or presence of ill-humor in the soul is no small factor in determining whether stoutness of soul or weakness of soul would result" (791c).

To illustrate, the Athenian paints a picture of the two extremes of babyhood, one full of luxury and the other full of neglect. An infancy saturated in luxury and pleasure tends to create adults who are "ill-humored, irascible, and easily moved by small matters." This harkens back to a passage in Book II, wherein the Athenian is musing on the falls of the sons of the great Persian kings. Cyrus, who "turned his children over to the women to be brought up," paid for his mistake dearly, as the spoiled women promptly "allowed no one to oppose [the children] in anything" from infancy onwards. By the time that their father's kingdom came into their hands, they were "bursting with luxury and lack of restraint" (694d). One heir killed his brother because "he couldn't bear to share equally" (695b).

The second extreme, an infancy in which the child is deprived of necessities, would lead to a character fitted for "extreme savage enslavement." Such an infancy would predispose children to be "humble, illiberal, misanthropic," and render them "unsuited for living with others" (791d). We see that neither of these paths (though the first is initially admired by Kleinias as "lovely") is a suitable proto-education for the virtuous citizen. Both beginnings have divorced the child in important ways from the rhythm of the heavens and man's place in it—both undermine the Greek understanding of who man is in relation to the gods and his fellowmen. Down the middle path of moderation lies the surest foundation for the good man and the good

citizen. The particulars of such an education are more difficult to elucidate than are the excesses to either side of it, but the companions are satisfied with having outlined the basic principles which should guide the infant's progress.

Choruses: Joy and the Worshipper

As the baby grows into a child, a shift occurs in his or her education. What was once done for them, they must now learn how to do for themselves. Their initiation or enchantment into reality occurs through learning how to perform beautiful motions on their own: the child enters the rituals while the infant is the subject of those rituals. Being rocked by one's mother is a predecessor to, and a preparation for, dance. The end of this education in rhythmic motions is the play, or chorus:

The source of play is once again the fact that every living being is by nature accustomed to jumping, and that human kind, as we asserted, obtained a perception of rhythm and thus engendered and gave birth to dance. When song recalled and awakened rhythm, the two in common gave birth to the chorus and to play (673d).

This propensity to jumping is ordered into rhythmic dance in the same way that the cries of infants are ordered into song. All of this culminates in the chorus. And it is in the choruses that human beings meet with the divine, because rhythm and harmony are their gifts; the Athenian tells us that Apollo, Dionysius, and the Muses are our "fellow-dancers" who give to us "the pleasant perception of rhythm and harmony" (653c). Infant education is intended to shape a human being for nothing less than worship, which is participation in the choruses and the sacred rites of the community. "Using [this perception of rhythm of harmony, the gods] move us, and lead us in choruses, joining us together in songs and dances; and that is why they bestowed the name 'choruses'—from the 'joy' [chara] that is natural to these activities" (654a). The terror of

the chaos-filled infant soul has been vanquished, replaced through the ritual motions that teach virtue and reason with the joy of worship.¹⁵

Thus the Athenian Stranger has laid out the earliest pre-education for virtue requisite to form courageous, moderate and pious citizens.

The City, the Mother and the Divine

Stepping back from the nursery, we see that a successful founding depends on the creation of excellent worshippers for the gods. The gods, in turn, instill in the people the moral responsibility at best (the fear at least) to obey the laws of the city. They add their transcendent weight and authority to the customs of the people. But danger lurks in the city's very success; its own authority can be challenged by the gods that they themselves so carefully led the people to. Socrates, Martin Luther, and Sir Thomas More are only the most famous examples of citizens who were too good to be good for their respective "cities." Such men are an interesting commentary on the end of the *Laws*, where the Athenian Stranger violently denounces the practice of setting up private shrines at home or spontaneous shrines about the city. "When someone is minded to sacrifice," he writes, "he is to go and sacrifice at the public shrines, and hand the sacrificial offerings over to the priests and priestesses, whose responsibility it is to purify these things" – since to do such a thing requires "deep thought" (909e). Women are particularly prone to take religious matters into their own hands, "to sanctify whatever happens to be around at the time, to vow sacrifices, and to promise to establish shrines to gods, demons,

¹⁵ This "dancing with the gods" corrects the natural atrophy of virtuous education among human beings, which "in the course of a lifetime becomes corrupted to a great extent" (653c). Seeing this corruption and "taking pity on this suffering that is natural to the human race," the gods gave humanity holidays "in order that these divinities" who move the people and dance with them "might set humans right again. Thus men are sustained by their holidays in the company of gods" (653d).

and children of gods”; their power in this area must be tightly regulated by the Legislator (910a). The city has to retain its power over access to the gods—a tug-of-war that is fought with the home, and with mothers in particular, who are the keepers of the sacred things of the hearth.

Conclusion

A founding is itself a kind of birth, and as such it both seeks to mimic the family and to protect itself from the family—because the family primordial in a way that threatens the very city of which it is part. Though the city is closer to divinity in its longevity, the mother is more divine in that she is more primary than the city, her powers of creation more real. Hence, every totalitarian regime has been at war with mothers, whether through cooptation or outright attack, and it is a jealous enemy of the spheres closest to motherhood: childhood, the home, and private religion. The very remains of cities tell us as much: while Athenian childhood toys sit in today’s museums, Sparta left nothing of the kind behind.

Even the most just cities face this triad of the most private things defensively. In relation to the home, the Athenian Stranger himself suggests common messes for the citizens of Magnesia and berates the Spartans for being so foolish as to omit such an institution for women, leaving them instead in private to pursue the crafty wiles that appeal to the weaker sex. Our own time features such dramatic cases as China’s one child policy (tame in comparison to its attacks on the family during the height of Mao’s rule) and the U.S.S.R.’s stranglehold on religion for most of its existence.

Though the city always exists in tension with the home, and mothers as the keepers of the home, the city is also an image of the home writ large, and as such it must protect the family assiduously if it is to protect itself. Thus we find that crimes committed by youths against the

elderly are treated as the worst of crimes—and those committed by a child against his own parents the most unspeakable of all. If, in an insane rage, a person were to attack and kill his parent, “he would become liable to the most severe judicial penalties for assault, and, likewise, impiety and temple robbing (for having plundered the soul of his parent).” Here, the Legislator intentionally and explicitly links parents to the divine through the formal law (869b). Death does not cancel out this ugly impiety: such a man would “very justly undergo many deaths” as his punishment, if it were possible. The Athenian Stranger goes even further: “In this case alone (where a man is about to be killed by his parents), no law will permit killing to defend oneself against death” (869c). Harsh penalties for the murder of one’s parents are expected, but such a pronouncement as this is terrifyingly sobering: “With regard to father or mother, the ones who brought one’s nature into the light, the law will legislate that one must endure, suffering everything rather than doing such a deed” (869c).

The Athenian Stranger seems to be implying that the act of procreation, the bringing into existence of one who was not, sanctifies the parents, regardless of their character. In the face of such a mystery, the only response is awe and resignation, reminiscent of Job’s response to God: “though he slay me, I will trust in him.”¹⁶ To harm one’s parents, regardless of the evil inflicted, is to be a defiler of the gods, a temple-robber, one who the Greeks would see as sub-human or at least unworthy of his humanity. And so in Sophocles we see the grief-stricken Oedipus, not guilty in any of his intentions but yet in his acts, blinding himself and begging for exile when his unintended crimes against his parents come to light.

¹⁶ Job 13:15. Although, directly following this extreme declaration of humility before an unfathomable deity, Job goes on to say that “I will defend my own ways before him.”

Such laws, in turn, serve the city well. Earlier, the Athenian Stranger has told us that the people must revere the land of the city “more than children cherish their mother; he must consider the land as a goddess who is mistress of mortals” (740b). The very division of the land is sacred, and if anyone should dare try to combine or divide the specified number of allotments, “they will engrave the story of the offender on cypress tablets stored in temples, there to be read and remembered for the rest of time” (741c). The greatest impiety after blaspheming the gods themselves is an assault upon the city. And thus “the true political art must care not for the private but the common – for the common binds cities together, while the private tears them apart,” the Athenian says. It is therefore “in the interest of both the common and the private that the common, rather than the private, be established nobly” (875a). Further, “no one’s soul should acquire the habit of doing something on its own and alone, either seriously or in play” the Athenian tells us (942b). Instead, every person must always be under their superior, ready at every moment to follow the orders of those above them. The city’s will must be guarded over and against every private will, because it is only the city which can protect private things.

And yet, we are left uneasy. There seems to be something instinctively impious about putting the city before one’s own family. The classic example of such a perversion is Euthyphro, hardened to his own father and using the laws of the city against him, invoking the overthrow of the Titans as his model. Antigone, by contrast, shines from every angle as a heroine. In practice, much is willingly left in the hands of the city, and at least in ancient times the gods were also given their due worship and sacrifice. But when we turn to the baby, we most vividly see the paradoxical and uneasy overlapping roles of the mother, the city, and even the gods themselves. The question cannot be avoided: Whose baby is it, really?

Otherwise law-abiding women have laughed at legislators when babies are involved, and would perhaps even undermine the city for the sake of their children. Jacob deceived his father and patriarch through the wiles of his mother. Brutus stands as an exception among parents, not the rule, in overseeing the execution of his two sons to protect Roman law. The mantra of Spartan mothers, to “come home with this or on it” in reference to their son’s shield, must be weighed alongside the many draft-dodgers of our own era who were aided in their flight by Mom’s apron strings.

Otherwise pious women have laughed at God when the topic turns to babies. Sarah infamously cackled at God when she was told that she would have a child (Genesis 18); and even Zechariah doubted that God could interfere successfully with such a private matter, and lost use of his tongue for it (Luke 1). Yet many more parents have walked to the blood-red fires of Carthage and acquiesced to the demands of the gods and the city. Abraham never disclosed to Sarah his intention for Isaac’s sacrifice, or the Old Testament might read very differently today.

The city may indeed be primary by necessity, as both Aristotle and Plato would tell us, but even to give our assent that the whole is more important than the parts is not to erase this fundamental uneasiness that lies in the relationship of all things private and public, both acting as complementary and competing mirrors of the divine. And nowhere are we more likely to see this perennial tension between the household and the city, a tension that even stretches out restlessly into the cosmos and halls of the divine, than in Twain’s unsung little bundle of drooling and wailing joy nestled in his crib.

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