Politeia - A Structural Analysis

1. The *Idea*

The central *idea* in this dialogue is The Highest Good to which all else is subsumed. Inevitably, this leads to the secondary *idea* of the Apparent Highest Good.

2. The *Eidos*

The aspects of the *idea* of the Apparent Highest Good are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. They each appear to be the highest good to a different psychic constitution.

3. The *Paradeigma*

The three main types of Apparent Highest Good are explained by a tripartite soul.

- The Rational part in control causes a desire to be beneficial.
- The Emotional part in control causes a desire to appear good.
- The Desiring part in control causes a desire for pleasure, divided into one, few, or many pleasures:
  - One all-encompassing pleasure to fill the void, impossible to attain.
  - The few pleasures essential for the maintenance of life (food, drink, reproductive sex).
  - Many pleasures, however and whenever they may be found.

To simplify this scheme for the readers, Plato has Socrates use political terminology to label each constitution. He also has Socrates present a spurious political development of one political constitution from another. While politically invalid, the presentation allows the audience to understand the hierarchy of psychic constitutions.

4. The *Deigma*

Structurally, five participants would suffice to represent each *paradeigma*; in fact, there are seven. Still more *deigmata* are required for understanding the structure as a whole, though

they are not present in the conversation:

- Aristocrat (the beneficial)
  - The oft-mentioned but absent poets and fathers of timocrats. They wish to make people behave well, and educate them using a carrot and stick approach, which inevitably involves lying.
  - Socrates. He unconventionally maintains that people may become good through dialectic exercise. However, when unsuccessful (as he necessarily is in a dialogue, where all characters function as stable *deigmata*), he can also employ the conventional carrot-and-stick approach. Both his unconventional dialectic and the conventional carrot-and-stick approach involve a form of "lying", in the sense that Socrates works within his interlocutor's vocabulary, expectations, assumptions and goals. He is not primarily intent on leading his interlocutor to a set of correct propositions, but on improving his interlocutor's psychic orientation, if at all possible. The account of a "psychic constitution" is itself a strategic construction: it provides an image of hierarchy that the timocrats, his interlocutors for nine of the ten books, can recognize and respond to. Whether such a constitution exists exactly as described is secondary to its pedagogical function.
- Timocrat (the reputation seeker)
  - Glauco is attracted upwards to the aristocrats, and through the conventional education he has received, promising rewards for just behaviour, wishes to appear just.
  - Adimantus is attracted downwards to the pleasure-seekers, since he wishes to enjoy the pleasure he no longer believes comes as a reward for appearing just. He is ashamed, however, to appear to desire pleasure.
- Oligarch (motivated by the few pleasures necessary for the maintenance of life)
  - Cephalus, a self-made man.
- Democrat (the fickle seeker of any and all pleasures)
  - Polemarchus, the son and heir of Cephalus. He is in this dialogue an upward-looking democrat, happy to act the timocrat.
  - Clitopho, currently a downward-looking democrat, happy to act the tyrant.

- Tyrant (obsessed with a pleasure that eludes him)
  - Thrasymachus, a sophist.

There are two timocrats for two main reasons: 1. to show how timocrats become disillusioned with the conventional education they received, as the rewards for apparently just behaviour are discovered to be won more easily by unjust people; 2. timocrats are competitive among their peers, so two are required for the competition which we see in the dialogue from Book II to Book IX

There are two democrats in order to portray the ease with which they may adopt any psychic constitution just for the novelty.

5. The Conversation

The aristocrat Socrates, as narrator, constructs the conditions for the conversation he claims to have had the previous day. The descent to the Piraeus - suggestive of the later cave analogy - is presented as casual scene-setting. Yet this appearance is dissembling. What looks like an incidental visit is in fact the careful gathering of the constitutions required for the dialogue to unfold.

The ease of the narrative masks deliberate design. The characters seem to converge by chance, but their motivations align with their psychic constitutions and are therefore predictable. Their presence is structurally necessary for the dramatization of the Apparent Highest Good.

Whether such a conversation ever occurred in this form is beside the point. The narrated event functions as compositional architecture rather than recollection. Socrates presents himself as merely reporting what happened, yet the account presupposes knowledge of the entire structural schema. The participants of Book I are the *deigmata* of the *paradeigmata*, the psychic constitutions fully articulated only in Books VIII–IX. The dissembling tone of casual narration continues throughout the dialogue and forms part of its philosophical design. This dissembling itself exemplifies a characteristic of the aristocratic constitution.

The aristocrat narrator Socrates claims that he went down "yesterday" to the Piraeus, the port of Athens, accompanied by the upward-looking timocrat Glauco, and presents as his own motive a recognisably timocratic concern with honour and public display, namely paying respects to the newly introduced goddess Bendis. This professed motive aligns him outwardly with the upward-looking timocratic constitution, suggesting that he allowed himself to appear persuaded by Glauco to make the descent to the Piraeus. This stated reason incidentally allows Plato to expose the city's hypocrisy: Athens welcomes a foreign cult, yet later condemns Socrates for introducing new divinities. The irony is not required for the structural assembly of the dialogue, but Plato characteristically allows a single narrative element to serve more than one purpose. As for the downward-looking timocrat, Socrates knows that Adimantus accompanies the democrat Polemarchus, who will predictably be drawn to the novelty of the festival.

Once Polemarchus has seen him, Socrates makes as if to return to Athens. The feigned withdrawal elicits the predictable response: Polemarchus sends a servant to detain him and presses him to remain, deploying democratic inducements: young men, conversation, and a novel nocturnal spectacle on horseback. Socrates again allows himself to appear persuaded by motivations that are not his own.

At the metic's house in the Piraeus the remaining psychic constitutions are supplied. The oligarch Cephalus is present, as expected, since he is the father of Polemarchus, and among the assembled company stand the tyrant Thrasymachus and the downward-looking democrat Clitopho. Thrasymachus, or another sophist just like him, fits the occasion of such a festival gathering. Nothing in the dialogue occurs by chance. Each participant occupies a predetermined place within the architecture of the psychic drama, and Socrates the narrator arranges them accordingly.

The conversation itself occupies ten "books" (originally scrolls), some thirty times longer than a typical short early dialogue. It is perhaps the sheer scale of the work, and in particular the distance between the dramatic presentation of the *deigmata* in Books I–II and the explicit paradeigmata of Books VIII–IX, that has obscured their structural continuity. The

separation in length and argumentative development encourages the two sections to be read independently rather than as corresponding parts of a single design. Indeed, the longstanding hypothesis that Book I once circulated as a separate work has reinforced the tendency to treat it in isolation, further distancing it from the structural role it plays within the completed dialogue.

Apart from the sheer distance between these sections, there is also the inherent difficulty of correctly aligning *deigma* with *paradeigma*. The constitutions do not always present themselves transparently. Democrats, for example, delight in playing the philosopher or the sophist - namely, the aristocrat or the tyrant. The timocrat strives to appear the best, and may therefore be mistaken for the aristocrat. The aristocrat, by contrast, may appear to be anything but the best. This obfuscation is not accidental but a necessary consequence of the nature of the *paradeigmata*.

Plato therefore provides a number of dramatic, non-philosophical, criteria by which the constitutional identity of a *deigma* may be discerned. One such criterion is the attitude toward wealth. In Books VIII–IX Socrates explicitly characterizes each *paradeigma* by this criterion. It is not by chance that earlier in the dialogue we are also informed of each *deigma*'s attitude toward wealth. The aristocrat is indifferent to money, as are Socrates and the father of Adimantus. The pleasure-dominated constitutions are associated with acquisition: frugally in the case of oligarchs and Cephalus, rapaciously in the case of tyrants and Thrasymachus, wastefully in the case of democrats and Polemarchus. The timocrat scorns both the aristocrat's indifference and the pleasure-seeker's menial money-making, and thus occupies the uneasy position of desiring money while refusing to appear to desire it, just like Glauco and Adimantus. For Glauco, wealth signals status; for Adimantus, it is already becoming something valued more for its own sake.

While money-making serves as an early dramatic indicator of constitutional identity, justice performs a confirmatory function available only after each constitution has been correctly identified. Justice is an aspect of the Good; the apparent justice of each constitution is an aspect of the Apparent Highest Good.

Nearly every constitution conceives justice in terms of benefit, though the beneficiary

differs according to psychic structure. For the aristocrat, justice benefits the whole polis. For the oligarch, it secures the interests of his own household. For the democrat, it serves shifting friends and temporary alliances. For the tyrant, it is whatever advances his unjust self. In each case, justice is interpreted as advantageous to what the constitution takes to be primary.

The timocrat alone seems to lack a conception of justice as benefit. His concern is not advantage but honour and reputation. This may help to explain Glauco's surprise in the cave analogy that the released prisoner would willingly return to the cave. From a timocratic perspective, such a descent appears as loss rather than gain. The notion that justice might require self-sacrificial benefit to a larger whole is alien to a constitution governed by the need to appear superior.

The framework for most of the dialogue now becomes self-organizing. The unconventional aristocrat throughout the conversation employs dialectical stratagems, often bordering on deliberate sophistry, designed to generate internal contradictions. These contradictions are not intended to provoke mere reconsideration, but to expose disorder and make room for the installation of the logical part as ruler. The constitutions themselves do not move; what moves are the arguments. Their shadowy, shifting character results from Socrates' strategic manipulation rather than from psychological development.

Books I–II introduce the *deigmata*. In Book I the unconventional aristocrat addresses the pleasure-seekers in descending order. The timocrats signal their dissatisfaction at the refutation of the tyrant's position, while Adimantus additionally voices resentment at the lies told to him in childhood by conventional aristocrats. Both are, in fact, attracted to what the tyrant represents. Socrates exploits this attraction, as well as their rivalry with one another, for the remainder of the dialogue.

Books II–IV articulate the hierarchical tripartite structure not by dividing a pre-existing simple soul, but by successive additions to it, additions that sit uneasily with the original premise. The political analogy assists this process: *Kallipolis* develops out of the so-called City of Pigs through accretions rather than organic necessity. The timocrats fail to notice both the tension in the city's foundation and their own complicity in fabrications far more systematic than the conventional aristocratic "carrots" that had shaped them into

apparently just men.

Books VIII–IX present the *paradeigmata* explicitly. Book X reintroduces the conventional aristocratic "sticks," outlining the punishments awaiting the unjust in the afterlife. This conclusion recalls the fears that motivate the oligarch's anxious sacrificing at the beginning of the conversation.

Within this overall structure stands the digression of Books V–VII: the Three Waves, the Sun, the Divided Line, and the Cave. This section interrupts the constructive sequence in order to introduce the Good itself.

The structural relations sketched here are developed in greater detail in the full study. Chapter 6, which treats the Digression of Books V–VII, is available on this site by permission of the publisher. A previously published article on Thrasymachus is also provided for readers who wish to examine that debate between the sophist and Socrates in Book I. The article differs in certain respects from the treatment of the same debate in Chapter 2 of my book.