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Plato's *Republic:* between utopia and religiosity

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Plato's *Republic* is often interpreted as a utopia. This strong and widespread hermeneutic tradition starts with Thomas More himself and is still deeply rooted in platonic studies. In his book *Utopia*, More considers Plato's philosophy as one of his major inspirations. By comparing Raphael Hythloday's sailing to "the sailing […] of Plato",[1] More draws attention on the fact that his work is profoundly indebted to Plato's philosophical effort to elaborate a new constitution for the city. By making such a comparison, More has launched an influent way to understand Plato's political theory in the *Republic* which is still nowadays widely shared amongst scholars.[2]

However, this approach, which I will call the "radical utopian interpretation", seems to be too global and too vague to accurately qualify Plato's thought and can be challenged. In *Utopia*, More refers to Plato's work, and especially to the *Republic*, as a source of inspiration. He is not interested in commenting and discussing each part of the argumentative process of this dialogue. He rather shares a common interest with Plato in picturing a better political system as an implicit critique and a potential answer to the political troubles of his time. In this sense, it is difficult to unilaterally qualify the *Republic* as a utopia, because More's primary goal is not to prove that this dialogue satisfies all the requirements of his concept of "utopia". Moreover, the *Republic* can't be globally interpreted as a utopia, precisely because it is one of the main inspirations of the utopian idea.

Let's have a closer look to the common radical utopian interpretation of the *Republic*. It pretends that this dialogue matches all the criteria defining a utopian project: a community looking for common good, settled in a fictional place and not firstly designed immediately to come into existence. It is possible to admit this view according to the two first two criteria, but not to the last one. Nothing indicates at first sight that the *Republic* is not designed to come into existence. Moreover, Plato doesn't only present one constitution model in the *Republic*, but several descriptions concerning different models.[3] It is obvious that all these models refer to different kinds   of   political

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[1] T. More (1975, 5).

[2] For instance, Karl Popper, in the first volume of his famous book *The open society and its enemies*, *The spell of Plato*, grounds his critique against Plato's *Republic* by considering it as the result of a "utopian engineering" method (*cf.* chapter IX).

[3] For instance, he talks about a primitive city called "city of pigs" (*Republic*, 371d) and a perverted or degenerated city in the second book. He also mentions a *kallipolis* (*Republic*, 527c) in book VII, this term referring to the model he pretends to establish, and opposes it in book VIII to the descriptions of perverted cities models (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny).

organizations. It seems therefore difficult or impossible to interpret the whole *Republic* as a unique, global and radical utopia. A last reason brings me to challenge a radical utopian interpretation of the *Republic*. At the very end of the dialogue, Plato claims in the following text that one the models he has designed – the *kallipolis* as the philosophical, virtuous and just regime he wanted to establish – could come into existence:

> Well, then, do you agree that the things we have said about the city [the *kallipolis*] and its constitution are not altogether wishful thinking; that it is difficult for them to come about, but possible in a way […] (*Republic*, 540cd).[4]

All these facts make the radical utopian interpretation hard to admit. The *Republic* inspires *Utopia*, but it doesn't seem to be fully comparable to a utopian system. This is because Plato presents different political models in this dialogue and considers only one of them could be enacted. For this reason I would first like to determine, in this paper, if it is still possible to present a relevant interpretation of the *Republic* as a utopia. Then, I will examine if it is sufficient to interpret the *Republic* only as a utopia or if an alternative interpretation is possible.

The first part of my analysis will study in detail the structure of the *Republic*, and the way the different political systems described by Plato are connected. My goal is to show that only certain parts of the *Republic* could be related to a utopian model. The second part will emphasize Plato's effort to bring his project into existence. To do this, I will focus my work on the religious notion of "*théia moira*" often translated by "divine dispensation" which definitively shows that the *Republic* can't be interpreted as a radical utopian project.

1) Is it possible to present a relevant interpretation of the *Republic* as a utopia?

In this section, I would like to discuss two recent interpretations of the *Republic* trying to show that there are different levels of utopia in this dialogue. The first one focuses on the difference between the historical city (the city in which Plato lived, Athens) and Plato's reformative project, and on how a transition between them is possible. The second one more closely examines the structure of this reformative project as a combination of different levels of utopia. Then, I will try to synthesize these elements in order to suggest a hypothesis that considers all the political models described in the *Republic* and to show that a radical utopian interpretation is not relevant.

a) Between Athens and the *kallipolis*: about Mario Vegetti's interpretation:

In his article "Il regno filosofico", Mario Vegetti (1994) clarifies the nature and the role of the different types of constitution in the *Republic*. Before exposing Vegetti's

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[4] I always refer to C. D. C. Reeve's translation (2004).

view, I would like to summarize what leads Plato to elaborate several constitution models.

The *Republic*'s major topic is the definition of "justice" (*Republic*, 331c). The first book and the first part of the second one expose several definitions of justice, but all these attempts fail. This is why Socrates is asked by his interlocutors to present his own definition of justice. To do this, Socrates decides to use a new investigation method grounded on the following analogy:

> I think we should adopt the method of investigation that we would use if, lacking keen eyesight, we were told to identify small letters from a distance, and then noticed that the same letters existed elsewhere in larger size and on a larger surface (*Republic*, 368cd).

In order to find what is justice, Socrates will examine first what justice is within a city, then, determine what justice is for the individual. This method leads him to present a new city model.

To expose Socrates' attempt, Mario Vegetti distinguishes three major steps. The first one (in a logical order, but not in the dialogue's order itself) is the actual and current constitution, *i*.e. Athens. Its major feature is to be ruled by corrupted statesmen who don't know what justice is and govern the city according to their own interests. Philosophers maybe know what justice is, but for the common view, they are perceived as unable to have an active part in city life. Even more, they are corrupted and perverted, as highlighted by Adeimantus.[5] Therefore, no change seems to be possible. However, according to Vegetti, Plato also presents a transitory constitution. It is related to the very short period of time when a philosopher takes the power within the actual city and re-organizes it according to Plato's model. Then, the following model will be the *kallipolis* itself.

In addition to these three models, Vegetti distinguishes three kinds of philosophers. The philosophers-kings appear in book VI. They have to rule the transitional city. They have all philosophical qualities, but they didn't receive any education from the state. They are self-made men: they are self-taught and have a great natural resistance against the corruption of the historical city. Dialecticians are only described in book VII. They are produced by the *kallipolis*' educational program and are destined to rule it. To do this, they will be helped by *archontes*. Described in books II and III, they represent a kind of intermediate rulers. As dialecticians, they practice gymnastic and learn music, but they don't follow their whole course of studies as exposed in book VII.

Veggeti's account sheds light on Plato's aspiration to create a new political regime by showing the different steps of this process. However, he doesn't really succeed in giving a sufficient account of the *Republic*'s structure. First, Vegetti omits some constitution models, especially the ones described in book II. Then, he doesn't

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[5] "The majority [off young people doing philosophy] becomes cranks, not to say completely bad" (*Republic*, 487d).

explain how the transition between the historical city model and the transitory one is possible.

b) Dawson and the *Republic* as combination of different levels of utopia:

Vegetti's approach points out that Plato's model is certainly designed to be enacted. However, he fails in taking into consideration all the models introduced in the *Republic*. Dawson, in his book *Cities of the Gods*, seems to have a more complete and complex theory focused on differences between the stages of successive constitutions.

Dawson considers that the description of the first city in Book II is not designed to be instantiated. It is only an example used to discover the universal patterns of human society. Dawson (1992, 80) calls this stage the "historical dialogue". There are two steps in it: the "primitive city" and the "city of war" (*Ibid*.).

The primitive city's goal is to shed light on the essential organization principles of the human community. These principles are exposed in the following text:

> SOCRATES: A city with the barest necessities, then, would consist of four or five men?
> ADEIMANTUS: Apparently.
> SOCRATES: Well, then, should each of them contribute his own work for the common use of all? I mean, should a farmer, although he is only one person, provide food for four people, and spend quadruple the time and labor to provide food to be shared by them all? Or should he not be concerned about everyone else? Should he produce one quarter the food in one quarter the time for himself alone? Should he spend the other three quarters providing a house, a cloak, and shoes? Should he save himself the bother of sharing with other people and mind his own business on his own?
> ADEIMANTUS: The first alternative, Socrates, is perhaps easier.
> SOCRATES: There is nothing strange in that, by Zeus. You see, it occurred to me while you were speaking that, in the first place, we are not all born alike. On the contrary, each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one job, another to another. Or don't you think so?
> ADEIMANTUS: I do.
> I SOCRATES: Well, then, would one person do better work if he practiced, many crafts or if he practiced one?
> ADEIMANTUS: If he practiced one.
> SOCRATES: And it is also clear, I take it, that if one misses the opportune moment in any job, the work is spoiled.
> ADEIMANTUS: It is clear.
> SOCRATES: That, I take it, is because the thing that has to be done won't wait until the doer has the leisure to do it. No, instead the doer must, of necessity, pay close attention to what has to be done and not leave it for his idle moments.
> ADEIMANTUS: Yes, he must.
> SOCRATES: The result, then, is that more plentiful and better-quality goods are more easily produced, if each person does one thing for which he is naturally suited and does it at the opportune moment, because his time is freed from all the others (*Republic*, 369d-370c).

Here, Plato presents the very essential principles of the new constitution he aims to build. Each person has to perform his task, do his job, according to his natural quality. This original correlation between nature and task grounds Plato's definition of justice. However, this first stage provides a too basic definition of justice because it doesn't represent a model matching with the people's common expectations. There are indeed only a few people in this city which is only structured to satisfy people's basic needs like food and housing, but not to provide them with a developed life. Glaucon notices this problem and points out that this primitive model doesn't include all that makes human civilization possible. He calls it a "city of pigs" (*Republic*, 371d). In response, Socrates decides to use the first model to create a second one, the "city of war". This city is more luxurious with more citizens, more tasks and jobs to perform, and a high level of collaboration is needed between people. In fact, the "city of war" describes the actual world the Greeks lived in. But, since the city becomes richer and bigger, and goes "beyond what is necessary" (*Republic*, 373b), it will need to expand its land and to be protected against other cities' aggressions. Socrates summarizes this problem in the following text:

> SOCRATES: Won't we have to seize some of our neighbors' land, then, if we are to have enough for pasture and plowing? And won't our neighbors want to seize part of ours in turn, if they too have abandoned themselves to the endless acquisition of money and overstepped the limit of their necessary desires? (*Republic*, 373d)

It is for this particular reason that Socrates starts to describe how the army should be organized.[6] But this new question was never solved by any actual historical city. No city has a class only dedicated to its defense. It's a new challenge for Plato that requests to reach another level in the elaboration of city models. According to Dawson (1992, 80), it is for this reason that Socrates introduces a new city model: the "low utopia model".

For Dawson, the low utopia model could be enacted. It is grounded on the rule of a special class: the guardians (or *archontes* as said by Vegetti). They are educated with gymnastic and music and present brilliant natural abilities to defend the city. However the main problem with this model is that it requires communism for guardians. To become the best soldiers possible, they need to live together and to receive a specific training without taking part in other tasks. This claim is coherent with Plato's definition of justice exposed before. This radical hypothesis requests that guardians live in a city ruled by philosophers because only philosophers can bring such a model into existence. According to Dawson (1992, 80), this new claim leads us to the "high utopia" part of the *Republic*.

The high utopia model consists in the rule of philosophers. This class refers to the dialecticians in Vegetti's theory. As said before, they will receive an intensive and

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[6] "SOCRATES: The city must be further enlarged, then, my dear Glaucon, and not just a little, but be the size of a whole army". (*Republic*, 374e).

challenging education. According to Dawson, it is the only way to make the creation of a soldiers' class possible because only philosophers are able to understand the principle of specialization grounding Plato's plan. But, according to Dawson (1992, 80), it can't be enacted.

Dawson's position is interesting because it takes into consideration the first two models introduced in Book II which are not included in Vegetti's account. Plus, it sheds light on the fact that Plato uses the primitive city model only as a way to emphasize the very basic principles of human society. However, I think that Dawson doesn't take seriously the possibility that Plato's project can be enacted or instantiated. Contrary to Veggeti, he never mentions Plato's critique of the institutions of his time and his reformative will. Vegetti's and Dawson's accounts are complementary, but they don't totally expose the *Republic*'s structure. That's why a synthesis seems necessary.

c) A new interpretative structure for the *Republic*?

The various city models showed by Vegetti and Dawson could be classified according to three categories: radical utopia, historical city and instantiable utopia.

The radical utopia concerns the first cities described in book II and pointed out by Dawson. They are organized according to two main principles: everybody has to perform his task according to his natural abilities, and a city needs an army to be defended against other cities. This radical utopian model is not designed to be enacted, but only aims to show the principles of human communities. The actual city is just a description of Athens, the city in which Plato lived in. It is corrupted and ruled by unjust institutions, and perverts young people. Between the actual city and the instantiable utopia, there is the transitive city. Philosophers-kings, who are self-made men able to resist to corruption and to take the power to establish a philosophical regime, rule it. Finally, the *kallipolis* represents the potentially instantiable utopia. It is the result of the activity of philosophers-kings. It is supposed to be a long lasting regime ruled by dialecticians and defended by archontes.

This synthesis sheds light on two facts. First, the *Republic* can't be interpreted as a global utopia, because Plato describes the city he lived in, and also two different forms of utopia, the radical one and the potentially instantiable one. Secondly, it is not sufficient to present the *Republic* neither as a global utopia, nor as an addition of utopian models. Such an interpretation misses an important but difficult point: the connection between the historical city and Plato's political reform project. In fact, nothing explains how a transition – through a transitive city model – between the historical city and the *kallipolis* is possible. Vegetti suggests this transition but doesn't explain it. Dawson, on his side, totally ignores this possibility. These two approaches miss an important point mentioned by Plato himself: the existence of people naturally gifted, capable of resisting against the ambient corruption of the historical city and potentially destined to bring into existence a new city model. Plato mentions such men in the following text:

> You see, there is not now, never has been, nor ever will be, a character whose view of virtue goes contrary to the education these [the sophists] provide. […] You may be sure that if anything is saved and turns out well in the political systems that exist now, you won't be mistaken in saying that divine help [*théou moiran*] saved it. (*Republic*, 492e-493a, translation modified).

This text clearly shows that it is normally impossible for young people to escape the ambient corruption of the historical city. In these conditions, there seems to be no room for Plato's reform project. The historical city system is comparable to a closed circle and nothing seems to allow Plato's potentially instantiable utopia to come into existence, nothing seems to allow opening the circle as described on the diagram below:
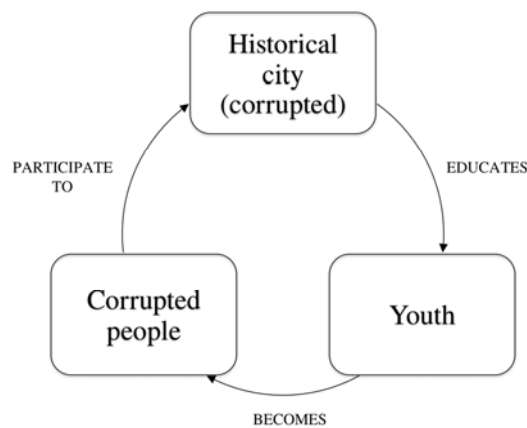

Fig. 1

A totally utopian-oriented interpretation doesn't suggest how it is possible to connect Plato's project with practical conditions and tends to make these two entities more and more separated. That's why it seems problematic to explain the *Republic* only as an addition of utopian structures. However, Plato claims, in the *Republic*, that his project could come into existence thanks to a "divine help" or "divine lot", expression used to translate "*théia moira*". This religious notion would allow the transition between the historical city and the potentially instantiable one, the *kallipolis*, by giving exceptional capacities to certain individuals. The *théia moira*, as the condition of possibility of Plato's reformative project instantiation, challenges a utopian-grounded interpretation and shows that another way to undertstand the *Republic* is possible.

2) Is it sufficient to interpret the *Republic* only as a utopia? Is an alternative interpretation possible?

According to what I said before, it is not sufficient to interpret the *Republic* only as a utopia. A satisfactory interpretative model rather tends to show that the *Republic* is

a combination of different levels of utopia grounded on a critique of the historical city. Nevertheless, this alternative model needs to be completed in order to be fully acceptable, especially with respect to the notion of *théia moira*. I would like to study this notion according to its two main aspects. First, I intend to show the formal role of the *théia moira* within the *Republic*. Then, I would like to try to make its meaning more precise.

a) What does the *théia moira* in the *Republic*:

The *théia moira* can be understood as a formal way to open the circle of the historical city corruption. Young people are corrupted and can't develop qualities necessary to become philosophers. By mere chance, the *théia moira* appears by giving to one person an exceptional nature resistant to ambient corruption. This person is a philosopher-king and can initiate a political reform to allow the *kallipolis'* constitution to come into existence, as showed below:
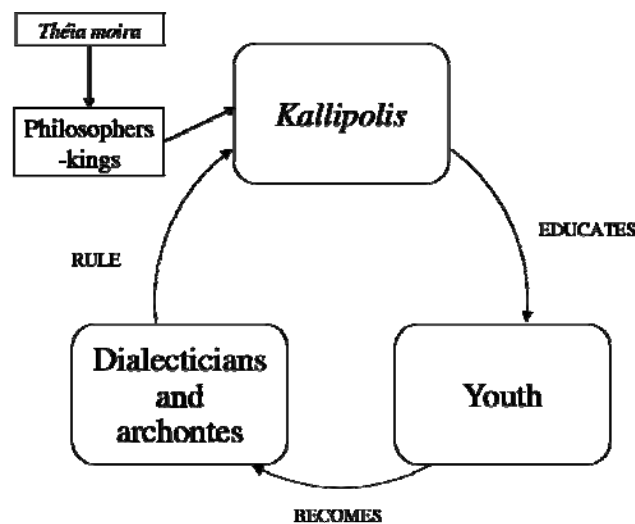

Fig. 2

The *théia moira* allows the transition to the potentially instantiable model by establishing a first city organized according to philosophical principles, the transitive city (which is the first stage of the potentially instantiable utopia). Then, this first temporary model will establish new institutions, especially concerning education. This last aspect is crucial for Plato's reformative project. Since the continued existence of a political regime depends on the possibility to educate young people to rule it in the future, and since this process can either pervert them or make them virtuous, only a virtuous regime with a virtuous educational process can bring young people to virtue. Then, the *kallipolis* as a fully virtuous city will be established and ruled by a cast of exceptional statesmen, the dialecticians, with the help of the *archontes*.

This formal explanation is not sufficient and many questions remain unanswered. What kind of help does the *théia moira* provide? What does it mean when the *théia moira* appears by chance?

b) What kind of help does the *théia moira* provide?

First of all, it is necessary to dissociate the two aspects of the *théia moira* in the *Republic*.[7] On the one hand, the *théia moira* is what is given to mankind by a superior power. On the other hand, the *théia moira* refers to this precise superior power providing help to mankind. I will study this second meaning later.

In the abstract previously mentioned (*Republic*, 492e-493a), Socrates claims that only people who enjoy a *théia moira* can avoid the corruption of the historical city. In this context, the notion of *théia moira* is related to the individual's character. In Plato's view, the character is tightly connected to the soul (*psychè*). For a human being, the soul is what causes life, actions and thoughts. Three parts compose the soul: intellect, anger and desire.[8] A virtuous soul is a soul in which there is a good balance between these three parts. In a good soul, the intellect dominates the desire with the help of the anger. On the contrary, a perverted soul is ruled by desire (helped by anger). These apply equally to the city[9]. For instance, a perverted city is a city whose citizens' souls are dominated by desire. This relation is also reciprocal. The nature of the Citizens' soul influences the city's organization. But, on the other hand, institutions of the city shape people's soul through education. A god-helped individual possesses a soul able to resist to the ambient corruption of the city. In this sense, I think that the *théia moira* refers to a special and exceptional soul (i.e. nature or character) as an inborn feature. And due to the fact that this latter is so rare, it has been interpreted as a god-sent gift. This interpretation of the *théia moira* as a special nature of the soul seems to be confirmed at the very end of the *Critias*. In this dialogue, Socrates describes the genesis of Atlantis. This mythical city used to be ruled by kings with exceptional natures. According to this dialogue, their souls were composed of two parts: divine and mortal. The mortal part represents desire and anger. The divine part refers to the intellect. This divine part used to rule their soul but, little by little, their exceptional nature was corrupted as described in the text below:

> But when the god's part [*hê toû theoû mèn moîran*] in them began to wax faint by constant crossing with much mortality, and the human temper to predominate, then they could no longer carry their fortune, but themselves unseemly." (*Critias*, 121ab).[10]

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[7] There are other aspects of the *théia moira* in Plato's work (especially in the *Protagoras*, the *Ion* and the *Meno*), but it is not necessary to discuss them here.

[8] *Republic*, 439-440.

[9] *Republic*, 441c.

[10] Translation by A. E. Taylor in Plato (1973).

The opposition is clear. There is a conflict between the "god's part" of the soul and the "mortality" or "human temper". Kings of Atlantis became less virtuous because the "god's part in them" stopped to control their behavior. This change had a strong political impact. Because they were corrupted, Atlantis started to decline.

The *Critias* tends to identify the *théia moira* with the soul's divine part, and consequently with its rational part. The *Timeus* seems to confirm this hypothesis. In this dialogue, the human soul is described as a combination of a divine and a mortal part. More precisely, in the *Timeus'* very end, the soul's rational part is qualified as "divine power" (*Timeus*, 90a). In this sense, the *Republic*, together with the *Critias* and the *Timeus*, suggest to understand the *théia moira* as the rational part of the soul. By extension, the *théia moira* can be considered as the nature of men ruled by the rational part of their soul. The *théia moira* is an exceptional psychological disposition, grounded on the directive role of the soul's rational part, and which is able to resist to the ambient corruption of the city. However, this hypothesis doesn't explain how the *théia moira* occurs. Luckily, Plato tries to clarify this problem in the *Republic*. In book VI, Socrates claims:

> SOCRATES: It was for these reasons, and because we foresaw these difficulties, that we were afraid. All the same, we were compelled by the truth to say that no city, no constitution, and, indeed, no individual man will ever become perfect until some chance even compels those few philosophers who are not vicious (the ones who are now called useless) to take care of a city, whether they want to or not, and compels the city to obey them-or until a true passion for true philosophy flows by some divine inspiration into the sons of the men now wielding dynastic power or sovereignty, or into the men themselves. Now, it cannot be reasonably maintained, in my view, that either or both of these things is impossible. But if they were, we would be justly ridiculed for indulging in wishful thinking. Isn't that so? (*Republic*, 499a-c).

This text introduces the "philosophers-kings theory". It is one of the most radical Plato's views concerning politics. In order to establish the *kallipolis*, Plato expects either that philosophers take the power, or that statesmen become philosopher[11]. This hypothesis seems to provide a good formal answer to the problem of the instantiation of the *kallipolis* because the philosophers-kings can be seen as the recipients *of the théia moira*. However, it remains difficult to understand how this change is possible, how a king could become a philosopher, or a philosopher a king. Plato provides a response in the following text:

> GLAUCON: So, he [the philosopher-king] won't be willing to take part in politics,
> then, if that is what he cares about.

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[11] This position was already introduced in book V ("Until the philosophers rule as kings in their cities, or those who are nowadays called kings and leading men become genuine and adequate philosophers so that political power and philosophy become thoroughly blended together […], cities will have no rest evils, my dear Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race." *Republic*, 473cd).

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> SOCRATES: Yes, by the dog, in his own city, he certainly will. But he may not be willing to do so in his fatherland, barring some stroke of divine luck. (*Republic*, 592a).

This text summarizes other problems related to the birth of a philosophically grounded political regime. It is very difficult, and almost impossible, for a philosopher to take the power in the city. Even if he was able to avoid the corruption of the historical city, it is very likely that his reformative efforts remain ineffective. That's why Plato here points out the opposition between "his own city" and "in his fatherland". The "own city" refers to the soul, and eventually it is the philosopher-king himself who takes care of his own soul. The second one is related to the historical city, to the political matters that the philosopher has to face. To resolve this difficulty, Plato uses the notion of *théia tuchè* (divine chance or fortune). This notion is tightly bounded to the idea of contingence. The existence of a philosophical political regime ultimately depends on the random apparition of a naturally gifted philosopher (as the recipient of the *théia moira*) and on the favorable conditions allowing him to take power within the city. As Santas (2010, 10) —with Rawls— says, it is ultimately a matter of "natural lottery".

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Interpreting the *Republic* in a global and radical utopian way is eventually not sufficient and not totally relevant. Several constitution models compose this dialogue. Some of them are totally utopian (as the primitive city and the city of war exposed in book II). Others are potentially instantiable. This diversity shows that Plato uses all the intellectual resources that a utopian strategy can provide. His radical utopian approach points out each fundamental key features of the human community. Then, the potentially instantiable utopia approach allows Plato to think how his reformative project could come into existence.

This last step is not easy to conceive because it refers to a curious notion within Plato's thought: the *théia moira*. The *théia moira* is crucial to understand Plato's reformative project. By allowing certain people to resist to the ambient corruption of the historical city, this notion makes it possible to introduce a new political regime grounded on philosophy, virtue and justice. In this way, the *théia moira* is the fundamental key to challenge the radical utopian interpretation of the *Republic*.

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