"Popping the Gygian Question"

by Alastair McIntosh

An exploration of power, invisibility and Truth in critiquing contemporary civilisation through the lens of Plato's Ecotopia and the Myth of Gyges in *The Republic*, II:372-375, II:358-361 & X:612.

Posthumous Dedication

On p. 107 I make reference to "the obvious question of whether good can ever come from knowledge acquired, or actions engaged in, by deceit." In truth, it was only retrospectively obvious. It was first pointed out to me, pretty much in these words, in a discussion with Tim Edwards, formerly manager of the government's Social Inclusion Partnership in Govan, Glasgow. Tim's work was deeply informed by urban liberation theology. He stood alongside the poor and did much to help the GalGael Trust, of which I am a director, to get government funding including paying for our building. He passed away suddenly in the early hours of Sunday 4th July. R.I.P.

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ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

Popping the Gygian question

In *The Republic,* which was written nearly two and a half millennia ago, Plato portrays Socrates and his friends as embarking upon an enquiry into the nature of justice. Socrates observes that none of them are very clever, but to determine what justice looks like in an individual is no small feat. He suggests that just as it is easier from a distance to read large lettering than small, so justice might be discerned more clearly if sought at the scale of the state rather than the individual. He therefore proposes a thought experiment. They should set up an imaginary Republic. If they can determine what justice looks like in a city-state, then they might infer its nature in the soul.

What Plato is doing here is inverting the usual idea that we get the politicians we deserve. He's asking, 'If such is our politics, what does it say about us?' *Uncivilisation,* the manifesto of the Dark Mountain Project, proposes a similar exercise. On its final page we are invited to climb the heights together by the poet's pilgrim path, and 'look back upon the pinprick lights of the distant cities and gain perspective on who we are and what we have become.'

I welcome such a taking of perspective while confessing wariness as to what is meant by 'Uncivilisation'. If we are to be useful in this world – if, to express my own values, we are to serve the poor or the broken in nature – then we cannot indulge in the sort of postmodern deconstruction that knocks down the Lego and leaves it scattered on the nursery floor. Our world now has nearly seven billion people. Whether we like it or not, 'civilisation' is held together by a tightly interlocked socio-economic system. The worry is that this arguably has very little resilience. *Uncivilisation* is correct that we walk on lava with a thin and brittle crust.

To take just one example, we now know that in October 2008, British banks came within hours of having to close down cashlines and suspend commercial lines of credit. If this had happened, commerce would have gridlocked. If suppliers think they might not get paid they won't dispatch the goods. But modern supermarkets operate on a just-in-time delivery system. Even a temporary blip in financial lubrication would almost certainly have caused

shortages which would quickly have been compounded by panic buying. At such a juncture, social disorder is not far around the corner. Just as it's said, 'If you don't like education, try ignorance,' so we must be resolute but not dismissive in our critique of civilisation. It might be the cause of our woes, but equally, its absence could become the cause of something worse.

For these reasons I welcome the idea of 'Uncivilisation' as a thought experiment. But let us, in such civilised company as we have with one another, ensure that whatever deconstruction we do also has an eye to reconstruction, or replacement with a credible alternative that would not require totalitarian enforcement. What I want to offer here are some footnotes in the footsteps of Plato, because *The Republic* is, in my view, the greatest philosophical study of civil society that we have in the traditions of the West. I realise what outrage that may cause to followers of Popper or Lyotard. But then, I purport to be neither a modernist nor, if such a thing exists beyond the modern, a post-modernist. Like Plato, I am a premodern essentialist.

That does not mean I swallow Plato hook, line and sinker or dismiss the importance of science. Far from it. Many of Popper's criticisms of authoritarian leanings in Plato were highly apposite, especially for our society that has moved on since ancient Greece. But Plato offers some unparalleled insights into the relationship between justice, the individual and the state. In particular, I want to focus here on the visibility or invisibility of power. In so doing I will take it as axiomatic that 'power denied is power abused,' and by 'denied' include that which is 'hidden' – especially when we hide from ourselves our complicity in systems that we may decry. This is where Plato is so challenging. He forces us to look at where we stand in relation to our social systems, and equally to look at our social systems in relation to ourselves. It presses us to engage in the joined-up thinking that is so often deficient in civilisation's discontents. In this, I am minded of a cartoon where all the activists file past with their placards. 'Save the Whale,' says one. 'Down with the Corporations,' another. 'Stop the War,' a third, and they go on and on, until the last which reads: 'I hate my Dad!' Yes, it is challenging to look at outer social structures relative to our own inner psychodynamics, but that is what Plato urges us to do. Without such integrated social and psychological honesty I do not think we can sustain action in the world in ways that build hope and give life.

So, *civilitas*, civilisation. Etymologically, the word contrasts with barbarity: the civilian with the soldier, civil law with criminal law. The problem with it, and thus our need to consider 'Uncivilisation,' comes about when the term gets co-opted by various forms of domination. That doesn't make civilisation

bad. It only affirms the badness of domination masquerading as civilisation. We should remember that our civil rights and civic duties are also part of civilisation. So is the duty to civil disobedience in the name of upholding a more civil sense of what is civilised. I don't think we need to engage too much in the displacement activity (displacement from the urgent imperatives of action) in fussing about how we use these words. People who fuss overmuch about words rarely get much done. Let actions speak louder. And in using names and ideas to explore such actions, my touchstone of validity is what I call the 'Crofter Test'. If something cannot credibly be explained to a Hebridean crofter who works the land and fishes the sea, and who functions as an individual in community with others, then we should think twice about its worth. Here from where I write in Glasgow this has its urban equivalent in the 'Govan Test'. If it can't pass muster with folks in this hard-pressed part of town, then we should question whether it is merely an elite conceit from the ivory tower as distinct from fruit from the elementally down-to-earth groves of academe.

Plato founded his Academy in a grove, and in the *Republic* this tension between the two reference points – town and country, as it were – is quickly apparent. He first puts Socrates to the task, setting up an imaginary utopia wherein to discern justice. Socrates pictures a Republic identical with what we today might think of as an eco-village. For him, right livelihood wasn't rocket science. Justice consists in everybody acting in fitting relationship to the wider community – a holistic balance environmentally, intergenerationally and with neighbours. Such a Republic is community writ large. Fulfilment comes from matching the providence of outer life with an inner life capacity to be satisfied. It embraces frugality but avoids destitution. As such, Socrates said he would have men and women spending their days doing honest pastoral and artisanal work. They would feast with their children on vegetarian meals, drinking wine in moderation, and spending their spare time not watching television but singing hymns to the gods, 'so they will live with one another in happiness, not begetting children above their means, and guarding against the danger of poverty or war.' In such a way they will 'at death leave their children to live as they have done.' The Brundtland Commission's famous definition of 'sustainable development' was presaged by Plato!

But on hearing all this, young Glaucon springs to his feet and pours derision on it. He accuses Socrates of setting up living conditions suitable only for fattening pigs. Instead, his version of the Republic would have rich foods in profusion. They'd have nannies to keep the kids at bay, every mod con to

make life comfortable, and decorations of gold, ivory and all the latest Britart fads from Charles Saatchi's gallery plus Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull.

'Very well,' says Socrates, letting go of his Ecotopia, 'If you wish let us also inspect a city which is suffering from inflammation.' And so he sets in train a discourse of brilliant Socratic questioning. He draws out the consequences of Glaucon's Republic and concludes, 'Then if we are to have enough ... we must take a slice from our neighbour's territory. And they will want to do the same to ours, if they also overpass the bounds of necessity and plunge into reckless pursuit of wealth?'

'Certainly,' admits Glaucon, but becoming less sure of himself.

'Then,' concludes Socrates: 'Let us only notice that we have found the origin of war in those passions which are most responsible for the evils that come upon cities and the men that dwell in them.'

Through Socrates, then, Plato has shown how the collective culmination of our personal values can result in unforeseen emergent social properties finding expression. The hapless Glaucon ends up a little shocked by the implications that Socrates draws from his greed. Equally, a society will only be able to rein in its 'inflammation' if it carries out political reform in parallel with a deepening of the inner personal values necessary to drive transformation. This is especially true in democracies and in economies that allow freedom of purchasing choice to create demand. Under such conditions we may blame the governments, the corporations, or civilisation itself, but if we look in their mirrors, we might be disturbed to see how much it is our own distorted faces that reflect back. Except where our hands are tied, we have to own our decisions, and own up.

The would-be revolutionary in her fashion-branded clothing or his designer suit is a case in point. Sometimes, when I'm challenged on saying this during a talk, I'll reply: 'Will everybody who is wearing a corporate product kindly take it off?' The threat of naked exposure pretty quickly brings home the truth of complicity. And nearly all of us are in this position. My own biggest eco-sin is addiction to eating more than my ecologically sound share of meat and fish. Such complicity in the global problematique is not something to be proud of. But by facing fair and square our own contradictions and confessing them, we at least avoid putting out our own eyes as the price of denial. That way we stay in touch with reality, even though it will be a more uncomfortable reality. And that's a start on the path to transformation, both personal and political in an iterative process. It reduces the hypocrisy and

diminishes the likelihood of projecting our inner conflicts onto the outer world, thereby unconsciously abusing the very causes we espouse.

The ability to see clearly, to see both truths and Truth is therefore pivotal. In *Uncivilisation,* the bottom line is that 'there is an underlying darkness at the root of everything we have built... which feeds the machine and all the people who run it, and which they have all trained themselves not to see.' I do not propose that we should make the category error of pathologising every political structure as if it were our personal responsibility. But I am suggesting that we seek to build a greater understanding of the emergent properties of what it means for us, as individuals, to be covenanted (and not merely contracted) into a body politic. We should seek better to understand power as both the fuel and the lubricant between individuals and structures of power. And in my experience, where we can unveil our own connivance in the Powers That Be, it helps to defuse the self-righteousness that would otherwise keep our opponents closed to us. An open-handed and open-hearted confessional path thereby paves the way for deeper mutuality in the discernment of problems. It legitimises our challenges because we have laid ourselves equally open to challenge. It oils the wheels of both hindsight and foresight, consecrating their bridging in the present. At the deepest level, such clear seeing opens us to 'participation in the harmony of the rhythm of Being,' which is the great religious philosopher Raimon Panikkar's definition of peace.

This question of power's visibility or invisibility is therefore at the heart of transforming what it means to be civilised. But if we are going to use a word like 'transformation', we have to think what we are transforming from, to what, and by which legitimate pathways. Too often the revolutionary overlooks these steps and violence, which is always the recourse of impatience, fills the gaps, numbs the soul, and intergenerationally poisons the soil from which justice might grow.

Again, Plato presses us on the connections between visibility, violence, power and justice. We see it in one of the less remarked-upon narratives of *The Republic* where he tells the story of the Ring of Gyges. It's a tale that, like a pair of cover-flaps to the main story, pops up early in Book 2, just before the philosophers agree to embark upon their republican thought experiment; and briefly resurges again near the end of Book 10, forming part of Socrates' triumphant *coup de grâce.*

Again Glaucon is centre stage and playing devil's advocate with the old master. He puts it to Socrates that justice is nothing more than concealed self-interest. To illustrate he tells of Gyges of Lydia – a shepherd in what would

today be western Turkey and the ancestor of King Croesus, who was the richest but not the happiest man in the world. The story variously refers to Gyges' ancestor but also to the 'Ring of Gyges', so to keep it simple I'll just attribute it to Gyges.

One day Gyges was tending the king's flocks when there was an almighty deluge of rain followed by an earthquake. The ground opened to reveal a chasm that turned out to be an ancient tomb. Venturing inside, Gyges found a hollow bronze horse with windowed trapdoors along its sides.

Peering through these he could see the body of an almost superhuman-sized warrior wearing a gold ring. Gyges opened a trapdoor, climbed in, and made off with the ring.

His next stop was for a monthly meeting that all the shepherds had with the king's officials to account for their flocks. While waiting for it to start he played with the ring. Amazingly, he found that when the bevel was turned inwards it made him invisible. On turning it outwards again he'd reappear. In this way he could wander freely amongst his colleagues and overhear everything they said about him.

When the meeting ended, Gyges merged with the cortege and followed them back to the palace. He entered the royal quarters, seduced the queen and with her help, slew the king and seized the crown.

And that's all there is to the story. But just imagine, Glaucon says to Socrates, that there had been two such rings. Imagine that the other had fallen to a just man instead of to a tyrant-in-waiting like Gyges.

We ourselves might pop the Gygian question. What would you or I do if we came by a Ring of Gyges?

Glaucon argues that no matter how principled when the opportunity to act otherwise had been lacking, the finder of such a ring would most likely behave henceforth exactly like Gyges. Would not anybody, Glaucon suggests, use it 'to steal anything he wished from the very marketplace with impunity, to enter men's houses and have intercourse with whom he would, to kill or to set free whomsoever he pleased; in short, *to walk among men as a god*?'

Because justice, he continues, is only held a virtue when working to our advantage. If we possessed a Ring of Gyges but refrained from exploiting it, others would certainly praise us to our faces. However, they would do so merely out of relief at not being in danger of suffering injustice. Secretly, they'd despise our folly. It's like the moral psychology of bankers and their bonuses. Those who do (which is not all bankers) do because they can. In their circular social reference group they'd reckon one another fools to do otherwise. Worse still, as the folklorist Hamish Henderson once said, 'The non-

genuine person cannot believe that the genuine exists.' The fruits of Truth and truthfulness themselves are relegated beyond the Pale.

For me, the power of Glaucon's story goes deeper than just the obvious question as to whether good can ever come from knowledge acquired, or actions engaged in, by deceit. It is a cogent reflection on the manifold meanings of invisibility and with it, our complicity and often, self-deception in many of the things that we profess to hate. We may hate, for example, capitalism. But how much are we willing to go out of our way and stretch our pockets to seek out the alternative, as embodied in fairly or co-operatively traded products? We may hate what bankers do, but are we willing to take a lower rate of interest from ethical investment, or even go the full Muslim way of decrying usury full stop? We may shun the casino economy of the stock exchange, but how's your pension? And behind so many of these questions lurks *consumerism – not the rustic economy of Socrates but the inflamed one* of Glaucon – and its invisible Gygian gas, CO_2.

And so, did Copenhagen fail in 2009 because the UN's politics failed? Or would it be more honest to say that politics actually succeeded; politics covertly did what the majority of people really wanted? By keeping CO_2 invisible, by side-stepping the imperative to act on the rich world's complicity in profligate consumerism, it sanctioned the ongoing Gygian theft of our children's ability to live as we have done.

And where does that leave matters now? My view is that civilisation – because that is what we are talking about when addressing the world at UN level – must reconnect to the soul. It must do all the outer stuff – all the political, economic and technical approaches to tackling a meta-problem like climate change – but it must also address the inner life. It must tackle what drives the relatively rich to consume so much 'stuff' in the first place and acknowledge that the relatively poor cannot ignore temptation. A Persian proverb says that behind every rich person is a devil, but behind every poor one are two. The rich have the devil everybody sees. The poor have the devil that's known plus the one that might emerge given half a chance. Assuming that the consensus science is broadly correct, when it comes to an issue like climate change we're all in this together.

I conclude with Socrates' lines from Book 10, where he returns to Glaucon's story. 'We have proved,' he says, 'that justice in itself is the best thing for the soul itself, and that the soul ought to do justice whether it possesses the Ring of Gyges or not.'

Such is the challenge of our times.

'Most true,' replies a mellowed Glaucon.