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Persuasion and Coercion in Plato's *Republic*

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Despite the frequent pairing of and contrast between persuasion and force, Plato's *Republic* undermines any coherent split between these two modes of handling others.¹ This paper provides two major pieces of evidence to support this claim: (i) Book I dramatizes the weakness of the distinction; and (ii) the arguments that the best rulers will rule only under coercion (in Books I, V, VII, and IX) makes the distinction into an obvious conundrum. Further evidence omitted here is Plato's tendency to subvert this same rhetorically popular binary elsewhere, especially *Statesman*, *Sophist* and *Laws*.² Given that Plato doesn't explicitly question the persuasion-force dichotomy, claims about why he implicitly questions it must be speculative; this paper concludes with nine ideas.

The Apparent Distinction

Throughout the *Republic* Plato's characters contrast force and persuasion. Often the speaker mentions the modes together, as though the two exhaust the means of handling people.³ Glaucon, for example, says that if any of the unjust person's "unjust activities should be discovered, he must be able to speak persuasively or to use force" (361b).⁴ The interlocutors of the *Republic* obviously also counter the types of mastery against one another. The thrifty man, they decide, holds his evil appetites in check "not by persuading them that it's better not to act on them or taming them with arguments, but by compulsion and fear, trembling for his other possessions" (554d). Sophists, "if their words fail to persuade, ... punish anyone who isn't

¹ I choose this word, "handling," to translate *cheiroumenon* (*Soph.* 219c) as neutrally and as generally as possible. I could have used "mastering" or "subduing," but those two terms imply success; Fowler's "coercion" is unsatisfactory, insofar as contemporary usage contrasts persuasion with coercion, making the former uncomfortably situated within the latter.

² On the *Laws*, see Christopher Bobonich, "Persuasion, Compulsion and Freedom in Plato's *Laws*," CQ 41:2 (1991) and the responses to Bobonich in the literature. The *Statesman* contains four interesting contrasts between persuasion and coercion. There is enforced verses voluntarily accepted government (276e); in a democracy the poor can control the wealthy by force or by consent (292a); statesmen can persuade a city to adopt better laws, or they can simply force those laws on the people, just as a doctor can persuade or require his patient to take some treatment (296b); and the decision whether to govern through persuasion or force is to be made by the statesmen, not by the orators (304d). Yet these contrasts are minimized or made problematic here just as they are in the *Republic*. Another example: early in the dialogue, the Eleatic Stranger divides kings from tyrants depending on whether the people obey voluntarily or not (276e). Yet he appears to abandon this criterion of distinction later on, (i) saying that consent is irrelevant and that what matters is instead "the presence or absence of some science" (292c), and (ii) and later yet saying that governing according to law or not, or both, makes the substantive difference (301b). For other observations on the *Statesman* see Blondell's article cited at fn. 5.

³ Indeed some commentators do the same: Glenn Morrow starts his article, "Plato's Conception of Persuasion," *Philosophical Review* 62:2 (1953), with the sentence, "There are two ways, recognized in all ages, by which social order may be brought about: persuasion and compulsion" (234).

⁴ In his nine-book-long defense of justice, Socrates has his interlocutors assent to the following: should the city-in-speech not be concerned solely to maximize the happiness of its leaders, "we must compel and persuade the auxiliaries and guardians to follow our other policy" (421b); the erotic necessities are "probably better than the others at persuading and compelling the majority of people" (458d); and "the law's concern... [is] to contrive to spread happiness throughout the city by bringing the citizens into harmony with each other through persuasion or compulsion" (519e). The fact that there are *two* methods is emphasized by the speakers' listing of them rather than using an umbrella term.

persuaded, with disenfranchisement, fines, or death” (492d). The person raised without music “no longer makes any use of persuasion but bulls his way through every situation by force and savagery like a wild animal” (411d).⁵ These examples provide only a sample of the total number within the *Republic*.

These examples point to a larger phenomenon in the *Republic*, an apparent claim about how politics should work. That the city described by the interlocutors comes to require totalitarian and illiberal measures seems to show the importance to Plato of understanding mechanisms of control, one by speech and one by force. As the remainder of the paper will show, however, while the interlocutors do accept and speak of this traditional set of techniques of mastery, Plato does not.

Questioning the Binary in the Prologue

The *Republic* opens by dramatizing the apparent difference between coercion and persuasion. Polemarchus’ slave stops Socrates by grabbing his cloak; only after using force does he ask Socrates and Glaucon to wait a moment (327b). Polemarchus and friends arrive and state that given the truth of strength-in-numbers, Socrates and Glaucon will have to stay (327c). Socrates asks whether instead he could persuade them. Polemarchus intimates “no” by responding that they won’t listen. Polemarchus goes on to list the evening’s attractions. After hearing about them, Glaucon concludes that the two, it seems, will have to stay. Socrates agrees on the basis of Glaucon’s decision (328b).

The contrast between power and reason seems plain. Polemarchus foreshadows Thrasymachus’ claim that the strongest element of society makes laws and enforces them by “punish[ing] anyone who goes against [them]” (338e).⁶ Socrates’ fondness for discussion and verbal persuasion sits in meek contrast.

Already, however, the two types of recommendation (literal and figurative) lose their distinctiveness. First, Polemarchus refuses to listen to persuasion, but he doesn’t actually close his ears.⁷ He in fact says, “we won’t listen; you’d better make up your mind to that” (327d). He is giving the pair a reason not to waste their words; he appeals to their rational sensibility. Second, Polemarchus and his gang abandon their threat of overwhelming force. Through Adeimantus they appeal instead to the “well worth seeing” events of the evening: a new style of torch-race, dinner, an all-night festival, many more young men, and talking. Socrates already indicated in the dialogue’s first two sentences his great interest in these types of events. Socrates’ fondness for talking with the young is notorious. Third, once Socrates and Glaucon acquiesce, Cephalus and Socrates reprise reasons for Socrates staying: Cephalus wants Socrates’ philosophical company, given that the former can no longer walk to the agora; Cephalus tells Socrates to treat them all as “friends or relatives” to whom one would likely feel fondness or a sense of familial obligation; and Socrates expresses particular interest in “talking with the very old” (328d).

These three examples could show that events and interests simply overdetermined Socrates’ stay in the Piraeus. Yet their position at the beginning of this long dialogue

⁵ In the hypothetical defense of injustice, Adeimantus suggests that it is not easy to keep vice hidden, but that by “using persuasion in one place and force in another,” it can be done (365d). So that people will believe that “no citizen has ever hated another and that it’s impious to do so,” the people will be persuaded of the fact, the poets compelled to tell them of the fact (378c).

⁶ All translations come from the transl. by Grube, rev. by Reeve, text (Hackett, 1992).

⁷ And twice in Book I it is clear that one can hear and not be persuaded (345a, 348a).

encourages—even compels—a more substantive appraisal. The appraisal seems to be this: the obvious differences between violence and rational argument may be overshadowed by their similarities. For one thing, Socrates appears *persuaded* to stay: he makes no mention of punishments or threats, he seems quite curious about the events they will see, and the prospect of conversation surely appeals to him. For another, the grounds on which he was persuaded—his love of spectacles and of philosophy—seem, like Sophocles’ erotic desire mentioned the following page, to compel him. How could he have passed up the opportunity? We cannot tell, therefore, whether Polemarchus and others, the arguments presented, Socrates’ desires, or Socrates’ acquiescence to Glaucon’s decision, caused Socrates to stay. Of course nobody presented a rigorous account of why staying would promote the most happiness, but nor did anyone fetter Socrates and forcibly bring him along.

The remainder of the first chapter repeatedly obscures the boundary between persuasion and coercion. One example to pause on is Socrates’ and Thrasymachus’ interchange about the “shepherd.” Socrates’ redefines “shepherd” in as a selfless worker concerned only for the wellbeing of his flock, rather than as a lazy exploiter of his animal wards (*Rep.* 345cd). Thrasymachus does not accept this new definition,⁸ one Socrates puts forth to understand the nature of government and justice.⁹ The shepherd’s purpose is thus undetermined; even less determined—not even mentioned—is the shepherd’s method. Sheep do not respond to convincing words, but nor does driving them require violence. The shepherd’s means of directing his sheep, then, fall neither within the fully persuasive or the fully compelling modes. This particular ambiguity exists throughout the dialogues. First, in the *Sophist* the Athenian says there is such thing as “hunting” tame animals (*hēmerôn*), but deliberately ignores the non-human ones. His definition of hunting, anyway, is expansive: within the art of hunting tame humans the Athenian includes both the art of force (*biaion thēran*) and the art of persuasion (*pinthanourgikē*) (222bd). Accordingly, which one the shepherd would use is difficult to guess. Second, at *Critias* 109bc, Critias tells the story of the divine shepherds who “did not compel us by exerting bodily force on our bodies, as do shepherds who drive their flocks to pasture by blows, but rather, by what makes a creature turn course most easily; as they pursued their own plans, they directed us from the stern, as if they were applying to the soul the rudder of persuasion.”¹⁰ Yet Critias does not say here that only with force may a shepherd lead his herd. Presumably some shepherds would use non-violent measures—a sheep’s tameness specifically allows this. Probably shepherds use husbandry methods not easily described as one or the other. Third, to rely on the herdsman analogy in the *Statesman* to understand the *Republic*’s herdsman analogy (which would hardly clarify the issue anyway) would be to beg the question, since the *Statesman* is as concerned with understanding political mastery as the *Republic* is (esp. *Pol.* 261e, 275c-276e). In sum, then, the prominent analogy of the shepherd in the *Republic* and elsewhere undermines any easy distinction between coercion and persuasion.

Other examples are worth a brief mention. First, Thrasymachus, the fan of force, wants to interrupt the argument between Socrates and Polemarchus (336b). Operating within this same economy of violence, the interlocutors restrain him, as they do again later, that time to prevent him from leaving (344d). Yet Thrasymachus wanted to interrupt because he thought Socrates’

⁸ See Ruby Blondell, “From Fleece to Fabric: Weaving Culture in Plato’s *Statesman*,” *OSAP* 28 (2005), esp. 26-28.

⁹ This debate prefigures Glaucon’s shepherd of Gyges, barred by no laws or words (359d), and the reference to the sheepdogs analogous to the auxiliaries, who never disobey their shepherd (reason/guardian) (440bd).

¹⁰ Translated by D. Clay, in the Hackett edition.

discussants were being persuaded too easily, and Thrasymachus seemed to want himself to try persuading the group.

Next, after Thrasymachus forbids Socrates to explain the nature of justice by appeal to words like “the right” or the “advantageous,” Socrates asks whether if the explanation seems to a person to require such an appeal, “do you think him any less likely to give the answer that seems right to him, whether we forbid him or not?” (337c). The power of reason quakes little in the face of force.

Third, Socrates claims that the penalty for ignorance should be education (337d). As Socrates prizes learning, this so-called coercive penalty will be quite the opposite: a reward for expressing one’s ignorance. Socrates’ subversive response redoubles, when Thrasymachus agrees that education is an acceptable punishment given it accompanies an additional penalty, a fine. But the fine, everyone knows, cannot compel, since Socrates is famous for having no money (Glaucou’s promise to back Socrates up will change Socrates’ behavior little if Socrates does not value highly his friend’s money).

Fourth, Thrasymachus takes Socrates’ questions, which aim at rational agreement, to be deceitful and harmful (341a).¹¹ When Socrates tells Thrasymachus that the latter has failed to persuade the him, Thrasymachus expresses his consternation: “Am I to take my argument and pour it into your very soul?” (345b). Such an operation is impossible.¹²

Finally, the end of Book I reveals the section’s most significant coincidence of persuasion and compulsion. Socrates relates the physical and psychological turmoil Thrasymachus undergoes in acquiescence to the argument (350d). Thrasymachus even blushes. The force of the arguments, and his previous agreements to Socrates’ claims, require him, under threat of public inconsistency, to acknowledge that his first view has taken him around to just the opposite view. Agreement, hardly even persuasion, has compelled him: that is, his own desire for hardheaded rationality compels him to assent to Socrates’ antithesis.¹³ Yet a short while later Thrasymachus whines that he has agreed with Socrates only under duress; he feels the social pressure, believing he’d be hated for disagreeing with him (352b). Thrasymachus tries to redefine persuasion—or honor—as coercion.

Insofar as the first book of the *Republic* foreshadows the dialectics of the remaining ninety percent of the dialogue, the connection between persuasion and coercion here may be recapitulated throughout the sequel. Socrates’ claims about the virtuous man’s reasons for ruling bear out this claim.

Forcing Philosopher-Kings to Rule

¹¹ Adeimantus explains in more detail, how a person feels “led astray a little bit by the argument at every question” (487b)

¹² Yet Thrasymachus’ idea hints at the myriad discussions of educating through soul-shaping throughout the remainder of the dialogue (e.g., 366e, 377b, 395d, 409a, 430a, 536e). On the same point: Socrates appears to think that the best sort of persuasion occurs through seeking agreement with one another, done through the asking of questions (348b); yet Glaucon overturns this method at 358d, preferring yet again the method of “speaking at length”; he requests Socrates do the same. In a sort of mixed discussion method, Socrates does both: he speaks at length, and frequently seeks agreement and allows questions. The point here is that while long speeches seem “persuasive” and questions-and-answers compelling, long speeches may not be effective, and questions-and-answers are probably the most humane way to come to new understanding.

¹³ For an argument that philosophical discussion often is but need not be coercive in this way, see Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard Belknap, 1990), 2-5.

In Book I, Socrates and the interlocutors agree that “no one willingly chooses to rule and to take other people’s troubles in hand and straighten them out” (347e). In Book V, Socrates says that “until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prohibited from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils” (473d). In Book VII, Socrates and Glaucon agree that “what we’ll say to [the rulers], when we compel them to guard and care for others, will be just” (520a).¹⁴ In Book IX, the speakers conclude that “a person of understanding... [wi]ll avoid any public or private honor that might overthrow the established condition of his soul, ... [and so] may not be willing to [take part in politics] in his fatherland” (591b, 592a). Each of these lines appear to demonstrate that philosophers will lead only if compelled. As is famously the case, why they would need to be compelled, and how this compulsion would differ from persuasion, defies explanation. I only have space to hint at this conundrum.

Early in the *Republic* Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that a person rules only upon payment: by money, honor, or punishment. The best people, despising the first two, must take the third. Who will threaten—and therefore compel—the rulers? Neither the masses (389d) nor other rulers (403e). Eric Brown argues that the city founders will be responsible for this coercion, through some law they will promulgate.¹⁵ Yet this solution does not solve the puzzle. Such a law would be justified, Brown argues, because philosophers owe a debt to their city. Why the philosophers need legal commands to fulfill the founders’ wishes—that the city be as happy overall as possible—is unclear. Wouldn’t a recommendation, or a statement, suffice? Brown says that these laws need no threats; a philosopher-ruler will act like “perfectly trained dog [told] to roll over” (13). But then what part of a threat-free imperative provides the compulsion? Since people can be persuaded to follow laws, it is inadequate to say that all external authorities are coercive.

In fact, fear of being ruled by anyone worse seems to compel the best rulers to rule (347c).¹⁶ Yet in the next lines Plato creates an unacknowledged paradox. In a city of good men, the interlocutors agree, the citizens would fight not to rule (347d). Good people generally don’t want to rule, but will if they have to. But good people seem just those who *do not* fight. So either “fight” is meant metaphorically, or politics corrupts good men so much that they’re no longer good, or some paradox problem exists.

The deeper paradox connects directly with the problem of coercion versus persuasion, and with the way in which good people will come to be compelled themselves to rule. Socrates explains the conflict by citing two assumptions:

¹⁴ The parable of the cave, also in Book VII, waffles on the matter of persuasion and compulsion: the budding philosopher “was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up” (515c). It is simply never mentioned who does the compulsion, what the nature of that compulsion is, and how any of the experience in the cave can serve to generate reasons for a person who has seen the sun to return, under force of persuasion or coercion, to the cave.

¹⁵ Eric Brown, “Justice and Compulsion for Plato’s Philosopher-Rulers,” *AP* 20 (2000).

¹⁶ Just as the virtuous person exercises virtue in part because doing so benefits himself, and avoids vice because to do vice harms oneself, the virtuous person rules the city for the sake of his well-being. It is true that the best people may have no eros directing them to rule; but as we saw in the anecdote about Sophocles above, being motivated by erotic desire no more makes a person act freely than being caught under “many mad masters” (329d, 458d) does. The best people must receive an education that will allow them to see and act on reasons to turn from their erotic inclination toward contemplation of wisdom. If this happens, then rather than being compelled, a philosopher’s soul would have been properly molded in youth. The methods of education—repetition, ἐπιδημία (“charms”), play, musical and gymnastic imitation—are neither persuasive nor coercive. The best people will have been compelled only so far as they have been trained to see clearly their best interests.

- (1) the true ruler seeks others' advantage
- (2) ruling is a hassle

The argument is not yet complete. We must assume many suppressed premises.¹⁷ Given the assumptions, an autonomous city of good people cannot have a leadership, since nobody is compelled to rule. If a city must have a leadership, then some assumption must be revised. The choice between persuasion and compulsion fails to provide enough possibilities to make the city of good people a reality.

At the end of Book IX Socrates says that philosophers would not need to be compelled to rule in the model city, but they *would* need to be compelled in any actual city. The reasoning appears the reverse of Book I reasoning. In that earlier reasoning, in a non-ideal city virtuous people rule to avoid being ruled by worse others. In the later reasoning, however, in a non-ideal city the virtuous would *not* rule, because doing so would put them in contact with the less-good, corrupting their souls. In this second conception, a good person would either accept rule by a less-good person—which seems absurd—or would compel another equally good person to rule: leaving us in the Book I quandary.

The Book V case of philosopher-compulsion simply reiterates our existing findings. A true ruler, Socrates says, should be asked by those needing to be ruled to rule (489c). Yet the majority is not philosophical, disapproves of philosophy (494a), and so disapproves too of philosophical leaders. The problem is not critical at the moment of the dialogue, since “there isn’t now, hasn’t been in the past, nor ever will be in the future anyone with a character so unusual that he has been educated to virtue in spite of the contrary education he received from the mob” (492e). Allowing for a new city with better education, however, or at least segregated education, may allow more frequently those of a philosophic nature to prosper, but it doesn’t solve the dilemma. If everyone is good, then nobody will agree to rule; nobody will provide the compulsive force to make someone else rule; and, though in contradiction to Book I reasoning, it seems probable that nobody will *need* anybody else to rule.

Understanding how good rulers could be compelled to rule demands significant effort; the above paragraphs do not claim the impossibility of solution. They show instead how any attempt at solving the puzzle requires the reader to confront the coercion/persuasion dichotomy, and be willing to loosen, redefine, or discard it. This confrontation may lead not simply to some redefinition, though. It may require a reassessment of Plato’s goals in the *Republic*.

¹⁷ (3) all people in this city prefer to be ruled
(4) everybody believes that somebody must rule
(5) someone can be made to rule through persuasion or through compulsion
(6) persuasion is effective only if ruling seems in a person’s interest
(7) ruling seems to nobody to be in his own interest
(8) accordingly, there is fighting over who will rule
(9) fighting itself will not determine who will rule
(10) a person must be made to rule through compulsion
(11) fear or eros or the force of another person can compel a person
(12) fear compels only if one will be ruled by worse people
(13) no potential ruler in this city would be a worse person
(14) so fear does not compel
(15) if eros compelled, then there would be no fighting
(16) eros does not compel in this case
(17) therefore, compulsion must be external

Reasons for Upsetting a Popular Dichotomy

Many of the following possibilities can coexist; some might be false; others may play a minor role in the dialogue whereas yet others may provide a running theme throughout the dialogue. None claim that undermining the persuasion/coercion dichotomy is Plato's primary or sole goal in the *Republic*. Each, however, demands substantial reconsideration of at least subsidiary goals.

1. Plato believes no moral difference exists between in the political use of force and of persuasion. Only efficacy differentiates. Efficacy depends on human nature and on the education regime.
2. A moral difference does exist, but it matters little compared to the true criterion of a good regime: with what knowledge it acts.
3. The *Republic* is aporetic with respect to this dichotomy, and so it demonstrates how political philosophy needs a more systematic inquiry into the ways of mastering people. The interlocutors' easy assent into the conventional rhetorical dichotomy has led them to make confusing and possibly self-undermining claims.
4. Plato questions the existence of free will by showing how all persuasion is coercion: one can hardly "choose" to have some particular belief.
5. Alternatively, Plato sanitizes coercion by subsuming it under persuasion.
6. The value of effective childhood education to those wanting to avoid coercion as much as possible becomes clear.
7. The city-in-speech has only persuasive effect, not a coercive one. That means its rules guide behavior only if someone, upon being convinced by the value of the city-in-speech, decides to implement the laws. A model of a city in heaven can enforce no rules on those living on earth (592b).
8. We should reflect how (i) in the city for pigs, there is neither persuasion nor coercion (369c-372d); (ii) in Glaucon's hypothetical city, power is replaced (through persuasion?) by legally-enforced agreements not to do injustice to others (358e-359b); and (iii) in Kallipolis there is elaborate education which is itself still inadequate for handling everybody.
9. Words and the psychological entities with which they interact have power. Obversely, one of the best ways to compel somebody is to use the lesson of rhetoric: to appreciate and take advantage of a person's particular characterological qualities.