



Comments on Weiss: The Unjust Philosophers of Republic 7

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Comments on “The Unjust Philosophers of *Rep. 7*”

Russell E. Jones

I cannot possibly hope, in such a brief commentary, to do justice to Professor Weiss’s rich and in many ways compelling account of the philosopher-rulers in *Republic 7*. So, I am going to focus rather narrowly on her claim that the philosophers are compelled to share in the duties of ruling in a strong sense of *compelled*: externally compelled, compelled by someone or some threat rather than by force of argument or the requirements of justice. This claim runs counter to the bulk of scholarship on the issue, and on it depend many of the interesting payoffs we are supposed to get from Weiss’s paper. I am not a true blue defender of the traditional lines of interpretation, and I will not insist that they are stronger than the competing view we now have on offer. But I do want to make a case that they have not yet been expelled from the competition, at least insofar as it comes to determining the sort of compulsion at work in *Republic 7*.

Weiss gives three kinds of evidence that ‘ἀναγκάζω’ and its cognates with respect to the philosophers of *Republic 7* should be taken in its strongest sense: that of force or compulsion with an underlying threat of repercussions in case of disobedience. First, there is evidence from the allegory of the Cave; second, “how unambiguously and explicitly the philosophers’ unwillingness to return to the Cave is expressed”; and third, “the sheer frequency of references to compulsion”. (WEISS DRAFT, 26)

The second of these I will ignore for the sake of space, and because I think it largely stands or falls with the things I will explicitly address. The last of these, the sheer frequency of references to compulsion, fails to persuade me. Presumably, this means the sheer frequency of ‘ἀναγκάζω’ and its cognates (perhaps also ‘ἔλκω’ and its cognates), which Weiss is taking to refer to compulsion in its strongest sense. But while frequent use may highlight the importance of ‘ἀναγκάζω’ and its cognates in this context, frequent use alone does little or nothing to determine the meaning. The meaning is whatever the meaning is. Frequent use gives us plenty of data points that help us discover that meaning, but it does not itself determine meaning.

The evidence from the allegory of the Cave is more promising, for clearly the stronger sense of compulsion is at work there. At 515c7, we are to imagine a prisoner who is forced (“ἀναγκάζοιτο”) to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light. When asked about the statues, he is forced (515d5; “ἀναγκάζοι”) to answer, though he cannot see them clearly. He is then forced (515e1; “ἀναγκάζοι”) to look at the fire, which is painful and dazzling. That these occurrences of ‘ἀναγκάζω’ have this sense is confirmed by the uses of ‘ἔλκω’ which follow. We are to imagine that the prisoner is dragged by force (515e6; “ἔλκοι τις αὐτὸν βίᾳ”) up the path and dragged out (515e8; “ἐξελκύσειεν”) into the sunlight. Something very close to this sense is still in view at 519c9, where Socrates says that it is their job as founders of the city to force (“ἀναγκάσαι”) the best natures to ascend and see the good. Evidently there is forcible compulsion when it comes to the education of the philosophers.

But this is not the only sense of ‘ἀναγκάζω’ and its cognates, or even the only sense available in the immediate context. Besides a standard broadly logical sense,¹ there are at least two other senses of ‘ἀναγκάζω’ and its cognates that Plato uses. One sense is that of compelling by argument. So, for example, at *Gorgias* 472b3-4 Socrates tells Polus, “Nevertheless, though I’m only one person, I don’t agree with you. You don’t compel me (οὐ γάρ με σὺ ἀναγκάζεις).” (Zeyl trans.) And we have this sense quite explicitly at *Rep.* 611b9-10: “Yet our recent argument and others as well compel us (καὶ ὁ ἄρτι λόγος καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι ἀναγκάσειαν ἄν) to believe that the soul is immortal.”² We could easily read certain instances in *Republic 7* as having this sense. Consider 521b7, which might be thought to be key evidence for reading ‘ἀναγκάζω’ in the strongest sense:

Then who will you compel (Τίνας οὖν ἄλλους ἀναγκάσεις) to become guardians of the city, if not those who have the best understanding of what matters for good government and who have other honors than political ones, and a better life as well?

Nothing requires reading this as compulsion by force rather than compulsion by argument, even though compulsion by force has been in play earlier in *Republic 7*. Nor is understanding compulsion in this way, despite the earlier uses of compulsion by force, illegitimate or *ad hoc*; there is a straightforward explanation available for such a shift (which I will propose momentarily). Likewise for 520a6-b1:

¹ At 516b8, Glaucon says, “Necessarily so (Ἀναγκαῖον)” in response to Socrates’ claim that eventually the prisoner will come to be able to see the sun itself. This represents a broadly logical sense of the term which is frequent in Plato, a way of saying that what we are saying now follows from what we were saying before. This is clearly the sense at 519b7-8: “Then isn’t it likely, and necessary given the things said before, that . . . (τόδε οὐκ εἰκός . . . καὶ ἀνάγκη ἐκ τῶν προειρημένων . . .).” This is also the sense at 520d4: “A city whose prospective rulers are least eager to rule must of necessity (ἀνάγκη) be most free from civil war.” See also 339e5.

² All translations of the *Republic* are by Grube/Reeve.

Observe, then, Glaucon, that we won't be doing an injustice to those who've become philosophers in our city and that what we'll say to them, when we compel them (προσαναγκάζοντες)³ to guard and care for the others, will be just.⁴

The final sense of 'ἀναγκάζω' and its cognates in Plato to which I want to call attention is something like hypothetical necessity: Assuming that one wants *x*, then one must take or do *y* as well. This sense is apparent in two passages from the *Phaedo*. At 60b7, Socrates says, "If someone pursues and catches the one [pleasure], he is almost always bound to catch the other [pain] also (ἐὰν δέ τις διώκη τὸ ἕτερον καὶ λαμβάνη, σχεδόν τι ἀναγκάζεσθαι ἀεὶ λαμβάνειν καὶ τὸ ἕτερον)." (Grube trans. with modifications) That is to say, someone could avoid pursuing pleasure, but insofar as he does pursue pleasure, he is pretty much guaranteed to catch some pain in the process. The second passage in the *Phaedo*, 66b-67b, employs several of the above senses,⁵ including something like hypothetical necessity at 67a2-4:

³ Notice that "προσαναγκάζοντες" need not here be rendered, "when . . .", restricting the sense to a temporal one. More neutrally, we can translate, "what we will say to them, compelling them to guard and care for the others, will be just." But this more neutral translation allows us to see a broader range of possible senses of the participial phrase. For instance, we might well read this as, "what we will say to them, in compelling them to guard and care for the others, will be just." But this reading suggests that the saying is the compulsion. That is, the argument in b1-d5, following the "We'll say that . . ." of b1, is the compulsion. Weiss argues that it would not in fact compel because it is obviously unsound. It is unclear to me, though, that we should make much of this. For instance, 611b9-10 (cited above) says that, "Our recent argument and others as well compel us." But 'our recent argument' refers to the argument of 608d-611a, an argument which has not been well received by commentators. Annas (1981, 345) calls it "one of the few really embarrassingly bad arguments in Plato, and though Glaucon is quickly satisfied with it [another clear parallel to 520b-d], we have good reason not to be." And the 'others as well' no doubt refers to – though perhaps not exclusively to – the arguments in the *Phaedo*, which have often received similar evaluations from commentators. I do not think we should be quick to make inferences from the presence of what we take to be obviously unsound arguments.

⁴ For 'προσαναγκάζω' with this sense, compare *Philebus* 13b2-3: ". . . though you would admit that they are unlike, if someone compelled you by argument (τῷ λόγῳ εἴ τις σε προσαναγκάζοι)."

⁵ The other occurrences in this passage include: (66b1) "All these things will necessarily (ἀνάγκη) make the true philosophers believe and say to each other something like this. . ."; (66b8) "The body keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture (διὰ τὴν ἀναγκαίαν τροφήν)"; (66d1) "It is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth

While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must (ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν ὁμιλῶμεν τῷ σώματι μηδὲ κοινωνῶμεν, ὅτι μὴ πᾶσα ἀνάγκη). (Grube trans.)

That is to say, if we want to get closest to knowledge in this life, we should avoid association with the body except insofar as we are compelled to associate with it in order to keep it functioning, so that we may continue to live and pursue knowledge. We must feed it and rest it if we are to be in any condition to practice philosophy.⁶

We could easily read certain instances in *Republic 7* as having this sense. Consider 540b3-5: “When his turn comes, he must labor in politics and rule for the city’s sake, not as if he were doing something fine, but rather something that has to be done (οὐχ ὡς καλόν τι ἀλλ’ ὡς ἀναγκαῖον πράττοντας).” Just as someone who regards pleasure or knowledge as something fine should recognize that one must accept pain or attending to the needs of the body in order to achieve these fine things, so we may read this passage as saying that the philosophers regard contemplation as something fine, but recognize that they must accept a share of

(τὰ δὲ χρήματα ἀναγκαζόμεθα κτᾶσθαι διὰ τὸ σῶμα, δουλεύοντες τῇ τούτου θεραπείᾳ) . . .”; (67b3) “Such are the things that all those who love learning in the proper manner must (ἀναγκαῖον) say to one another and believe.” (Grube trans.) I suggest that the variety of uses in this passage should alleviate concerns about finding a variety of uses in *Republic 7* as well.

In addition, there is the ‘ἀπαλλακτέον’ of 66e1, which clearly has a conditional sense in the context – “If we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body . . .” – and may provide a parallel to ‘καταβατέον’ at *Rep.* 520c1. In the latter case, the context is not clearly conditional, and the ‘οὐδ’ does indicate that the justification is the argument that has preceded, which concerns the debt the philosophers owe. But the ‘γὰρ’ of the following sentence suggests that what comes next provides justification as well. What comes next is a description of how the city will be better ruled and so better off, “for you and for us.” (c6) This sort of city might be thought to provide a precondition of the contemplative life, and so in the overall context, ‘καταβατέον’ may here function very much like ‘ἀπαλλακτέον’ at 66e1: If we are ever to engage in the contemplative life, then we must take our turn ruling the city, lest a necessary condition for engaging in the contemplative life – a well-functioning city – vanish.

⁶ For this sense, see also *Apology* 32a1: “A man who really fights for justice must (ἀλλ’ ἀναγκαῖον ἐστὶ τὸν τῷ ὄντι μαχοῦμενον ὑπὲρ τοῦ δικαίου) lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.” (Grube trans.)

ruling the city in order to maintain the conditions for contemplation. Likewise for Glaucon's claim at 520e1-2: "Each of them will certainly go to rule as to something compulsory (ὡς ἐπ' ἀναγκαῖον)."⁷

So, here is a suggestion that maintains the aspect of the traditional account that has it that the philosophers will go to rule without external forcible compulsion.⁸ The education of the philosophers, as represented in the Cave and perhaps several other passages,⁹ does involve some external compulsion. Until their studies are complete, the future philosophers are in no position to determine the course of their education, or even whether or not they should embark on a course of education at all. But after their studies are complete, they are in a position to recognize that the well-functioning of the city depends on the rule of the best (themselves), and that the favorable conditions for their contemplation (sufficient food, clothing, protection, etc. supplied by others) depend on the well-functioning of the city. Thus, they will go to rule, not as something most desirable in itself, but as the maintenance of the conditions they need to live the contemplative life. This is not to go to ruling as someone externally compelled, but as someone who would prefer, all other things being equal, to be engaging in contemplation. But all other

⁷ See also 347d1, 358c4, 465c3.

⁸ Though it may not easily accommodate aspects of traditional accounts which have it that the philosophers go to ruling as something fine (540b4 is a tough hurdle for such a position to clear), or pleasant, or perhaps even intrinsically valuable. At the very least, the philosophers think that there is a more pleasant, more valuable activity that they prefer to ruling: contemplation.

⁹ I have in mind 519c9, 539e3, and 540a7, as well as perhaps some of the talk of "compulsory subjects" in between (e.g., 525b4, 537b2).

things are not equal, for contemplation requires the maintenance of certain conditions, and only the philosophers can perform that maintenance.¹⁰

Now, there are still difficulties surrounding this sort of solution. One difficulty is that it may simply push the problem of external compulsion down a level. Socrates envisions rule by a group of philosophers, each of whom takes her turn at ruling. But the requirement that some philosopher rule at all times does not necessitate any given philosopher ruling at any time. So why shouldn't one member of the group simply refuse to do her share of ruling? So long as the others pick up the slack, the free-rider will still be able to achieve the life of contemplation, and full-time, at that. Unless, that is, her fellow philosophers externally compel her, perhaps by threatening to cut off her resources or expel her from the city. And so there is still external compulsion for the individual, though it comes from within the group of philosophers rather than from without. Since each philosopher will have the same motivations as any other, they will all need to be under threat from the rest of the group. But now we are effectively back to Professor Weiss's position.

I do not see this as a particularly pressing problem. For each of the philosophers will recognize that they are all in exactly the same boat, and the rational thing for each to do to guarantee that they get as much as possible of what they want – time for contemplation – is to accept an equal share of the ruling duties.

¹⁰ It should be obvious in outline, at least, how this sort of reading would handle the issue I set aside at the outset: the philosophers' explicit unwillingness to return to the Cave and rule. In one sense, they are unwilling to rule, as they do not see ruling as valuable as an end. In another sense, they are willing to rule, as they see it as necessary for achieving the end(s) they value and so do choose to engage in it.

A bigger problem, in my view, is one that Weiss has already anticipated in her paper, and we may get at it by taking a page from Aristotle:

Hence these people's life does not need pleasure to be added [to virtuous activity] as some sort of extra decoration; rather, it has its pleasure within itself. For besides the reasons already given, someone who does not enjoy fine actions is not good; **for no one would call a person just, for instance, if he did not enjoy doing just actions**, or generous if he did not enjoy generous actions, and similarly for the other virtues. If this is so, actions in accord with the virtues are pleasant in their own right. (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.8 1099a15-21, Irwin trans., emphasis mine)

If Aristotle is correct, then it looks as if the philosophers, if they are just, should engage in the activity of ruling with relish, since it will be a pleasant expression of their virtuous character. At least, given the challenge in Book 2 to show that justice is both good in itself and good for its consequences, it seems that Socrates must show that ruling is not good *merely* for its consequences. Insofar as the philosophers value justice (as evidenced by their valuation of the just act of ruling) merely for its consequences, they are failing to value justice as it ought to be valued, and therefore failing to be just.

This does seem to me to be a particularly pressing problem, and it is an issue to which Weiss gives some attention at the end of the paper. Part of what she says depends on what I hope to have shown to be a reading of compulsion in these passages which is open to alternative readings. For instance, she writes (27 IN THE DRAFT), "One thing we do know, however, is that they cannot be trusted to give up what they prefer to be doing – contemplating the Forms – on their own just 'for the sake of the city'." On the alternative reading I have offered, this is true under one interpretation and false under another. It is true that the philosophers do not give up contemplation for the sake of the city as an ultimate end, but for the sake of the

city as a necessary condition of their continued contemplation. But they can be trusted to do the latter, for they will recognize its necessity for achieving their ultimate ends. It is not at all clear to me that lack of concern for the others in the city shows them up as unjust; that is, it is not at all clear to me that this shows them up as unjust on a Platonic conception of justice. The challenge of the *Republic* is to show that my justice is good for *me*, not that it is good for others whose interests I care about precisely because I am just. So why should we require that the philosophers have as ultimate ends something other than their own fullest happiness? It is enough to show that they will do their job of ruling the city because it is compatible with, even necessary for, those ends.

None of this goes so far as to show how ruling could be good both in itself and for its consequences,¹¹ but it does suggest where we might have room to maneuver within the overall framework of the *Republic* to maintain the justice of the philosophers. I do not take anything I have said here to be a knock-down argument against Weiss. Indeed, I have a good deal of sympathy for her position. What I hope to have done is to focus the discussion on the central issue. The central issue is not how many times the language of compulsion comes up in *Republic 7*, nor even that the Cave imposes on us a certain understanding of compulsion. Given the many different varieties of compulsion that could be at issue, we cannot move from a definitive position about these things to an evaluation of the justice of the philosophers. Rather, we should go the other way around, asking first whether the

¹¹ Should every act/state that is just be good both in itself and for its consequences? Maybe Plato requires only that justice as a whole will be good for its possessor both in itself and for its consequences.

general depiction of the philosophers is consistent with taking them to be just in the context of the overall project of the *Republic*, and then using our answer to determine more precisely the sense of compulsion at work in the specific passages of *Republic* 7. Whether Weiss's answer is right in the end, I am not sure. But I do contend that this is the proper way to approach the question.¹²

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