ON THE MOST DISORDERED SOUL

“No one is willing to tell falsehoods to the most important part of himself about the most important thing, but of all places he is most afraid to have falsehood there.... To be false to one's soul about the things that are, to be ignorant and to have and hold falsehood there, is what everyone would, least of all, accept, for everyone hates a falsehood in that place most of all.”

Plato, Republic, II (382a-b).

Reading Plato is ever soul-wrenching and, at the same time, soul-forming. When I come, with a class, to a favorite passage well-marked in my text, I read it again. I shake my head. “Has anyone ever said it better?” I wonder, sometimes out-loud. How is it that something written over two thousand years ago still strikes our souls in a way little else does? Is it because, all claims to the contrary, human nature really has not changed? Some suspect that the only way they can escape the truths found in Plato is to insist that we no longer have the same human nature. We are new men.

I read the passage cited from the end of the Book II of the Republic. The text does not state what is affirmed as a question but as a fact. In the most important part of our souls, no one wants to lie to himself about the most important thing of existence. It seems so obvious. Why would we want to be ignorant of what is really important to his very being? We hate a lie in our soul about the things that are.

And yet, we suspect that there are people who do so lie to themselves. We do so ourselves sometimes. The last words of the Lesser Hippias read: “But if you wise men are going to do it (waver), too—that means something terrible for us (ordinary folks), if
we can’t stop our wavering even after we’ve put ourselves in your company” (376b). Can “terrible” things come from men said to be “wise?”

What the wise men were “wavering” about was whether or not to approve someone who “voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust.” These same “wise” men, we now call them professors and experts, evidently taught others that sometimes it is right to do wrong. Such a teaching Socrates himself never countenanced. Indeed, his affirmation, in the Apology and in the Crito, that it is never right to do wrong is the basis of our civilization, indeed of any civilization worthy of our kind.

At the beginning of this same Book II of the Republic, the book that tells us that our polity is a reflection of our soul, Glaucon, Plato’s brother, directs to Socrates a very blunt question: “Tell me, do you think there is a kind of good we welcome, not because we desire what comes from it, but because we welcome it for its own sake—joy, for example, and all the harmless pleasures that have no results beyond the joy of having them?” (357b). Socrates thinks that there is. But on mulling over the profundity of the question, we can see why Socrates had so much esteem for Glaucon. He had the rare quality of intellectual courage to insist on Socrates providing an answer that he understood, an answer that did not lead to despair.

What is remarkable about the inquiry of Glaucon is the example that that he gives of a good that we welcome for its own sake and not because we get something else for it. The first thing Glaucon mentions, besides other harmless pleasures, is “joy.” “Joy” of course, is not exactly a thing that someone just gives to us. Joy is rather in the order of what happens to us when we receive something good, love for example. Joy, as Pieper
once said, is not something we go out to achieve. Rather it is the result of our receiving what is good. Both joy and peace are results, not things we pursue as such.

But the title of this essay has to do with the “most disordered” soul. And that soul is the one that lies to itself about what is. It is the soul that does not want to know the truth, or even more basically that there be a truth. It suspects that truth will demand something of us, something that we want to blind ourselves about so we can do what we want. We “voluntarily” miss the mark and do what is shameful, knowing it is so, but convincing ourselves that it is good for us. We lie to ourselves, even in our own souls, about the truth of things.

Now we might think, on reading such lines, that if we do what is right and noble, if we accept what is true, everyone will praise us and love us. Speaking of the so-called second ring of Gyges, the one that the good man wears but does not do evil even if he can, Glaucon says, “The extreme of injustice is to be believed to be just without being just. And our completely unjust person must be given complete injustice; nothing may be subtracted from it. We must allow that, while doing the greatest injustice, he has, none the less, provided himself with the greatest reputation for justice” (361a). This is a remarkable passage.

On reading this passage, we wonder: “Is Glaucon here talking about things we know?” Are great reputations for justice granted among us to those who do or propose maximally unjust things? Do we have “lies” in our souls about the things that are? Are we a society full of those who “waiver” about what is good, what is evil?

“Tell me, do you think there is a kind of good we desire not because of what comes from it, but because we welcome it for its own sake?”
The most disordered and the most dangerous soul is the one who lies to himself about *what is*. The most disordered society is the one that praises the most disordered soul when it has achieved leadership. The ultimate battles are always first fought out in the soul, usually one’s own, before they appear about the surface in the city.