

varia

Sophie Bourgault: « **Prolegomena to a rehabilitation of Platonic moderation** »

« it is impossible for a city to honor wealth and at the same time for its citizens to acquire moderation. » (Plato, Republic 555d)

When United States President Obama offered his inaugural address to an attentive national and international audience in January 2009, he did not hesitate to identify excessive acquisitiveness as a central reason behind the economic crisis. Indeed, he noted that America's woes were the consequence of « greed and irresponsibility » – an observation he also made earlier when unveiling his *Recovery and Reinvestment Plan*.¹ Judging from the public mood and the relatively warm response to the capping of salaries of certain bank executives, Obama's conclusions seem commonly embraced. Publicly at least, few would dare claim that the greed of traders and bankers (or that of the average consumer) are *necessarily* good for society. And how many would quarrel with the suggestion that there may be something morally suspect about top CEOs earning 431 times more money than an average worker?² If Ryan Balot could write, in 2001, that the idea of « individual greed [being] good for society at large has had remarkable staying-power in our culture³ », the events of the last two years may have – temporarily at least – shaken that conviction.

Now, even if many of us would readily label greed a vice, few seem ready to endorse its corresponding virtue: moderation.⁴ If greed is out, moderation is not in – and this is true for both the general public and academia. Apart from green political theorists and a handful of economists and theologians⁵, the virtue of moderation has attracted little

¹ www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/01/08/Transcript_of_Obama_speech_on_economy/UPI-61161231435966 (accessed Jan.13th, 2009). For the inaugural address, see www.cbc.ca/world/story/2009/01/20/obama-speech-text.html (accessed Jan.20th, 2009).

² S. Hamilton & A. Micklethwait, *Greed and Corporate Failure*, New York, Macmillan, 2006, p. 4.

³ R. Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 20.

⁴ Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, sees moderation as the opposite of greed and gluttony.

⁵ J. A. Nash, « On the Subversive Virtue: Frugality? », dans D. Crocker & T. Linden (éds.), *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice and Global Stewardship*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1998 ; A.

attention on the part of social scientists. The reasons for this neglect are multiple and will be discussed below, but one fairly obvious reason readily comes to mind. If President Obama was willing to waive his finger at Wall Street and at average Americans who purchased houses they could not afford, he still celebrated the market as « the greatest creator of wealth » and called for « a new foundation for *growth* »⁶. If moderation is partially about the restraining of unnecessary desires for material commodities, it is no wonder that the virtue is quickly dismissed on the basis of its incompatibility with market capitalism and its gospel of growth. Only a very naïve social scientist – so the argument goes – could possibly call for a curbing of our appetites.

The purpose of this paper is to entertain, for a moment, this naïve idea, and to take seriously the virtue of moderation. I do so by turning, more specifically, to Plato's understanding of *sophrosyne* – which has been variously translated as self-control, self-knowledge, prudence, harmony, and, of course, moderation. A close study of Platonic *sophrosyne* (literally, « soundness of mind ») is especially pertinent not only in light of our economic woes, but also because it is a fairly neglected area of Plato scholarship. Indeed, if political theorists have paid a remarkable amount of attention to the Platonic virtue of courage⁷, moderation has not been the object of much study. Apart from a few articles devoted to the early dialogue *Charmides*, there has not been any sustained study of Platonic moderation in political theory. And yet, Ernest Barker considers *sophrosyne* to be « the motive of the whole State in the *Laws*⁸ », Leo Strauss sums up the entire *Republic* as « an act of moderation⁹ », Werner Jaeger regards moderation as the focal point of Plato's *paideia*¹⁰, Hannah Arendt refers to it as « one of the political virtues par excellence¹¹ », and R.F. Stalley insists that *sophrosyne* is « the *raison d'être* » of all institutions described in the *Laws*.¹² If moderation is so central, why is it so rarely discussed? The first part of this paper will suggest possible reasons for this neglect, while simultaneously fleshing out what Plato's *sophrosyne* is largely about: self-control and self-knowledge.¹³ I object to the overly conservative and ascetic labels attached to *sophrosyne*, since these are regrettable obstacles to an appreciation of the

Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, London, Routledge, 2000 ; M. De Geus, *The End of Over-Consumption. Towards a Lifestyle of Moderation and Self-restraint*, Utrecht, International Books, 2003.

⁶ Inaugural address: see note above (my italics).

⁷ L. Craig, *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's Republic*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994; L. Rabieh, *Plato and the Virtue of Courage*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006; T. Berns, L. Blésin & G. Jeanmart, *Du courage. Une histoire philosophique*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2010.

⁸ E. Barker, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, New York, Dover, 1959, p. 117.

⁹ L. Strauss, *City and Man*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 64.

¹⁰ W. Jaeger, *Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. III, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 226.

¹¹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 191.

¹² R. F. Stalley, *An Introduction to Plato's Laws*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1983, p. 56.

potentially subversive politics that flow out of the ideal of moderation. In the second part, I will consider what realizing moderation would entail politically, and then conclude by briefly highlighting one of the many insights we could draw from Plato's reflections.

As I noted above, apologists for moderation, albeit few, are not inexistent; some can be found in the ranks of green theorists, political economists, and theologians. Now, if green political theorists and left-leaning critics of greed or over-consumption tend to turn to state regulation when it is time to put forward solutions, theologians and social conservatives often opt to turn inward, to the soul. As I have just phrased them, these two types of « solutions » are, undoubtedly, oversimplified and overly strict archetypical positions. But they are still convenient for our purposes here, in that they tend to subsume emblematic « solutions » typically proposed, respectively, by the left and by the right. Now, Plato belongs neither to the left nor to the right. As this paper underscores, one of the insights that we ought to gather from Plato's reflections on moderation is that state intervention without moral reform (*and vice-versa*) is insufficient, if not pointless. From a Platonic perspective, our economic crisis is the unsurprising consequence of a spectacular failure in law making *and* of a failure in character.

Priests, sheep, chaste women and last men. Moderation and its critics

« *small people need small virtues...*¹⁴ »

The word *sophrosyne* represents a challenge to translators. According to the classicist Arthur Adkins, no English word is adequate to capture *sophrosyne's* wide-ranging meaning.¹⁵ T. G. Tuckey, in his classic translation of Plato's *Charmides*, similarly emphasizes that this curious Greek word « cannot be translated by any one word in English. It means wisdom, discretion, self-respect, moderation, chastity, temperance¹⁶. » Similarly, Marie-France Hazebroucq observes that: « la notion est

¹³ The importance and interconnectedness of these two definitions are underscored in the title of Helen North's classic text on the subject: *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (1966).

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, Penguin, 1966, p. 68.

¹⁵ A. Adkins, « *Polu pragmosune* and "Minding One's Own Business": A Study in Greek Social and Political Values », *Classical Philology*, 71(4), 1976, p. 302.

¹⁶ T. G. Tuckey, *Plato's Charmides*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1951, p. 8-9.

ambivalente, sujette à des jugements contradictoires : la définir est redoutable¹⁷. » Adding another dimension to our challenge is the fact that Plato deals with moderation from considerably different angles throughout his corpus: for instance, while the *Charmides* puts great emphasis on self-knowledge, the *Republic* stresses obedience, and the *Gorgias* underscores – within a harsh critique of Athenians' lust for power – the need for self-control. Now, we may do well to use the term moderation and to avoid using « temperance » as an English rendering (as is increasingly done by English translators) – for « temperance » naturally raises in the contemporary reader's mind a host of associations with turn-of-century campaigns for prohibition. It is thanks to Christian temperance movements and also to the lasting impact of medieval Christian thought, that the idea of temperance/moderation has come to be associated, quite narrowly, with asceticism or abstinence – whether it be from alcohol or sex. I believe that it is such narrow reading that is partially responsible for the neglect of the virtue of moderation: few ideas seem to be as unpalatable to the average North American baby-boomer as abstinence.

The association made between moderation and asceticism is not, of course, totally unjustified. In the *City of God*, Augustine insisted that the Greek term *sophrosyne* referred above all to an individual's struggle against the flesh and the carnal passions (XIX, 4), and similarly, Aquinas' treatment of *temperantia* in the *Summa Theologica* (a treatment heavily inspired by Aristotle) gave much weight to humility and chastity. But this is not to say that Christian *temperantia* only comes down to abstinence and a quest for purity. Indeed, there is a lot more to both Christian and Platonic moderation than bodily discipline: the virtue is imbued with complex cognitive and political dimensions.¹⁸ Scholars' blindness to moderation's complexity may be a result of the popularity of Friedrich Nietzsche – who famously attributed to both Plato and Christianity a deep hatred of the body. Now, although Nietzsche's reading of Plato has been disputed by many¹⁹, there is still a residual tendency amongst political theorists to associate Plato with asceticism or at least, with a tyrannical « hyper rationalism ». One could think of the work of the late Hannah Arendt, or that of Martha Nussbaum, who presents, in her *Fragility of Goodness*, quite an ascetic reading of the *Republic* and

¹⁷ M.-F. Hazebroucq, *La folie humaine et ses remèdes. Charmide ou de la modération*, Paris, Vrin, 1997, p. 10.

¹⁸ For instance, we will note below the political consequences of the love of money. On that issue, Plato and the Bible speak with one voice: the love of money is considered to be a great source of evil. The most famous passage is 1 Timothy 6:9-11. See also Hebrews 13:5; James 5: 1-6; Ecclesiastes 5:10; Luke 12:15.

¹⁹ C. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996; W. Brown, « "Supposing Truth Were a Woman..." Plato's Subversion of Masculine Discourse », *Political Theory*, 16(4), 1988, p. 594-616.

who suggests that Aristotle has a much richer perspective on *sophrosyne* than Plato.²⁰ As we will see below, the latter claim is problematic – since Aristotle has, unlike Plato, a narrow and heavily gendered account of *sophrosyne*.

Contra Nietzsche and Nussbaum, Platonic *sophrosyne* is not the virtue of body-haters. Indubitably, the virtue does entail a *restraining* of bodily desires (this is one of its crucial components), but before deriving from this an ascetic ethical project we must see what this restraining entails and what else moderation is about. Plato proposes several definitions of *sophrosyne* throughout his dialogues²¹, but four of these definitions are particularly recurrent. The first has to do with the control of appetites and desires (i.e. self-control).²² This control of appetites is what Plato sometimes refers to as « the popular definition », a definition that is particularly emphasized in the *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. Indeed, when Callicles asks Socrates to define what he means by a man who possesses « self-rule », the latter replies: « Nothing subtle, merely the general definition... having mastery over [one's] own pleasures and desires » (*Gorgias* 491d). Similarly, in the *Republic*, Socrates asserts that « for the majority of people », moderation is the control of the desires for drink, sex and food (389d). That this definition of *sophrosyne* should be labelled « popular » should not, however, be taken as suggesting that it would only apply to the *demos*: moderation must « spread throughout the whole » (*Republic* 431e).

Now, none of this involves a forceful repression of the « multi-headed beast » so vividly described in Book IX of the *Republic*. What moderation entails is a healthy regulation of our passions – which ought to be achieved not by force but by education and good

²⁰ M. Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 151-153, 308-309. Compare with p. 204 for a more subtle treatment. See also H. Arendt, « Philosophy and Politics », *Social Research*, 57(1), 1990 ; *Between Past and Present*, New York, Penguin, 2006.

²¹ In the *Charmides*, *sophrosyne* has much to do with self-knowledge, whereas in the *Philebus*, it is tied to the control of appetites (45d). In the *Republic*, it refers at once to obedience to rulers, to the restraining of one's appetites, and to harmony (between parts of the soul and the state). In the *Gorgias* (491d), the *Phaedo* (69d) and the *Symposium* (196c), Plato focuses largely (albeit not solely) on the control of appetites and passions. In the *Phaedrus*, *sophrosyne* is defined both as « sound-mindedness » (237e) and as the control of appetites (256). In the *Laws*, Plato draws on several meanings, but puts much emphasis on harmony and controlled appetites. As will become clear over the course of the following pages, this paper largely takes for granted the appropriateness of using a unitarian interpretation of Plato. Some readers will (rightly) fault me for overlooking many important differences in the treatment of moderation offered in distinct dialogues. But given that the task of this present paper is to offer a prolegomena to a rehabilitation of moderation, offering a brief survey of what is said about moderation all over the corpus seems appropriate. In future work, I intend to delve more deeply into each dialogue.

²² The others are: concord/harmony, self-knowledge and obedience (with some overlap between these meanings). Although this paper will focus more on self-control, self-knowledge and harmony, I will also say a few words later about obedience.

habits. To be truly moderate, an individual's battle against the flesh (so vividly described by the likes of Augustine) must *not* remain a battle. Socrates repeatedly insists that *sophrosyne* does not call for a tyranny of reason over the appetites (as the likes of H. Arendt have suggested), but rather, for a voluntary *concord* between them (*Republic* 442d). In the *Phaedrus* (237e) for instance, we learn that an individual can be considered truly moderate only when her desires for pleasures are *in harmony* with her acquired judgment. This brings us, in fact, to the second most recurring definition of moderation found in Plato's dialogues: harmony or concord – be it that of a state or that of a soul. The truly moderate person is described by Plato as an individual who has succeeded in relieving the tension between his reason, spirit and appetites – he is said to possess a « kind of consonance and harmony » within his soul (*Republic* 430e). Now, how does this second definition (i.e. harmony) relate to the control of appetites and desires? It seems that the latter is subsumed under the former or, to be more precise, that self-control serves as a *prerequisite* for concord: only once we have a command over our desires can we work our way towards true psychic harmony – or, similarly, civic unity. As we will see further below, the close ties between individual virtue and the city's happiness are underscored by the fact that moderation entails not only the ability to judge what is an adequate amount of food, power or money to have, but also the ability to resist the urge to acquire *more than that* and the tyrannical urge to acquire *more than others*.

What I would like to underscore here is that, contra Nietzsche, the Platonic critique of intemperance cannot be read as a critique of pleasure qua pleasure or as a call to abstinence. The *Philebus* makes it clear that pleasure is an important part of the good life, and other Platonic dialogues draw, similarly, connections between pleasure, learning and philosophy (e.g. *Philebus* 21b-23c; *Laws* 667c). And, for all the purging that takes place in the middle books of the *Republic*, Glaucon will be allowed to keep his sweet relishes (assuming he is still interested in them): citizens of the *kallipolis* will not only live on bread and water. Indeed, Plato's understanding of what constitutes a « necessary desire » includes delicacies that, while not being essential for health or survival, are deemed necessary for well being (*Republic* 559b). But to say that Plato approves of pleasure naturally does not mean that for him, all pleasures are created equal: the gratifications of money-lovers and sex-lovers cannot be said to compare with those of music-lovers and wisdom-lovers. Moral excellence will require the capacity to judge what constitutes a pleasure worthy of a good human being. Put most succinctly: knowledge matters.

Indeed, as many scholars have shown, Platonic moderation entails an important dimension of cognition and introspection. Moderation calls for both some knowledge of what civic life requires in particular circumstances, and an extensive knowledge of the

self (the third most frequent definition of moderation provided by Plato is precisely this: self-knowledge).²³ Not only is there an important cognitive moment in the life of the average, moderate citizen (and by « cognitive » I do not mean « philosophical »), but philosophy itself requires a gentleness and calmness of spirit which Leo Strauss underplays when he writes that « thought must not be moderate, but fearless, not to say shameless²⁴ ». Illustrative of this is the fact that in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, Plato often speaks of « the moderate » and « the philosophic » in the same breath (e.g. *Republic* 403a, 411c).

But these latter passages confront us with an important and difficult question: if moderation is so closely connected to philosophy, to what extent can the majority of individuals be truly *sophron*? In a passage cited above (*Republic* 559a), Plato implicitly suggests that habituation from childhood onwards might be enough to train most minds to judge properly what constitute appropriate desires – a claim strengthened by the suggestion that poor upbringing is often the root cause of intemperance in people (e.g. *Republic* 431b). But this kind of habituation in right like and dislike cannot be equated with the extensive self-knowledge that Plato associates with *sophrosyne* in the *Charmides* – more specifically, the knowledge of what one knows and what one does not know (167a-b²⁵). In this particular dialogue, true *sophrosyne* seems to be the privilege of the few – of those fortunate enough to fill the better part of their days with philosophical conversation. On the basis of the *Charmides* and the *Phaedo*, it seems reasonable to suggest, with Matthias Vorwerk²⁶, that Plato distinguished between a philosophical type of *sophrosyne* and a more popular (or political) version of it²⁷ – with the latter being an essential step to the full realization of the former.

²³ Self-knowledge is the definition that is most central to the *Charmides*. For a detailed discussion of the dialogue, see T. W. Schmid, *Plato's Charmides and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality*, Albany, SUNY, 1998. Another scholar that provides us with an excellent discussion of the close ties between self-knowledge and moderation is Marie-France Hazebroucq (see her *La folie humaine*).

²⁴ L. Strauss, *What is political philosophy? And Other Studies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 32.

²⁵ See T. W. Schmid, *Plato's Charmides and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality*, Albany, SUNY, 1998.

²⁶ M. Vorwerk, « Plato on Virtue: Definitions of *sophrosune* in Plato's *Charmides* and in Plotinus' *Enneads* 1.2. (19) », *American Journal of Philology*. vol. 22, 2001.

²⁷ But the distinction is not consistently made throughout the Platonic corpus. In the *Laws* for instance, the distinction between a more and a less reflective type of moderation is muddled, and a lot less emphasis is placed on philosophical knowledge as opposed to the habitual control of desires (a control that is deemed good for all and that is tied to right opinion). This changing emphasis in Plato's conception of moderation may have to do with the fact that the ties between knowledge and virtue have been loosened in the *Laws*, whereas they are closer in the earlier dialogues. Vorwerk's argument about the different « grades » of virtue is anchored in a subtle comparison of Plotinus and Plato.

But ultimately, regardless of whether one engages in philosophy or not, the *sophron* individual must, at a minimum, have the cognitive ability to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary desires (*Republic* 559a). Indeed, she must be able to rank different kinds of pleasures (at least on the basis of right opinion) and to live her life in such a way that it is judiciously organized to satisfy the pleasures worthy of a good human being. Not surprisingly then, the line is repeatedly blurred between good judgment and self-control. The Athenian Stranger observes, for instance that: « When we say that the legislator should keep *self-control or good judgment* or friendship in view, we must bear in mind that all these aims are the same, not different. » (693c)²⁸ Phrased differently, my point here is that self-control that is not informed by some knowledge (at minimum, right opinion, but at best, wisdom) is worthless according to Plato. This may be what Plato intended to convey with the exchange that takes place between Socrates and the rich metic Cephalus at the beginning of the *Republic*. The old man is at first presented to us as a character that possesses moderation—Cephalus himself boasts about being *sophron*.²⁹ And yet, as the dialogue unfolds, Plato makes it clear that the old metic does not in fact possess the virtue of moderation. The taming of Cephalus' sexual desires is but the result of (bad) luck and aging – not of reflection or of right opinion.

In her well-known piece « Platonic love and Colorado Law », Martha Nussbaum remarks that, unlike Aristotle, Plato had enormous « anxiety » about bodily desires and, in particular, about sexual desires.³⁰ While it is reasonable to claim that Plato had reservations about the worth of physical appetites, what Nussbaum fails to appreciate is what ultimately lies *behind* such reservations. Plato does not make the moderation of desires the cornerstone of his *Republic* and *Laws* because he despises the body or the passions, but above all, because he despises the *love of money* (and the horrors and stupidities committed in its name). It is quite significant that in the *Republic* Socrates refers to the appetitive part of the soul as the « money-loving » part. He justifies this label by arguing that the longing for money is the strongest of all desires – part of this potency flowing from the fact that wealth is the obvious means to satisfy most cravings (e.g. *Republic* 442a & 581). But the arrow also seems to work the other way around: wealth in itself (especially when a society has set no limits on acquisition) has the power to stimulate in citizens countless unnecessary desires. In the *Laws*, the Athenian stranger notes that money is

²⁸ My italics. See also *Laws* 689d, 711e and 730e.

²⁹ See *Republic* 329a-330c.

³⁰ M. Nussbaum, « Platonic Love and Colorado Law: The Relevance of Ancient Greek Norms to Modern Sexual Controversies », *Virginia Law Review*, 80(7), 1994, p. 1581-1582.

the object of most men's strongest and most frequent longing. Because of the innate depravity of men and their misdirected education, money has the power to produce in them a million cravings that are impossible to satisfy – all centering on the endless acquisition of wealth. [...] The best and the noblest policy for all cities to follow is to tell the truth about wealth, namely that it exists to serve the body, just as the body should be the servant of the soul. (870a)

Predictably then, a good deal of Plato's energy is spent, in the *Laws*, on devising a set of laws, « charms for the souls » (659e) and institutions which will curb the worship of money.

I have argued thus far that part of the reason for the scholarly neglect of the virtue of moderation may be because it has been unduly associated with asceticism. Let me now suggest that Platonic *sophrosyne* may also be understudied because it tends to be equated with blind obedience and an unquestioning respect for the status quo. For many scholars, *sophrosyne* is essentially a convenient tool in the hands of rulers to get the submission of the masses. Such a skeptical reading of moderation is offered by Neal Wood, who writes:

The operating principle of [the *Republic's*] ideal socio-political organization, hinted at by Socrates in the *Charmides* as the principle of temperance, would be each man tending to his own business, no one interfering with another's' function in the hierarchy... All of this translates into the axiom that *the superior should dominate the inferior who must submit to their domination*, just as soul should command body, and body should obey soul. In both cases the relationships are conceived of as existing by nature and hence by right. *The Socratic ideal contains a built-in bias for the upper classes of his age*³¹.

Albeit from a different angle, other scholars have also suggested that moderation is an inherently conservative virtue or that it necessarily leads to a conservative politics – one can think here of Dana Villa, Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt. D. Villa refers to moderation as « the' classical-conservative virtue³², Strauss speaks of it in terms of an « *unquestioning* submission to the wisdom of the law³³ », and H. Arendt describes Greek *sophrosyne* as a « keeping within bounds³⁴ ». Whether or not this apparently conservative virtue is desirable is not, however, a matter of consensus: if D. Villa and

³¹ N. Wood, « Socrates as political partisan », *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, VII(1), 1974, p. 19; my italics.

³² D. Villa, « The Philosopher versus the Citizen », *Political Theory*, 26(2), 1998, p. 148.

³³ L. Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 214. My italics.

³⁴ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 191.

H. Arendt are unconvinced, Strauss is definitely interested in tapping into the potential of *sophrosyne*. For Strauss, a moderate soul and a moderate (which means, to him, conservative) politics may well be the best we can get.

Now, the association between *sophrosyne* and conservatism is not entirely unfair. Until Plato, *sophrosyne* had been viewed by the Greeks as an aristocratic virtue which called for the recognition of one's proper station in life, and deference to one's superiors and to a city's laws.³⁵ Socrates thus builds on traditional Greek usage when he says, in the *Republic*, that moderation entails, « for the majority of people », obedience to rulers (389e). That being said, while significant, this obedience of the ruled to their rulers is not, in my view, the most significant element of *sophrosyne* when considered from the perspective of Plato's corpus as a whole. If it is clear that in the *Republic* Plato gives much weight to this subordination, his other dialogues put the emphasis elsewhere (in particular, on self-control). What should be stressed here is that Plato was concerned with restraining the unnecessary desires of *all* citizens; in fact, he was even more concerned with the self-control and the self-knowledge of individuals likely to hold positions of power. It is these people, after all, who have the greatest capacity to cause harm to the city and to other human beings.³⁶ That obedience to rulers is not the most decisive element of Platonic *sophrosyne* is made manifest in the *Laws*—where the ties between *sophrosyne* and the obedience of the lower ranks are almost absent. All in all, it is too simplistic to suggest that moderation is a virtue for sheep or, as Philippa Foot has suggested, for the timid³⁷.

Just as the concord between reason and desires was not to be envisioned as a tyranny of the former over the latter, moderation *in the city* is not the forceful domination of the many by the few, as suggested by Neal Wood. Wood underestimates how meaningful it is to Plato to describe moderation as a kind of harmony. Like justice, « moderation spreads throughout the whole. It makes the weakest, the strongest, and those in between – whether in regard to reason, physical strength, numbers, wealth, or anything else – all sing the same song together » (*Republic* 431e). As we will see below, the reference to song is much more than an attractive metaphor: *mousikē* is the key to civic harmony and to a proper internalization of *sophrosyne*.

³⁵ But it was also more than that: in Homer, *sophrosyne* also had to do with soundness of mind; in Aeschylus it entailed deference towards one's mortal status (and as such, was seen as the opposite of hubris). See H. North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1966.

³⁶ This is underscored by the choice of Critias and Charmides – notorious tyrants and relatives of Plato – as Socrates's interlocutors in the *Charmides*.

³⁷ P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 18.

Wood also errs when he suggests that Platonic *sophrosyne* is there to serve the interest of a small clique and to reinforce the status quo. If one took seriously the « politics of moderation » that is put forward in the *Laws* and the *Republic*, this would have undermined the entire socio-economic structure of Athens (the very structure Wood is critical of). Perhaps Calicles said it best when he asked Socrates about where (Platonic) philosophy and (Platonic) justice would lead us:

Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you seriously at this point or are you only jesting? For if you're serious and what you say is really true, won't human life have to be turned completely upside down? Everything we do, it seems, is the exact opposite of what we ought to do. (*Gorgias* 481b)

Realizing moderation would indeed turn the world upside down – a claim I will defend in the second part of this paper.

But before we turn to this, let me suggest another reason for the scholarly neglect of *sophrosyne*: moderation has been regarded, at various points in the history of Western thought, as a virtue particularly appropriate for women and one entailing (female) chastity, obedience and silence. Aristotle thought he captured feminine virtue well when he quoted Sophocles' quip « To a woman silence is a crowning glory » (*Politics*, 1260a29-30) and so did St. Paul when he suggested that women « should adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefastness and sobriety... Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection [...] I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence » (I Timothy 3:16). Centuries later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was building on a very long tradition when he told his readers that modesty and shame would constrain Sophie's passions – whereas Emile's own moderation would be the result of a proper usage of his reason.³⁸ As far as ancient thought is concerned, Helen North and Adriaan Rademaker have both shown the degree to which in antiquity, *sophrosyne* for women characteristically meant modesty, quietness and obedience.³⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre is thus certainly not the only scholar to have observed that « *sōphrosunē* is for the Greeks *the womanly virtue*⁴⁰ ». As such, many scholars today might be reticent to take moderation seriously because it is (rightly) associated with the repression of female sexuality and female speech.

But what is extremely significant for us here is that for Plato, moderation is *not* a womanly virtue. Having reviewed all works produced from Homer to the Church Fathers,

³⁸ Rousseau, *Émile*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p. 467.

³⁹ H. North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*, *op. cit.*; A. Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint: Polysemy and Persuasive Use of an Ancient Greek Value Term*, Leiden, Brill, 2005, p.

⁴⁰ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 136.

H. North concludes that Plato is the *only* writer not to have gendered the virtue of *sophrosyne* nor to have established any particular connection between it and women.⁴¹ It seems significant that in the *Laws* (773c) the Athenian stranger insists that moderate and brash characters can be found both in male and female citizens, and that Book V of the *Republic* puts forward a non-gendered account of the virtues. While there are a few passages in the Platonic corpus where *sophrone* music is associated with the feminine (e.g. *Laws* 802d)⁴², Plato is remarkably uninterested in female silence and chastity – a fact so remarkable that for the philologist A. Rademaker, it must simply have been the result of an oversight on Plato's part.⁴³ A. Rademaker seems unable to entertain the possibility that most of what Plato has to say about moderation in citizens may equally apply to both sexes.

This is not to suggest that Plato is completely uninterested in quietness and modesty/shame, but only to suggest that these are *not* the marks of female virtue.⁴⁴ In the *Charmides* and *Symposium*, it is Socrates who is hailed for his tremendous capacity to control his desires when put in contact with young boys. And if a superficial reading of the *Charmides* could suggest that Plato rejects the connections between moderation, gentleness and quietness, the *Statesman*, *Republic* and *Laws* all make it clear that these traits are (when appropriate) part of what moderation consists of (*Statesman* 307a, *Republic* 410e). As such, Nietzsche is partially correct to see something « monkish » in Platonic *sophrosyne*, since it entails a fair degree of calm, tranquility and a decreasing of the intensity of our physical impulses (*Laws* 734a). If, for Plato, this calm is necessary for philosophy and for experiencing of true (and thus better) pleasure, for Nietzsche this « mildness » is envisioned as mediocrity. To seek moderate passions is the mark of the priest and impotent, and it entails the forfeiting of our capacity to be creative and free.⁴⁵ For Nietzsche, it is *disorder* in the soul and frenzy that leads to great deeds and ideas – not tranquility. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes the morality of last men as follows:

virtue to them is that which makes modest and tame: with that they have turned the wolf into a dog and man himself into man's best domestic animal.
« We have placed our chair in the middle », your smirking says to me; « and

⁴¹ H. North, *From Myth to Icon*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 49.

⁴² But see *Republic* 431b, where Plato lumps together children, slaves and women in his list of immoderate individuals.

⁴³ A. Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint*, p. 295 et 353.

⁴⁴ In *Republic* (388d), Plato speaks of shame and self-restraint almost in the same breath. On shame, see also the *Charmides* (160e-161b).

⁴⁵ Due to space concerns, I can only offer the briefest (hence superficial) reading of Nietzsche. A more sustained discussion would point out that Nietzsche was more Platonic than he thought: he craved for a calmness of soul and a self-control that has much to do with Platonic *sophrosyne* in my view.

exactly as far from dying fighters as from amused sows ». That, however, is mediocrity, though it be called moderation⁴⁶.

But Socrates is clear: true moderation need not mean simple-mindedness or mediocrity. It can denote « the sort of fine and good character that has developed in accordance with an intelligent plan » (*Republic* 400e). For Plato, it is frenzy and extreme desires that can be dull and senseless – not moderation. Moreover, in answer to the Nietzschean concern that moderation could lead to slavery, it must be said that Plato was keenly aware of the risks posed by an *excess* of *sophrosyne* for virtue and civic liberty. In the *Statesman*, for instance, we learn that when moderate individuals are in office, they can be *too* cautious, lacking « bite, and a certain sharp and practical keenness » (311a). Indeed, when severed from courage, the virtue of moderation can be hazardous: it can compromise a *polis'* freedom. It is thus for this reason that Plato counsels statesmen to « weave together » moderate citizens (who can be too prudent and gentle) with courageous ones (who can be too brash and bold). Similar advice is given in the *Laws*, when the Athenian argues that Magnesia should do all it can to encourage marriages between individuals of different temperaments.⁴⁷

What I have argued thus far is that it is inappropriate to equate Platonic *sophrosyne* too quickly with asceticism, conservatism, female chastity or spinelessness. While not entirely unjustified, some of these associations do little justice to the richness of Plato's account of moderation. In the next section, I intend to address further the criticism (raised by the likes of Wood and Villa) that moderation necessarily leads to the reinforcing of existing hierarchies, by discussing a few things that the realization of a politics of moderation would entail. A complete consideration of this matter is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. I will therefore only focus on two ingredients of Plato's politics of moderation which I consider to be central: music education and state legislation regarding wealth and commerce.⁴⁸

As should become clear to my readers in the following pages, I take seriously Plato's utopianism. Since I do not have the space required to fully address the complex interpretative issue raised by Plato's political « prescriptions », I will limit myself to claiming that an interpretative position can be found between that which sees Plato's radical reforms as a « joke » (or as a way for him to underscore the danger of utopian

⁴⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 170.

⁴⁷ « It is infinitely better for the virtue of a man and wife if they balance and complement each other than if they are both at the same extreme » (*Laws* 773a-e). This intermarrying of character (and social classes) will not be obtained through the forceful compulsion of law, but via the gentle persuasion of « charms » (i.e. songs).

⁴⁸ And which Plato also considered to be central: see for instance *Republic* 404e & 424c, and *Laws* 669-670 & 836a.

politics) and that which suggests that Plato really wanted these reforms to be taken *à la lettre*. Indeed, my position is that one can take seriously the spirit and principles that inhabit the radical reforms proposed by Plato (and to use these to reflect on our own institutions and practices) without nevertheless claiming that Plato thought possible and desirable to turn all his reflections into a concrete blueprint for legislators.

Plato's politics of moderation: sophrosyne built from within and from without.

We saw above that the vital components of Platonic *sophrosyne* are self-knowledge and self-control – the ability to both identify and *resist* unnecessary desires (particularly for money). Now, Plato repeatedly suggests that achieving self-control is the fundamental goal of all education (e.g. *Laws* 653b). If, during early childhood, an education in moderation will entail an unreflective, habitual training of desires via *mousikē*⁴⁹, in due time reason will come to understand the appropriateness of the emotional habits acquired (*Republic* 402a).⁵⁰

But the fact that early education is at first quite unreflective need not lessen its importance. In the *Laws* (559c), we learn that it is possible for most individuals to train themselves to disregard unnecessary desires *when they are young* – and one cannot overstate how critical this short window of opportunity is to Plato. As Socrates observes in the *Republic*, « it looks as though the start of someone's education determines what follows » (425c). Not surprisingly then, the occupation of minister of education is considered of foremost importance in Magnesia, since « any living creature that flourishes in its first stages of growth gets a tremendous impetus towards its natural perfection » (*Laws* 765e). In fact, Plato takes the early years of a child's life so seriously that he is even interested in beginning education in the womb – encouraging pregnant women to enthuse a « moderate' disposition in their babies with the help of songs and movement, and with the avoidance of excessive emotional states.⁵¹ Once

⁴⁹ *Mousikē* meant, to the Greeks, a lot more than it does to us: it referred at once to dance, poetry and music (as we more narrowly understand it). I will retain the Greek term throughout this discussion in order to capture this wide meaning.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of Plato's educational scheme, see W. Jaeger, *Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture*, *op. cit.*; G. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City. A Historical Interpretation of the Laws*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993. On music and education, see E. Moutsopoulos, *La musique dans l'œuvre de Platon*, Paris, PUF, 1959; C. Holloway, *All Shook Up: Music, Passion and Politics*, Dallas, Spence, 2008; D. Carr, « The significance of music for the moral and spiritual cultivation of virtue », *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, (14)2, 2006.

⁵¹ *Laws* 788c-793a. Incidentally, there is considerable scientific evidence today suggesting that late-term fetuses do learn musical rudiments from their mother's singing. E.g. P. Gowland et al., « Fetal brain activity demonstrated by functional magnetic resonance imaging », *The Lancet*, n. 354, 1999, p. 1397-

born, children will be steeped in a musical education that is absolutely pivotal for the early, non-forceful acquisition of *sophrosyne*. What children hear, sing and see will be tightly regulated by the state – a legitimate measure to achieve good citizenship according to Plato given that « imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice and thought » (*Republic* 395c).

Mousikē in fact serves several important purposes at once: it brings grace to the body and helps moderate physical impulses; it provides children with an education in judgment; it helps to stabilize and perfect the institutions of a city⁵²; and it can prepare minds for philosophy. As Socrates suggests in the *Republic*, there can be no love of learning and of beauty in individuals who take little joy in associating with the Muses (411c). In fact, in the *Timaeus*, Plato speaks of philosophy and *mousikē* in the same breath (73a & 88c). The lover of reason and virtue, and the lover of *mousikē*, are thus created simultaneously – a connection also established in the *Republic's* account of regime degeneration (549b).

Of greater interest for us here than the ties between *mousikē* and contemplation are those between *mousikē* and *sophrosyne*. Socrates sums these up succinctly when he tells Glaucon that « simplicity in music and poetry makes for moderation in the soul » (*Republic* 404e). There is, of course, no guarantee that *mousikē* will deliver its promise: it is, *in itself*, insufficient to create moral excellence. Indeed, Plato acknowledges that a lack of moderation in the soul can be the result not only of a poor early childhood education, but of bad company and poor legislation (*Republic* 431a). That being said, *mousikē* remains one of the most potent tools that law-makers have to impart on the young « right like and dislike » – a capacity for good judgment that the young will apply, later on, to their ethical and political lives more generally (*Republic* 401e).

Mousikē is the greatest educational tool not only because it is the most potent prior to the age of reason, but also because it is pleasant and well suited to children's restlessness and playfulness.⁵³ Songs may be « deadly serious devices for producing this concord [i.e. *sophrosyne*] we are talking about; but the souls of the young cannot bear to be serious, so we use the terms "creation" and "song" for the charms and children treat them in that spirit » (*Laws* 659e). Indeed, for Plato, nothing is more serious than play and the *mousikē* children are exposed to: not only the modes but the

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⁵² In both *Republic* (424c) and *Laws* (700e-701b), Plato underscores the ties between musical and political licence.

⁵³ *Laws* 653e. Plato would be appalled by the ever growing tendency to promptly prescribe medication for very young children who are deemed excessively restless, instead of first resorting to non-medicated tools to cultivate a degree of self-control while also *respecting* the child's natural restlessness.

word-content of songs ought to be the object of legislation. If one hopes to create young adults who are in control of their desires for sweet foods, money or power, one must expose children to *mousikē* that portray individuals who are capable of limiting their longings for such things, or alternatively, to *mousikē* which overlooks their importance or existence (*Republic* 395c).

Plato's politics of moderation calls for much censorship – and particularly for the censorship of what children hear, see and sing. In contemporary terms, the realization of moderation in our own cities would entail, for instance, legislating children's television programming and advertising. Needless to say, Plato would be completely baffled by the fast-pace T.V. shows children gulp down, but more importantly, he would be shocked by the nature and amount of advertisement children are inundated with. It is easy to see how, from Plato's viewpoint, few things could contribute more to the molding of greedy or gluttonous souls than bombarding the young with suggestive accounts of the joys of material consumption or that of sweet foods. « In fact, we could hardly point to a greater force for good – or evil – than this inevitable assimilation of character. » (*Laws* 656b) But it is equally easy to see how, from a liberal perspective, few things would be as unappealing as a program of Platonic propaganda – be it a campaign promoting the merits of a frugal existence or one promoting the virtues of broccoli. (But to this liberal objection one could counter briefly that few of the most beneficial programs of social reform have been realized without considerable amounts of propaganda.) If only a small number of us are comfortable with the idea of replacing the sugar industry's aggressive propaganda with state-sponsored, Platonic propaganda for virtue or broccoli-eating, nobody is entirely blind to the absurdity of having millions of dollars invested in the prevention and treatment of child (and adult) obesity each year while at the same time tolerating that the bulk of the advertisements watched by young children have to do with sugary foods.⁵⁴

Similarly, many people readily acknowledge today that our over-consumption (be it of food, oil, or cheaply produced plastic goods) has led to deplorable environmental destruction. And yet, few are willing to cheer at the idea of using the power of law to limit the amount of wealth and material goods that individuals may acquire. Now, the latter is precisely what Plato's work is inviting us to reflect on. For him, molding moderate citizens not only required considerable investments in early childhood

⁵⁴ For instance, a recent article published in *Pediatrics* claims that of all food products advertised on television targeting American children (age 2-11), 80.7% are « high in sugar ». See L. Powell et al., « Nutritional Content of Television Food Advertisements Seen by Children and Adolescents in the United States », *Pediatrics*, vol. 120, 2007, p. 579. This reality is especially absurd in light of the fact that we readily acknowledge that advertising works. For the links between advertising and obesity see: « Children, Adolescents, and Advertising », *Pediatrics*, vol. 118, 2006, p. 2563-2569. The later study estimates that only 3% of advertisements viewed by children concern healthy foods (p. 2565).

education and censorship: it also called for laws against luxury, the close supervision of commerce, and various state measures aimed at minimizing growth, inequality and the worship of money. With regards to the latter, Socrates was unmistakably clear: « it is impossible for a city to honor wealth and at the same time for its citizens to acquire moderation » (*Republic* 555d).

That a city aiming at moderation should concern itself so much with wealth is hardly surprising: as we noted above, the lust for money is the most powerful desire according to Plato. But what is more surprising is the fact that relatively few political theorists have taken up Plato's treatment of property, commerce and redistribution.⁵⁵ This is particularly puzzling given that so much is at stake here according to Plato, both ethically and politically. First, the regulation of wealth and the restraining of our lust for money have great sway over peace and stability – not only within a city, but also between cities. It is Glaucon's desire for delicacies (and thus wealth) that ultimately leads to war and empire in the feverish city, and it is an uncontrolled appetite for money that is at the root of most regimes' corruption in Book VIII. The close connections between wealth, imperialism, decadence, and bloodshed are not merely depicted in the *Republic*, but also in the *Laws*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*. In the latter, Socrates is remarkably blunt, affirming that « all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth » (66b).

A second argument made by Plato for the need to moderate our desire for money (and consumption) is that these desires distract us from caring for things that truly matter for the good life (*Phaedo* 82c; *Republic* 561d-562c). Thirdly, Plato insists that good morals and civic friendship are unattainable without moderating our acquisitiveness. A city full of money-lovers is one where « everybody is out for himself... it doesn't matter whether something is sanctioned by heaven, or forbidden and absolutely disgusting – it's all the same to them, and causes not the slightest scruple » (*Laws* 831c). If sharing is an essential aspect of good citizenship, it is obviously much harder to do when one is obsessed not only with acquisition but also with « outdoing others » (*pleonexia*). As Malcolm Schofield rightly observes, the problem with greed is not only that it entails a constant desire for more, but more problematically, that it entails a desire to have *more than others*.⁵⁶ As such, greed inevitably raises complex issues of justice and injustice – as Ryan Balot has persuasively shown.⁵⁷ Plato points to this extremely significant political problem by having Socrates gently chastise Callicles for suggesting

⁵⁵ Recent exceptions: R. Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*, *op. cit.* ; E. Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; M. Schofield, *Plato*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁵⁶ M. Schofield, *Plato*, p. 278.

⁵⁷ R. Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*, *op. cit.*

that the « stronger and better » *should* plunder the property of the weaker and should necessarily get more goods and rewards in life (*Gorgias* 488a-490b-c). The sharing of goods is obviously a principle that is repugnant to the likes of Callicles – whose radical hedonism leads into championing great material and power imbalances in the city. A similar point is made by R. Balot, who insists that an unreasonable desire for money will necessarily translate into a desire for power *over others*.⁵⁸ In short, minimizing our desires for wealth and material goods matters deeply to Plato because greed is necessarily detrimental to stability, moral excellence and civic trust.

Now, how exactly are we to create citizens who are not driven by a longing for money and for « outdoing others » according to Plato? We noted above that musical education could do a lot to limit desires by using gentle persuasion instead of force. But the reformation of character via *mousikē* is not sufficient: to rely solely on pedagogical means to achieve *sophrosyne* would be unwise according to Plato. What is needed are also a number of important institutional measures to work on moderation « from without ». One such measure (perhaps the most important one) should be to forbid citizens from accumulating any great amount of wealth. Indeed, the Athenian stranger posits a direct correlation between such legal measure and *sophrosyne*: « the law against excessive wealth will do a great deal to encourage self-control » (*Laws* 836a). Now, the point is not to completely forbid money or the private owning of land: citizens are in fact allowed to have a certain amount of both in Magnesia (even though Plato forbids the usage of gold and silver and insists that each private portion of land be regarded as « the common possession of the entire state ».)⁵⁹ Rather, the goal is to prevent the accumulation of wealth beyond what is deemed suitable for living well and for civic friendship – which requires significant equality between citizens (*Laws* 729a, 737d, 743d).

In the *Laws*, Plato divides up citizens into four property classes – a division which serves the following purposes: 1) determining the amount of taxes and fines appropriate to each individual; 2) allocating some (relatively insignificant) offices on the basis of wealth; and 3) more importantly, *preventing increases in inequality* amongst citizens by fixing the minimum and maximum amounts of wealth to be possessed by each class (744d)⁶⁰. Now, what is particularly significant for us here is that the « richest » citizens will not be allowed to have more than four times the amount of wealth possessed by the « poorest » class. If a citizen does happen to get more than what is permitted – through some lucky business transaction or a generous gift – these

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁵⁹ *Laws* 742a, 740a, 877d, 923a.

⁶⁰ See G. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City*, p. 131-138.

riches will have to be given to the state and hence contribute to the funding of common meals, festivals or public works.⁶¹

Plato's way of limiting wealth underscores the limits of U.S. President Obama's decision to cap senior bank executives' salaries at 500,000\$, for if we followed the Athenian stranger's principle, the capping should have been fixed somewhere closer to 80,000\$.⁶² Now, Plato would be perfectly capable of comprehending the fairly common objection that the capping of salaries (or the capping of wealth more generally) will necessarily undermine growth and dampen ambition: after all, this is precisely his point. Plato's conception of a good economy is a no-growth economy (and here lies the radicalism and untimeliness of his work). If the city ought to grow, it is to grow in virtue and in virtue only. The restricting of wealth accumulation would contribute to this growth by forcing individuals to reorient their efforts and ambitions towards other purposes than money-making.

One should note that, in the *Laws* (744c), the Athenian stranger is not only concerned with preventing the wealthy from getting richer, but also with preventing the « poorest » from getting poorer (i.e. from falling below what is deemed necessary for comfortable living and a proper cultivation of one's land). Limiting the desire for money in those « better off » is, in fact, inseparable from the prevention of poverty in the « worse off »: a « policy of moderation », the Athenian observes, is « dictated by the conviction that poverty is a matter of increased greed rather than diminished wealth » (*Laws* 736e). Now, it may be slightly unwarranted here to speak of the « rich » and « poor », or the « better off » and the « worse off », given that the objective of the economic arrangements in Magnesia is precisely to avoid the creation of such categories in the first place. Plato sees a close connection between economic inequality and instability – whether it is rooted in the arrogance and idleness of the rich or in the resentment and suffering of the poor (e.g. *Republic* 422e).⁶³ One of the goals of moderating citizens'

⁶¹ *Laws* 745a. This measure applies to each property class.

⁶² This amount would be obtained if one took 19,000\$ as representing the income of the bottom 20% of American households. This amount is based on the US Census Bureau's « Current Population Survey » (2007). Even if we took the median annual household income of 50,000\$, the capped salary of executives should still be only 200,000\$. http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032007/hhinc/new05_000.htm (accessed March 2, 2009). Fairly similar numbers would apply to the Canadian case.

⁶³ Few are completely blind to the connections between instability and socio-economic inequality: witness the significant (although by no means universal) concern regarding the 2008 OECD report on the growing inequality between rich in poor in multiple countries. Amongst all OECD countries studied, the USA was said to have the highest rate of inequality and poverty (putting aside Mexico and Turkey). If Canada did not rank as low as the USA, the report nevertheless noted that both inequality and poverty have *increased* within our borders in the last decade. See www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality. For just one of the numerous studies showing the ties between economic inequality and political stability, see

longing for wealth is thus to achieve greater unity – for as Plato repeatedly emphasizes, a *polis* where there are rich and poor citizens is not one, but two (*Republic* 551d).

Another way to discourage citizens from becoming immoderate « money-lovers » is to separate commerce from citizenship. Specifically, this means that only metics should be allowed to take part in business transactions and trade – a measure not that uncommon in many Greek city-states at the time.⁶⁴ Trade is, for Plato, not something we can do away with (*Republic* 370e): no city can be entirely self-sufficient and, without trade, citizens cannot live well (at a minimum, commercial exchange will be necessary *within* the city in order to optimize the division of labor). Now, at the root of the necessity of trade are the body and its needs. As we noted at the beginning of this paper, Plato ought to be distanced from the charge of asceticism: while he certainly called for a taming of our desires for comforts and bodily pleasures, he nevertheless accepted that the good life was to entail certain gratifications that could only be provided through trade. But if trade is necessary, it is also dangerous. Plato is convinced (like many of his contemporaries) that dealing with money on a daily basis will inevitably corrupt one's character and that it is wiser to make sure that this corruption will not affect the virtue of those who matter for the city. The Athenian stranger observes that:

only a small part of mankind... is able to steel itself to moderation when assailed by various needs and desires; given the chance to get a lot of money, it's a rare bird that's sober enough to prefer a modest competence to wealth. Most people's inclinations are at the opposite pole: their demands are always violent demands, and they brush aside the opportunity of modest gain in favour of insatiable profiteering. (*Laws* 918c-d)

Trade is thus extremely likely to corrupt those involved in it – regardless of what the state does to limit such harm (i.e. regulating the wealth metics can accumulate, requesting public records of all business exchanges, and offering longer residency periods to metics who have been virtuous – *Laws* 915b & 851b).

Plato's Athenian stranger also calls for a tight regulation of the prices of goods (e.g. 850a), a forbidding of lending at interest (742c), and for Magnesia to forbid the use of credit – since « shameless traders » will never hesitate to lend money to those who cannot repay their loans, thus reducing them to poverty (*Laws* 915b-919c; *Republic*

A. Alesina & R. Perotti, « Income distribution, political instability and investment », *European Economic Review*, vol. 40, 1996, 1203-1228. (But in this study, the argument offered in favour of moderating inequality is rooted in the very anti-Platonic claim that less inequality is better for *growth*.)

⁶⁴ P. Cartledge, E. Cohen & L. Foxhall, *Money, Labour, and Land: Approaches to the Economies of Ancient Greece*, New York, Routledge, 2001; G. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City*, *op. cit.*

555c). Plato also calls for greater transparency in business: profits made in retail trade should be carefully recorded and be part of the public domain (e.g. 920c). Finally, he insists that the main purpose played by trade should be a fair *redistribution* of goods, and not the maximization of profits. « When goods of any kind are distributed disproportionately and unequally, anyone who makes the distribution equal and even cannot fail to do good. It needs to be stated that this redistribution... is precisely the purpose the trade is meant to serve » (*Laws*, 918b). In sum, Plato proposes to use the power of the state to curtail inequality amongst citizens, to restrict excessive luxury and wealth, and more generally, to make the life of « money-grubbers » difficult and unappealing.

Citizens' lust for money must thus be moderated by what will strike us as remarkably immoderate legal measures. But to Plato, Magnesia's legal order was, on the contrary, the very embodiment of moderation. On a more general level indeed, it could be said that Magnesia's entire constitution is guided by principles of measure and harmony – whether it concerns land distribution, marriage, the distribution of power, the degree of freedom permitted, or the desirable amount of health or wealth to be possessed by an individual. In all these domains of human life, the Athenian stranger insists that « the moderate man is God's friend » (*Laws* 716d).

Plato's no-growth society?

This paper sought to reflect not only on various reasons behind the neglect of the virtue of moderation in Plato scholarship, but also on the kinds of educational and institutional measures that might be entailed if one were interested in taking a politics of moderation seriously. Evidently, these thoroughly utopian proposals would turn our world upside down; it is hard to conceive how any of them could be put in place in our modern liberal democracies. But if we are sincere when we assert that over-consumption and immoderation are *vices* and that these may be at the root of our economic ills (as many like to do), there is little sense in refusing to initiate a reflection on the virtue of moderation.

We saw that part of what moderation entailed according to Plato were a number of measures that are antithetical to notions that are at the core of our liberal and capitalist ethos – in particular, individual freedom and economic growth. But I have also indicated that for Plato, a moderate soul and a moderate city need not be seen as devoid of pleasure, friendship, and comforts. For all his ascetic inclinations, Plato did not call for the relinquishing of all wealth and material goods, but rather, like his

student Aristotle, insisted on the need to see these for what they are: *means*, not ends. What Plato wants to hammer home is the idea that an excessive longing for money (or for the consumption of material goods) is indicative of a city where lives are poorly lived and where there is much mistrust and insecurity amongst its citizens.

Once again, there is no doubt that Plato's ideal of moderation is radically at odds with our vocabulary of growth and prosperity. Plato is instructive here precisely because he confronts us with one of the most radical visions of a no-growth society. In fact, the utopian politics set forth in his *Laws* is based entirely on the premise that growth is not good: the population of Magnesia ought to remain stable; every household's finances should remain within a certain, pre-determined range of wealth; trade is to be regulated in order to minimize profit-making and market growth; *mousikē* and laws ought to remain fairly stable and geared towards civic virtue; citizens are to have secure lives and tranquil souls.

Now, even if we are not willing to follow Plato all the way to Magnesia (and I believe that there are many good reasons why one would not want to), we may do well to hold on to some of the wider philosophical insights found within Plato's reflections on *sophrosyne*. Plato's suggestion that the « bulwarks » of our cities should lie in *both* moral education and institutional measures should, at the very least, give us pause as we seek to address social ills and economic crises. That a just city requires serious concern for both character and institutions may seem like a fairly commonplace teaching, but it is one that tends to be overshadowed when political discourse becomes overly polarized between social crusaders for « individual morality » and champions of institutional reform. Plato compels us to rethink this schism.

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