

Children and *The Republic*

As children, for many of us, the ideal of individualism is accentuated and we are taught to embrace our inherent qualities that make us unique. Parents or parental figures have provided us praise for our achievements and accomplishments, while society and the media, public life as we know it, have reinforced the value of being an individual. In Plato's *Republic*, the concept of the individual is eradicated and children are taught the value of collectivity, community, and being one with the state. This ideal form of communism, according to Socrates' vision, is partly achieved through the calculated and selective breeding of the Guardians' children, the communal rearing of these children, and finally the conditioning of these children, through inclusion and participation, in war.

The breeding of the Guardians' children is precisely calculated and, almost entirely, pre-determined by the *Republic's* ruler. Socrates expresses that "there is a need for the best men to have intercourse as often as possible with the best women...if the flock is going to be of the most eminent quality" (459d). Socrates' use of the term "flock" indicates desired uniformity among the children of the Guardian class, much like a flock of sheep or birds. The term "eminent" emphasizes the value and expectations placed on the Guardian class and their genetically superior children. As women and men in present day may be concerned about their reproductive capabilities as they get older, Socrates also notes importance of men and women breeding while still in their prime. This eugenic process of breeding ensures that the *Republic's* Guardian class remains ideal, strong, and pure, so long as those born with deformities or of a lower quality personage remain in an "unspeakable and unseen place" (460c). In the *Republic* there is no acknowledgement of sex as an intimate, pleasurable, or recreational activity; rather, sex is strictly for the purpose of procreation and maintaining the

homogeneity of the Guardian class. Once children have been systematically created within the Guardian class, they must be properly reared in a way that stresses community and equality.

In the *Republic*, parents are prohibited from raising their own children and even residing in the same vicinity as their children in order to preserve equality and avoid personal possession. Socrates refers to the rearing of children as a source of grief, which is evaded within the *Republic* through the appointment of officers whose purpose is “take the offspring of the good and bring them into a pen to certain nurses who live apart in a certain section of the city” (460c). It is in this section of the city that the children are raised as a family and, if born at the same time, are considered to be brothers and sisters. This image of a community of children is not unlike that of a boarding school where parents are not usually present and the children are aspiring towards a similar, if not common, goal. However, in the *Republic*, children are shaped into a uniform mold that prevents the development of individuality. The lack of a mother’s responsibility to her children is, as Glaucon states, “an easy-going kind of child-bearing” (460d). Although a mother may come for a limited amount of time to nurse when she is full of milk, she does not necessarily nurse her own child, for parents should avoid recognizing their own children. Some of the breastfeeding is taken over by wet-nurses and all other labor of child rearing is carried out by governesses and nurses. All of these measures are taken to ensure that the children have a sense of collective community and equality. Although the nurses and governesses serve the role of caregivers to the children, the children are to hold the belief that all the Guardians are to be considered their mothers and fathers, whom they are aspiring to emulate.

The children are acting as apprentices to the Guardians and will hopefully become Guardians in time and fulfill the duty of defending the state as warriors. Therefore, Socrates

prescribes that the children, being pre-destined to participate in wars, should accompany and observe their mothers and fathers in battle as “spectators of war” (467c). The involvement of the children in war serves as an opportunity for the *Republic* to instill a sense of patriotism to the state and admiration of the mighty Guardian class amongst the youths. Guardians of experience and of a proper age serve as leaders and tutors to the children and educate them in the specifics and practice of war. Responsibility is also given to the children, as they are to “help out and serve in the whole business of war, and care for their fathers and mothers” (467a). How the children are to “help out and serve” is not specified, though it is doubtful that Socrates is suggesting that the children actually participate in physical combat. Unlike some countries that presently use children to fight on their frontlines or act as unsuspected carriers of weapons, the Guardians will trust their own judgment as to which battles are suitable for the children to observe. For those battles children do attend, horses are provided to assure a quick and safe escape if the need strikes. This concern for the children’s safety demonstrates their significance to public life and the future of the state. Defense of the state is of utmost importance and proper training and conditioning of the future Guardian class, through observation of battle, is a necessary means of maintaining such defense.

The processes of breeding children selectively, rearing children separately from their natural parents, and conditioning children to the realities of war are structured and idealistic approaches to molding the future Guardian class of the *Republic*. In other words, these processes are creating a uniform assembly of children, children who are raised as equals and act collectively without deviation from the desired vision of public life. Whether a society is capable of inhibiting the natural tendency and predisposition of humans to be unique and diverse is questionable; however, the *Republic* conceived in Socrates’ mind is a vision that

portrays one extreme form of public life. One of the vital aspects of implementing this extreme is through the creation and formation of children who are capable of ignoring their diversity and accepting that their duty is to the collective “we” and to the defense of the state.