Plato-libertarianism: A Case for the Defense

In the struggle to promote liberty, the search for intellectual allies is a crucial front to support. Even though authority does not constitute a good reason for a serious thinker to adopt libertarian views, it would be well if we in the libertarian camp could draw inspiration from generally recognized great thinkers. This quest leads us to the door of at least one philosophical stronghold long besieged by libertarian forces, to the door of Plato.

In this paper, we will focus on making the positive case for including Plato in the ranks of libertarian allies, if not as a libertarian himself. We will not dwell at length on the many and vehement attacks on Plato over the years, such as by Murray Rothbard (1995) and Karl Popper (1945). Instead, we will subject three of Plato’s dialogues to scrutiny to discern the truth of Plato’s political philosophy. These dialogues are the Crito, in which Plato presents his justification for the state, or at least seems to; the Gorgias, where Plato challenges the intellectuals of his day; and the Republic, to examine Plato’s theory of justice. Before plunging into the dialogues, however, let us review the principles of libertarianism as laid out by Rothbard, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, Walter Block, and Frank Van Dun.

1. Libertarianism

Conventionally, libertarianism is identified with the Non-aggression Principle (NAP). Simply stated, this principle is that no one may make use of another person’s property without the consent of that person. A person’s property consists of that person’s physical body and of those physical objects which he has originally appropriated out of the state of nature or received in a voluntary exchange with, or at the conclusion of a series of voluntary exchanges beginning with, an original appropriator. The only acceptable method for appropriating unowned resources is by altering them in an objective, intersubjectively ascertainable way, typically by physical labor.

The NAP leads to a number of important conclusions. The most obvious results are prohibitions against theft or damage of another’s property, and against battery, murder, kidnapping, and the like. Furthermore, since the NAP is of a universal nature, it leads to the radical conclusion that the modern state, a compulsory, territorial monopoly of judicial services and enforcement, is illegitimate and ought to be abolished. However, libertarianism does not reject, and in truth demands, restrictive covenants founded on a voluntary basis. Once such a covenant is formed, libertarianism does not dictate what rules the parties choose to adopt, as

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1 Rothbard takes this position in *The Ethics of Liberty* (1998), as does Block in *Defending the Undefendable* (2008)
long as they allow members of the association to leave should they so desire.  
To be sure, advocates of libertarianism would likely prefer rules that mirror the larger libertarian order, and for good reasons, this is not a feature of libertarianism itself.

The justification for the libertarian ethic has two different forms. Rothbard gives a natural law-based argument in *The Ethics of Liberty*. Hoppe (1989), on the other hand, defends libertarianism with an argument based on the principles of rational discourse. Van Dun (2009a) considers both the natural law approach and the argumentation approach fundamentally the same, while Block focuses on application rather than justification. Van Dun’s work is of special interest in that he goes beyond the NAP in his theory of libertarian jurisprudence.

For Van Dun, as for Rothbard, libertarianism is the logical result of consideration of the nature of man, specifically as a rational being living in a community of similar beings—his “likes.” Thus, man ought to respect his likes as rational beings as well, dealing with them through reason and discourse rather than through violence. Of course, man is capable of totally rejecting this imperative, but by so doing, he makes himself an “outlaw” and no longer to be respected by his erstwhile fellows. In application, however, Van Dun goes beyond Rothbard in claiming that the NAP is but one consequence of these considerations. Another major consequence is that lying is unlawful—“[t]here is no right to lie”, and if a lie leads to physical or financial harm, the victim is entitled to compensation from the liar. In the same vein, forging another person’s signature or otherwise appropriating their means of identification, as well as producing and using counterfeit currency—even fiat currency—is impermissible. Especially not permitted are lies that take the form accusations of unlawful action, and even worse if they result in injury to an innocent man.

Beyond these essential features of libertarianism, there are a number of other noteworthy common characteristics of libertarians. They generally have a certain contempt for politicians, as the exemplars of a political order they consider immoral and destructive. Similarly, libertarians do not look kindly upon intellectuals who provide ideological support for the modern state, whether in academia or in public media. An appreciation for economics and

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2 Van Dun notes, “Although we conceivably may end up with a worldwide totalitarian society that legally regulates every aspect of life and work, for the moment we can still picture societies as local and limited structures, emerging from and then disappearing in the flux of human relations—waves on the ocean.” (2004)

3 Van Dun’s position is not universally accepted among libertarians. Block especially has written to the contrary (2004a), (2004b). We will not justify our taking of Van Dun’s side in this dispute here, as our focus is ultimately on Plato.

4 The issue of financial harm is another distinguishing feature of Van Dun’s philosophy. Block, in particular, disagrees on Van Dun on this point (2004b)

the benefits of trade is also common—three of the thinkers we are drawing on are trained economists. To be sure, these characteristics are not all universal, but a libertarian who thinks politicians are paragons of virtue, that college professors are all working hard to advance freedom, and that economics deserves its moniker of the “dismal science” would be a rare find.

Now that we have laid out what libertarianism is, we can turn to Plato. In examining the dialogues, we will look especially for instances of the NAP and respect for contracts and property, though contempt for politicians and statist intellectuals, as well as an understanding of economics, will not be ignored. Fortunately, examples of both abound.

2. The *Crito*

The *Crito* is one of the earliest of Plato’s dialogues and is set the day before Socrates’s execution. In it, Socrates’s friend Crito comes to visit him in prison and tells him of a plan that he and several others have formulated to spirit Socrates out of Athens to avoid his execution. In response, Socrates argues that he has a covenant with the laws of Athens and so is bound to stay and die.

At first glance, the *Crito* does not appear at all inspiring for lovers of liberty. Socrates seems to present a contractual basis for the state, but this is line of argument has been rejected by libertarians since Lysander Spooner’s exacting dissection of the United States Constitution in 1867. And this state which Socrates is defending not only has sentenced him to death, but is totally unlimited in what it may do. He says, speaking for the laws of Athens,

> Do you not realize ... [t]hat if you cannot persuade your country you must do whatever it orders, and patiently submit to any punishment that it imposes, whether it be flogging or imprisonment? And if it leads you out to war, to be wounded or killed, you must comply, and it is right that you should do so. You must not give way or retreat or abandon your position. Both in war and in the law courts and everywhere else you must do whatever your city and your country command[.] (*Crito* 51b-c)

As if that weren’t bad enough, the justification Socrates gives for being bound by this contract is simply that he stayed in Athens when he could have left. This line of argument smacks of the modern slogan “America, love it or leave it,” implicitly assuming that the state has just authority over a certain territory. While libertarianism certainly permits people and agencies to have just authority over sections of land, it grants that authority only to original appropriators and those who receive the land in contractual exchange.

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6 To be sure, though, the greatest tyrants of Greece never dreamed of the power possessed by modern states.
Libertarians have often been quite vociferous in their criticism of the idea of a contractual state, and with good reason. Were it genuine, the contractual state would utterly disarm libertarians of their moral case against it and anything it does. However, in practice, such arguments must always be particular and historical. Since libertarians support voluntary, restrictive covenants, they must content themselves with the fact that most, if not all, of the governments in existence today and throughout history have been based on compulsion rather than contract. If thinkers of old and translators of foreign tongues have used the word “state,” then it is for the modern libertarians to tease out what they meant.

Returning to the dialogue, we may definitely grant that a libertarian would put up more resistance than old Crito does, but it is clear that the character of Socrates is convinced of his claims. And the idea that Athens had a contractual basis is nowhere near as farfetched as similar claims for modern states: not only was the population many orders of magnitude less, the laws were similarly fewer and thus easier to understand.\(^7\) Furthermore, since we are interested in what Plato thought rather than the reality of antiquity, we can waive the historical question to focus on theory. By so doing, we uncover a conception of society easily compatible with libertarianism.

One indication of what Plato has in mind comes from his last completed dialogue, the Laws, which tells of an Athenian, a Cretan, and a Spartan trying to determine what the proper regulations are for a community. The discussion is occasioned in part by the Cretan’s, Clinias by name, recent assignment to help devise the rules for a new colony...and he has been so tasked under the auspices of the colonists and their sponsors themselves: “You must know that the largest part of Crete is undertaking the foundation of a colony, and has charged the Knossians with the management of the business, which has been entrusted by the authorities of Knossus to myself and nine others.” (Laws 703c) This lends some credence to the notion that Plato genuinely has a contractual social order in mind, and this is borne out even more in the Crito.

One of Socrates’s more perplexing claims is that by fleeing his death sentence, he would make himself a “destroyer of laws,” a character so villainous that the truly just cities of Greece would not dare to admit him for fear of their own survival.\(^8\) As he says, again speaking for the laws of Athens,

Can you deny that by this act which you are contemplating you intend, so far as you have the power, to destroy us, the laws, and the whole state as well? Do you imagine that a city can continue to exist and not be turned upside down, if

\(^7\) Of course, the laws of Athens were not all that a libertarian might desire. The practice of slavery was permitted, and Athenian judicial practices left much to be desired, as demonstrated by Socrates’s plight.

\(^8\) In matter of fact, Crito likely had the right of the argument in that the people of other cities rather lacked the moral circumspection of Socrates and would have been quite happy to have him.
the legal judgments which are pronounced in it have no force but are nullified and destroyed by private persons?... [Y]ou will confirm the opinion of the jurors who tried you that they gave a correct verdict: a destroyer of laws might very well be supposed to have a destructive influence upon young and foolish human beings. (Crito 50a-b, 53a-b)

If Plato is advocating a coercive state, the qualms he puts in Socrates’s mouth about destroying the state, yea, even all of society, by breaking a covenant is more than passing strange. A state can call upon the swords of its enforcers to justify itself, insisting that it is if nothing else inevitable and that its subjects ought simply to resign themselves to its power.⁹ A libertarian reading, on the other hand, reveals great wisdom. It is indeed difficult to imagine how a restrictive covenant could survive if people simply ignored the restrictions whenever they felt like it. A libertarian social order may certainly police itself, utilizing armed violence when necessary, but it cannot go beyond its contractually agreed upon rules; and to destroy the contract is to destroy the society itself.

To conclude that Plato truly does support a contractual society rather than a compulsory state, there is one further requirement: that he supports the right of secession. Consideration of a single passage should banish all doubt on this matter:

[W]e openly proclaim this principle, than any Athenian, on attaining to manhood and seeing for himself the political organization of the state and us its laws, is permitted, if he is not satisfied with us, to take his property and go away wherever he likes. If any of you chooses to go to one of our colonies, supposing that he should not be satisfied with us and the state, or to emigrate [sic] to any other country, not one of us laws hinders or prevents him from going away wherever he likes, without any loss of property. (Crito 51d-e)¹⁰

Far from taking issue with this liberality, Socrates uses it to buttress his argument that he is contractually bound to the laws of Athens. Thus, the Athenian “state” that Socrates describes and praises fulfills, at least in theory, both of the requirements of a libertarian social order: voluntary basis and permitted secession.

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⁹ And imperial Athens was not averse to such arguments, as displayed by the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides’s History of the Peloponnesian War.
¹⁰ One might object that this does not indicate any permission to secede, but merely to migrate, thus making the claim that Athens was a state legitimate. There are two things that can be said in response. One, in point of historical fact, Athens was a state, but we are focused on theory not practice. Plato is viciously critical of the Athenian government, so it makes little sense that he would be trying to justify it as such. Two, participation in a restrictive covenant may be attached to a property title, thus making migration the only legitimate form of secession. That banishment was a considered a legitimate form of punishment gives some indication that this was so, again in theory. For more on restrictive covenants, see Hoppe (2001) esp. chapter 10.
On the basis of the *Crito* alone, then, we ought to lift the siege and welcome Plato into the ranks of the allies of liberty. However, some might still have qualms, as the enmity for Plato has a long history. With luck, these harsh feelings will be allayed when we examine the *Gorgias*, wherein Socrates meets and challenges the Sophists, statists who kneel at the altar of power.

### 3. The *Gorgias*

The setting for the *Gorgias* is immediately following a rhetorical display by the titular character, a famous Sophist. The Sophists were rhetoricians and teachers of rhetoric, knowledgeable in history, psychology, and literature, and Plato is not overly fond of them. In addition to Gorgias, Socrates argues with two of his friends, Polus and Callicles, lesser known characters of a similar bent.

At first, Socrates interrogates Gorgias as to the nature of the art he professes, that of rhetoric. The old Sophist provides somewhat evasive answers, albeit partly at Socrates’s behest that he be brief. When Socrates finally gets a full answer of out him, Gorgias’s description of the nature of his profession is hardly inspiring for a lover of liberty,

> [Rhetoric] is in very truth the greatest boon, for it brings freedom to mankind in general and to each man dominion over others in his own country... I mean the power to convince by your words the judges in court, the senators in Council, the people in the Assembly, or any other gather of a citizen body. And yet possessed of such power you will make the doctor, you will make the trainer your slave, and your businessman will prove to be making money, not for himself, but for another, for you who can speak and persuade multitudes. (*Gorgias* 452d-e)

Compared to his friends who speak after him, Gorgias is quite benign, and his statement is more chilling in what it presages than in what it says. Still, talk of making men slaves will certainly raise the hackles of any wary libertarian. Gorgias’s comrades well justify this wariness in the following pages.

Over the course of the discussion, Socrates traps Gorgias in contradiction—Gorgias claims that he teaches those that he—and other Sophists—shapes into skilled rhetoricians also to be good men, but claims that rhetoric is often abused by evil orators. At this point, Gorgias’s student Polus butts in to the conversation. Polus insists that Gorgias does teach men to be good, since the happiest men are those who have the power to satisfy all their whims and

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11 A fair argument could be made that the real-life Sophists were not as villainous as Plato depicts them, but he builds up a position that no libertarian could support and then sets his proxy Socrates up in contradistinction to that position, so we will deal solely with the Sophists as portrayed in the dialogue.
desires and also avail themselves of that opportunity. And the example of such a man is hardly one that any libertarian—and it is hard to believe any person—could possibly respect.

Polus claims that the highest good one can achieve is to achieve the power of a tyrant, “to kill, to exile, and to follow my own pleasure in every act.” (Gorgias 469c) To prove his point, he proffers a gross tyrant, Archelaus of Macedon. Of this villain, Polus has the following words of admiration,

“Wicked? Of course he is! ... In the first place he sent for this master and uncle of his [Alcetas, by name], ostensibly to restore him the power of which [Archelaus’s father] Perdiccas had deprived him, and entertained the man and his son, Alexander, who was his own cousin and about his own age, and after making them drunk he flung them into a wagon, took them away by night, and made away with them by murder. ... But a little later, so far from wishing to become happy by justly bringing up the rightful heir to the throne, his own brother, the legitimate son of Perdiccas, a child of seven years, and restoring the throne to him, he threw him into a well and drowned him, and then told the child’s mother, Cleopatra, that the boy had fallen in and killed himself while chasing a goose. (Gorgias 471a-c)

Compared to the atrocities of modern states triple murder seems like nothing, and Polus’s honesty about Archelaus’s villainy is quite refreshing at least. Still, it is clear that Polus, as well as Callicles following him, glorifies coercive power and does not care for any genuine principles of justice. Against this tide of power-worship stands Socrates, and behind him Plato. Far from agreeing with the Sophists, Socrates confutes them, carefully explaining how a tyrant is truly a wretched creature and that one should live according to the principle of justice. Precisely what Plato means by justice will be seen in the Republic, but he is at the very least opposed to murder, theft, and kidnapping.

After defeating Polus in argument, Socrates finds himself challenged by another of Gorgias’s friends, an Athenian politician named Callicles. He challenges that the notion of what is good that Socrates uses to defeat Polus is truly just a convention established by the weak to keep themselves safe from the strong. The truly good man is just as Polus initially said—a powerful tyrant who does whatever he pleases. Against this, Socrates points out that the many are stronger than the few, so even by Callicles’s own standard, the conventional view must stand.

The discussion with Callicles produces mixed feelings for the libertarian reader. On the one hand, Callicles is a consummate democratic politician and so shifts to a new position whenever Socrates destroys his old one, eventually giving up in petulant frustration rather
shared by the reader. On the other hand, Socrates makes such biting comments about politicians that a potential libertarian might reasonably be denied the appellation if he could find no delight reading in them. Against criminal politicians, he remarks,

I notice that, whenever the city treats any of its statesmen as wrongdoers, they are indignant and violently protest that they are shockingly treated; so after doing the city many services, they are now being unjustly ruined by her, according to their story. But all this is a fabrication. For there is never a ruler of a city who would unjustly be ruined by the very city he ruled. (*Gorgias* 519b-c)

Rothbard and Hoppe themselves could hardly have said it better! And he indicts and condemns all those who hold power to the lowest point Greek religion allows:

[T]hose who have been guilty of the most heinous crimes and whose misdeeds are past cure... [are] suffering throughout eternity the greatest and most excruciating and terrifying tortures because of their misdeeds, literally suspended as examples there in the prison house of Hades, a spectacle and a warning to any evildoers who from time to time arrive. And one of these, I maintain, is Archelaus, if Polus tells us the truth, and any other tyrant too of like character, and I think that most of these warning examples are chosen from tyrants and kings and potentates and politicians, for these, owing to the license they enjoy, are guilty of the greatest and most impious of crimes. (*Gorgias* 525c-d)

With his contempt for politicians and support for a contractually based society, it is difficult to see what might be wrong with Plato from a libertarian standpoint. When we consider Plato’s theory of justice, we will find even more to appreciate.

### 4. The *Republic*

The *Republic* is one of Plato’s longest dialogues, surpassed only by the *Laws*, and it touches on many different subjects. The primary theme of the dialogue is the nature of justice, which Socrates and his friends discuss in detail at the house of Cephalus, an old man who lives just outside of Athens proper. They initially consider several naïve notions of justice and find fault with them all. Eventually, the Sophists once again rear their ugly head in the form of Thrasymachus, who insists that “the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger.” (*Republic* 338c) Once again, Socrates faces down the power-worshiper and shows that justice is not merely what benefits the strong.\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) According to Plato, justice benefits everyone who is just, whether the just are strong or not.
The bulk of the dialogue is occupied with Socrates’s response to a challenge by Glaucon and Adimantus. Though the two brothers are intellectually allied with Socrates, they insist that he demonstrate in detail how a just man is better off than an unjust man even if they have the opposite reputations. In the process of doing so, Socrates constructs an “ideal city” as model of a human soul writ large. By examining what justice is in the city, Socrates hopes to determine what justice is for the individual and see how it is beneficial. And what Socrates uncovers is so plainly libertarian that it is difficult to imagine how it could have been misinterpreted. We will focus specifically on the definition of justice and its application and the much maligned “noble lie.”

After building up the ideal city through the full extension and intensification of the division of labor,13 Socrates explains how the people set up and organize a contractual society. The bulk of the people produce the goods required for their sustenance and comfort, while the few philosophically inclined are set aside to provide direction for the community and to settle disputes among the citizens. These guardians are supported by the voluntary contributions of the populace, but they enjoy none of the luxuries available to everyone else.14 Instead, they are brought up to love philosophy, which ultimately means that they do not even wish to perform their leadership function—in fact, the only mention of force being used within the ideal city is in requiring the guardians to put aside their philosophy and rule.15 Between the philosopher-guardians and the populace, there is a third class of soldiers and policemen who defend the city and keep the peace living in the same manner as the guardians.

The principle of justice reigning over the city is simple and eminently libertarian: “[T]o do one’s own business and not to be a busybody is justice.” (Republic 433a) If this simple phrasing seems insufficiently libertarian, this following passage would make even Rothbard proud:

[Socrates:] Will you not assign the conduct of lawsuits in your state to the rulers?
[Glaucon:] By all means.
Will not this be the chief aim of their decisions, that no one shall have what belongs to others or be deprived of his own?

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13 Plato’s explanation of the origin of the city is fine enough to elicit even Rothbard’s grudging praise (1995, pg. 11-12).
14 Rothbard’s criticism of Plato on this count involves a certain bit of double-think. On the one hand, he claims that the guardians ruthlessly exploit the populace, but on the other hand bemoans how they are forced to live so spartanly.
15 Plato would not endorse rule by self-anointed intellectuals—his battle with the Sophists illustrates that quite plainly. Furthermore, he explicitly says in the Republic that only people who don’t wish to rule are to be even considered as potential rulers in the ideal city. He also says that it is not the natural way of things for experts to foist themselves upon those who need their expertise, but rather wait until they are called upon. To be sure, Plato believes in the rule of the wise, but it would be difficult to find someone who thinks the idiots should rule instead.
Nothing else but this.
On the assumption that this is just?
Yes.
From this point of view too, then, the having and doing of one’s own and what belongs to oneself would admittedly be justice. (*Republic* 433e-434a)

A more clear expression of the libertarian ethic could perhaps be devised, but we will wait long to hear it.

Careful consideration of the “noble lie” also yields a strikingly libertarian theme. In the first place, this lie is not like the protean falsehoods emanating from the Ministry of Truth. Rather, it is an unchanging creation myth that the rulers are intended to believe just as much as the populace. Furthermore, the nobility of the “noble lie” is that, while it is literally false, it conveys an important truth. What it literally says is that all the people of the city are children of the Earth and that they have had different metals planted in their souls, suiting them for different tasks. In plainer language, it means that the people of the city are all fundamentally alike, but they have different aptitudes. This perfectly captures the natural law approach to libertarianism—that people are and should treat each other as “likes.” It also nips in the bud the threat of egalitarianism and ochlocracy. Plato does not believe that people are equal in abilities, especially not in ruling, and so does not want to grant any room for ochlocratic revolution.

There are a number of other points on which Plato conforms to libertarianism. Lying is forbidden in the ideal city just as Van Dun says should be so. The eighth book is eerily similar to Hoppe’s *The Rise and Fall of the City*, detailing the decline of the ideal city into injustice and statism. The person most reviled by Plato is, as in the *Gorgias*, the all-powerful tyrant, and he spends much of the ninth book of the *Republic* describing the how such men are both villainous and wretched. Next in evil to the tyrant is the false accuser who kills an innocent man—he is spared no punishment by Socrates’s lashing tongue:

> And is it not true that in like manner a leader of the people who, getting control of a docile mob, does not withhold his hand from the shedding of tribal blood, but by the customary unjust accusations brings a citizen into court and assassinates him, blotting out a human life, and with unhallowed tongue and lips that have tasted kindred blood, banishes and slays and hints at the abolition of debts and the partition of lands—is it not the inevitable consequence and a

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16 Plato does allow that the guardians may have some use for falsehoods, but so does Van Dun (2009a), and he plainly does not intend any large-scale deception aside from the “noble lie,” as he does not dwell on the subject.
decree of fate that such a one be either slain by his enemies or become a tyrant and be transformed from a man to a wolf? (Republic 565e-566a)

Libertarians should surely rejoice that an eloquent writer has been revealed as one of their own!

5. Conclusion

The recruitment of Plato as a supporter of liberty is remarkable in two respects. For one, it disarms statist of his authority and turns his powerful arguments against his erstwhile friends in the camp of statism. Additionally, it opens the door for exploring the possibility that other supposed statist thinkers are also allies of freedom. At the very least, none may be marked off as hopeless, and the ranks of libertarianism may soon swell.
References


Van Dun, Frank. “Against Libertarian Legalism: A Comment on Kinsella and Block.” *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Volume 17, no. 3 (Summer 2003).
