Plato’s Goat-Stags and the Uses of Comparison

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1 Introduction

As is so often the case in the study of Plato, any analysis of literary technique will have philosophical implications. This is particularly so in the present instance: Plato’s imagery is not only an important element of his rhetorical arsenal but poses multiple questions of epistemology, various aspects of which are explored in the current volume. My essay takes up a seemingly minor image from Book 6 of the Republic, where Socrates compares his procedure in explaining why philosophers seem useless in the contemporary city to a painter creating a goat-stag (tragelaphos). This image is often overlooked, given that it is merely a prelude to the more famous and complex “ship of state” analogy that follows. I argue that, when interpreted, Socrates’ goat-stag image can present us with a deeper understanding of that strange and hybrid creature, the philosopher-king, and of Socrates’ rhetorical and didactic strategies as he surmounts the “third wave” of paradox in Republic 6. I shall begin by reading the goat-stag carefully against its immediate context, then look beyond Plato to its appearance in Aristophanes’ Frogs and the Aristotelian tradition. Finally the goat-stag will be interpreted as emblematic of the entire complex of images used in Book 6 to explore the problematic participation of the philosopher in the life of the city.

2 The Goat-Stag and the Philosopher-King

At Republic 6.487e Socrates is in the midst of the third of the great waves of paradox that structure the middle books of the dialogue. He has made the startling proposal that an ideal city can only be founded when philosophers become kings, but has been challenged by his interlocutor Adeimantus to explain why contemporary philosophers are either useless to the city or vicious. Socrates replies that he must speak in images:

“You ask,” I said, “a question that requires an answer formulated as an image.”

“And you,” he said, “are not accustomed to speak in images!”

“Well,” I said, “you’re mocking me after throwing me into an argument like this that’s hard to demonstrate! Hear, then, my image, so that you
may see still better how greedily I construct images. For what the most capable experience with regard to cities is so difficult that there is not any other one thing like it, but I must bring it together from many sources, creating an image and making a defense on their behalf, like painters paint goat-stags and things like that by mixing. So imagine something like this happening either on many ships or on one: a ship-owner who in size and strength surpasses all on the ship ...”

487e-488a

He goes on to elaborate the ship of state analogy, about which several papers in this volume have much to say. This is a marked moment. We should note first the use of humor that draws attention to Socrates' passion for images and comparisons. Adeimantus' ironic amusement when Socrates declares his intention to use an imagistic comparison works because Socrates uses such comparisons all the time, and not only when he is in argumentative difficulty. In several dialogues he has recourse to a craft analogy that helps him explore the nature of specialized knowledge, so that Callicles in the Gorgias can complain that Socrates never stops talking about cooks, cobblers, doctors, and so on (491a). Socrates’ response to Adeimantus grants him his point in mock dismay and suggests that what follows will be a prime example of this Socratic tendency. He grants that what he will say will show how he constructs images “greedily” (glischrôs).

Secondly we should notice that this is a second-order moment, one in which Socrates deploys an image to illustrate how he uses images. His comparison of himself to a painter who creates hybrid creatures like goat-stags is intended to

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1 Ἐρωτάξε, ἢν δ' ἐγώ, ἐρώτημα δεόμενον ἀποκρίσεως δι' εἰκόνος λεγομένης. Σὺ δὲ γε, ἐρήμη, οὐκ αἰών εἰσίωσας δι' εἰκόνος λέγειν.
Εἶεν, εἶπον· σκώπτεις ἐμβεβληκώς με εἰς λόγον οὐτω δυσαπόδεικτον; ἄκουε δ' οὖν τῆς εἰκόνος, ἢν ἢτι μᾶλλον ἰδέας ως γλισχρῶς εἰκάζω. οὕτω γὰρ χαλεπὸν τὸ πάθος τῶν ἐπιεικεστάτων, δ' πρὸς τὰς πόλεις πεπόνδαισιν, ἢτε οὐδ' ἢστιν ἐν οὐδὲν ἄλλο τοιοῦτον πεπονθός, άλλα δ' ἢτι ἢκ πολλῶν αὐτό συναγαγεὶν εἰκάζοντα καὶ ἀπολογόμενον ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν, ὥστε οἱ γραφῆς τραγελάφους καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα μειγνύντες γράφουσιν. νόησον γάρ τοιοῦτον γενάμενον ἢκτε πολλῶν νεῶν πέρι ἢκτε μιᾶς ναύκληας μεγέθει μὲν καὶ ῥώμῃ ὑπὲρ τοὺς ἐν τῇ νηὶ πάντας ... Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


3 Adam (1902, vol. 2: 9) argues convincingly that the translation we should use for γλίσχρως is "greedily" rather than “sparingly,” although the adverb seems to be able to mean both. The passage would, I think, still work even if we translated “sparingly.” In that case, it would pick up on Adeimantus’ ironic comment that Socrates, of course, is not used to making images. Socrates would reply: “Well, see how sparingly I make them now.”