

## **Platonic Corruption in *The Handmaid's Tale***

**Abstract:** *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a United States taken over by a fundamentalist dictatorship called Gilead that also resembles Plato's ideal city. Attempts to explain Gilead's debt to Plato face two challenges. First, aspects of Gilead that recall Plato also contain features that differ, at times dramatically, from the Platonic original. Second, Gilead invokes distorted versions of ideas from philosophies other than Plato's. I explore two ways of making sense of Gilead's distorted philosophical appropriations. The explanations differ over whether such distortions are best explained by the nature of the philosophies they misrepresent, or by the nature of Gilead. The explanation that emphasizes Gilead's own agency is ultimately best able to make sense of how illiberal regimes misappropriate philosophical concepts, both in the novel and in reality, in order to limit the political imagination of their subjects.

**Keywords:** *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood, Platonism, feminism, liberalism, textual distortion

### **Introduction**

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a future in which the United States is taken over by a fundamentalist dictatorship. In response to a fertility crisis, Gilead, as the theocracy calls itself, forces fertile women to serve as handmaids: sexual servants who are assigned to households of the ruling class in order to conceive a child. Critics have frequently commented on the novel's depiction of a dystopian backlash against women's rights that, while it may be extreme, amplifies tendencies that exist in reality.<sup>1</sup> An aspect of the novel that has received much less attention is its concern with the manner in which authoritarian regimes misappropriate philosophical ideas. In particular, Gilead takes special pains to associate itself with concepts that originate with Plato.

These elements include a social hierarchy that recalls Plato's classes of rulers, auxiliaries and producers; a state-based eugenics program; the use of gymnasiums as educational spaces in which women are socialized into new

gender roles; and the widespread dissemination of a noble lie. Explaining Gilead's relationship to Plato's ideal city, however, is made difficult by two challenges. The first is that features of Gilead that call to mind Plato are not straightforward similarities. In each case, the resemblance is combined with some feature that differs, at times dramatically, from Plato's original. The result is that Atwood's dystopia deliberately calls to mind a distorted version of Platonism, one that differs in ways large and small from the original. In addition, Gilead seems to do the same with other philosophies and concepts, albeit to a lesser degree than in the case of Plato. The reader is not initially sure what to make of the fact that the Gilead regime distorts each idea that it appropriates, so that characters who encounter them are exposed, not to an idea as Plato or another thinker originally formulated it, but to a corrupt version that has been twisted to suit the regime's ends. Prominent among those ends is that of preventing the populace from imagining any alternative to Gilead.

Different aspects of the novel suggest two different ways of making sense of Gilead's corrupt appropriation of philosophical ideas from Plato and elsewhere. The first possible explanation is suggested by the novel's sympathetic engagement with liberal feminism. It suggests that the reason Gilead distorts the philosophies that it does is due to the fact that none of them is an explicitly liberal view. As such, it is comparatively easy for a regime such as Gilead to retool them to advance the regime's illiberal ends. The second possible explanation is suggested by the fact that Gilead is home to many different forms of corruption, beyond those that occur to philosophical concepts. Words and phrases, holidays and representations of history are all handed down or presented in a way that distorts the meaning they had in the pre-Gilead period.

Where the first interpretation emphasizes the internal content of the philosophies in question, the second cites something external to them, namely the willingness of the regime to distort any word, idea or fact to reinforce its authority.

The best standard to use in deciding between these two explanations, I argue, is a historical one. That is, we should hope to use a standard that explains not just Gilead's fictional distortions of philosophy, but the way illiberal regimes distort philosophical concepts in reality. While such a standard is similar to one Atwood set for herself in writing the book, the grounds for using a historical standard are not that authorial intentions are sacrosanct. It is rather that such an interpretation brings out what Gilead shares with actual undemocratic states. This can be seen by comparing Gilead's distortion of Plato to a distorted use of Rawls in apartheid-era South Africa. When Gilead's misappropriation of Plato is compared to Rawls misappropriation by a philosophical defender of apartheid, the external interpretation emerges as the one that is best able to make sense of how illiberal regimes misappropriate philosophical concepts in general. In making this case I note the superiority of the external explanation over a previous reading of Atwood's novel that interpreted it as satirizing Plato, which to my knowledge is the only previous attempt to make sense of Gilead's strange Platonic traces.

### **Two Republics**

The Republic of Gilead bears a clear but complex debt to the ideal polity described in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>2</sup> Plato's ideal city and Gilead both include a military class known as guardians. In Atwood they do police and security work. In Plato the guardian class is divided between those who serve as military auxiliaries and

a more elite group, the latter of which are trained to rule after being selected in childhood for their intelligence and virtue. The education of Plato's ruler-guardians covers mathematics, philosophy and other subjects and lasts until the age of 50, after which only the best among them are selected for political leadership. The Commanders who rule Gilead take a quicker path to power, having been installed in a coup, but otherwise resemble Plato's ruler guardians in legislating undemocratically.

Plato's auxiliary-guardians and Atwood's guardians both occupy a social rung above a third group that performs functions related to subsistence. In Plato this is the producer class, which includes farmers, labourers and craftspeople. Gilead has domestic functionaries, composed of handmaids and a second group, Marthas, who are reminiscent of Plato's producers in performing essential but mundane tasks necessary for survival. The domestic responsibilities of Marthas include cooking and housekeeping, while handmaids' sole purpose is to participate in sexual rituals with commanders and their wives. Plato's classes of ruler-guardians, auxiliary-guardians and life-sustaining producers are thus recalled by Gilead's commanders, guardians and female domestic functionaries, who duties include that of producing life itself.

Plato's polity and Gilead both host a state-based eugenics program. Socrates describes two ways in which the Platonic state takes an interest in the offspring of auxiliary guardians: "First, the best men must have intercourse with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true for the most inferior men and women, and second . . . if our herd is to be of the highest possible quality, the former's offspring must be reared but not the latter's" (459d). Children of auxiliaries who are "reared" are raised collectively, without special ties between

parents and their biological offspring, which are severed at birth. As Plato describes the process of separation, “they’ll take the children of good parents to the nurses in charge of the rearing pen situated in a separate part of the city, but the children of inferior parents, or any child of the others that is born defective, they’ll hide in a secret and unknown place, as is appropriate” (460c).

Plato may have had in mind the practice of infant exposure, which was widespread in the ancient world, and saw parents leave unwanted newborns in a secluded place to die or be picked up by a stranger.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, Plato’s scheme may stop short of exposure. John Boswell for example has argued that Plato’s discussion entails only that “inferior” and disabled children are to be “brought up outside of both their natal homes and public view.”<sup>4</sup> Regardless of which reading we have in mind, the rulers of Plato’s society clearly take a managerial interest in the selective breeding of the entire guardian class.

Gilead, for its part, forces handmaids to bear the children of commanders, who raise the children as their own with their wives. As in Plato’s scheme, the eugenics program is class-based: unlike commanders, lower status men are not entitled to handmaids. In this way the households of Gilead’s commanders recall a detail from Plato’s program. Auxiliary guardians are assisted with childrearing by “wet nurses,” whose role of socially imposed surrogates resembles that of handmaids (460d). Also as in Plato, a mysterious fate awaits children of Gilead who are born with physical handicaps. “We didn’t know exactly what would happen to the babies that didn’t get passed, that were declared Unbabies,” Atwood’s protagonist states, “but we knew that they were put somewhere, quickly, away” (113).<sup>5</sup>

The social role of handmaids, and of all members of Plato's society, is assigned to them in light of what is considered their natural function. For almost all women in Gilead, their assigned role is reflected in the monochrome clothing they must wear. Handmaids are forced to dress in red while the uniforms of Marthas (and Guardians) are green. Commanders' wives, who despite their domestic authority are denied any agency in the public sphere, must wear blue. The assignment of colours to reflect one's place in a eugenicist social hierarchy echoes Plato's myth of the metals, which associates ruling guardians with gold, auxiliary guardians with silver and producers with iron and bronze. A primary function of the myth is to make palatable the removal of children from their biological parents, as when a child of guardians is determined to be made of the wrong elements, which obliges the parents to "give him the rank appropriate to his nature and drive him out to join the craftsmen and farmers" (415c). Both societies are thus organized in a manner designed to sever any connection a mother may feel to her biological child.

Gilead and Plato's ideal city both valorize militarism. Auxiliary guardians occupy a position of privilege in Plato's polis precisely because of their military prowess, which other social institutions are devoted to reinforcing. For example, Plato's auxiliaries are collectively married at mass weddings, with the number of marriages determined by rulers after "taking into account war, disease" and other needs of state (460a). An auxiliary who excels at fighting benefits from a law that states that so long as he (or she) is involved in a military campaign, "no one whom he wants to kiss shall be allowed to refuse" (468c). Gilead, for its part, is at constant war. Its militarism is reflected in the benefits that accrue to members of its highest military class, who are known as Angels. Atwood

describes twenty of them “newly returned from the fronts, newly decorated,” participating in a mass ceremony of arranged weddings (219). From the point of view of modern liberal society, both Plato’s polis and Gilead see the private realm invaded by demands that originate in the public one.

If Gilead bears noticeable similarities to Plato’s ideal city, their precise meaning is not initially obvious. This is because many of the features that recall Plato simultaneously highlight aspects of Gilead that are deeply anti-Platonic. One smaller detail concerns the role of gymnasiums in the two societies. In Plato’s time gyms were educational institutions in which students studied intellectual pursuits alongside athletic activities such as wrestling that were performed in the nude. In *The Republic*, Plato famously describes female guardians exercising naked alongside their male counterparts. When Socrates first mentions this aspect of the ideal city Glaucon exclaims that it “would look really ridiculous as things stand,” an indication of the distance between Plato’s view and Athenian common sense (452b).<sup>6</sup> In the first sentence of Atwood’s novel the protagonist states, “We slept in what had once been the gymnasium,” describing the training facility at which she and other women are re-educated to become the first generation of handmaids (3). Like all women in Gilead, they have lost the freedom to choose their own occupation. Unlike other women, their bodies are to become public resources, at the sexual disposal of commanders. In both *The Republic* and Gilead the gymnasium is thus an educational space, the conscious function of which is to socialize women into new gender roles. Crucially, however, these new roles see women gain freedoms equal to men in Plato, whereas they lose any such freedom in Gilead.

The different forms of female socialization that take place in gymnasiums reflects a deeper difference between the two societies. Social roles are gendered in Gilead in a manner that is devastating to women's interests. Being made to serve as a handmaid or other female-specific role represents a major step backward from the freedom women enjoyed before Gilead. Plato's view of gender roles is much more egalitarian. To be sure, there are grounds to doubt whether Plato's vision of women serving as auxiliary- and ruler-guardians should be labelled "feminist."<sup>7</sup> But even if that term is anachronistic, it is not controversial to say that his view of gender roles extended greater freedom to women than they could expect in ancient Athens. Against the backdrop of Athenian views on gender, which denied women any voice in the public sphere, let alone the ability to serve as heads of state, Plato's vision is progressive.<sup>8</sup> Given how starkly *regressive* Gilead is concerning gender, it is not immediately clear what the reader should make of Gilead's similarities to Plato's ideal polis. Every noticeable similarity is immediately complicated by a deep and abiding difference concerning gender roles, leaving the reader initially unsure as to what the similarities amount to.

### **A Diversity of Distortions**

There is a second puzzling feature of Gilead's Platonic traces, beyond their lack of fidelity. In addition to Plato's political philosophy, Gilead's representatives invoke other belief systems. As with Plato, these other belief systems are each recalled in manner that appears deliberately distorted or "off" in some way.

Consider two mottos that are repeated by handmaids during their time at the re-education center. "Not every Commander has a handmaid: some of their wives

have children," the narrator remarks before recalling one such saying. "*From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs. We recited that, three times, after desert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts.*" (117). Later on the protagonist recalls another mantra. "Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Center motto, warning us away from such objects" (126).<sup>9</sup>

The first motto is of course a garbled allusion Marx's famous description in *Critique of the Gotha Program* of the communist principle of economic distribution: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. The corrupt Gileadian rendering introduces a sexual double standard not present in the original. Similarly, "Pen Is Envy" is a distorted rendering of Freud's notion of penis envy. Penis envy has long been criticized as a sexist concept in its own right, attributing to women a sense of biological inferiority compared to men.<sup>10</sup> Gilead's catchphrase however introduces an additional form of sexism not present in Freud, using "pen is envy" to justify a near-total ban on female literacy. As with Plato, ideas from Marx and Freud are recalled with enough faithfulness to be recognizable; but obviously faithless in the way they are twisted to justify a sexist social order.

Even feminism is not immune to appropriation in Gilead. As previous critics have noted, Atwood's novel participates in debates within second-wave feminism that were ongoing at the time of its publication.<sup>11</sup> The book's engagement with feminism is more straightforward, even at times didactic, than its engagement with other philosophies, making some of its commentary on different strands of feminism easier to decipher than whatever commentary it may be making on Plato, Marx and Freud. To take but one example, the novel

appears to offer a straightforward verdict on the issue of whether women should seek to create institutions that exclude men. The question is brought to mind by the low expectations the protagonists' mother has regarding the opposite sex. "I don't want a man around," she remarks, "a man is just a woman's way of making other women" (121). A similar thought is associated with the protagonist's best friend. During the course of the novel the friend comes out as lesbian, and it is implied that her preference for women is related to her dissatisfaction with the unequal nature of traditional heterosexual relationships. The political views of the protagonist's friend, whose name is Moira, are associated with utopianism when the protagonist remarks, "if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken" (172).

It is not hard to detect in these passages a negative verdict on the separatist strand of feminism that was perhaps most influential during the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Such separatism should be carefully distinguished from Moira's sexual identity, which the novel does not denigrate. Indeed, Moira is something of a hero, being the only woman to escape the re-education facility. Although she is last seen serving men as a prostitute in a nightclub, she puts a brave face on her situation: "Don't worry about me," she tells the protagonist, "it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (249). If Moira's sexual relationships with women count as a form of separatism, it is a personal version that the novel portrays as realistic and non-utopian. But when separatism is presented as a larger political project, as it was during the late 1960s and 1970s, not just by lesbian but also heterosexual feminists, then the novel suggests that it drifts into fantasy.<sup>13</sup>

If the novel's overall depiction of separatist feminism is clearly negative, it is less clear what to make of the link the novel appears to draw between the extreme form of gender separatism enforced in Gilead and its feminist precursor. When handmaids become pregnant, for example, they are attended to in birthing rituals that are exclusively female. "You wanted a women's culture," the protagonist reflects at one such ritual, in an inner monologue addressed to her feminist mother. "Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (127). The same point is made in the novel's epilogue, which takes the form of a speech by a professor of Gilead studies: "Gilead was, although undoubtedly patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content, like some sectors of the society that gave rise to it" (308). A female character named Aunt Lydia, who instructs the protagonist in official regime ideology, remarks approvingly at one point of second-wave feminists, "we would have to condone some of their ideas, even today. Only some, mind you" (119).

The central idea Gilead would appear to condone is that the free mixing of the sexes is best avoided. If this resemblance to difference feminism is obvious, the rationale behind Gilead's separatism could not be more different. Whatever the limitations of 1970s feminism, its goal was not to coercively confine women to domestic spaces and roles. As with Plato, Marx and Freud, an idea or practice from before the time of Gilead reappears in a manner that makes its origin legible, but in a distorted and sinister form.

Finally, there is the fate of Christianity in Gilead. References to the Old and New Testament are everywhere on the surface of daily life. Stores have biblical names such as Lillies of the Field, All Flesh, and Milk and Honey. Similarly, the re-education facility at which women are trained to be handmaids is named after

Rachel and Leah from the Book of Genesis. If these and other Biblical references are impossible to miss, it also seems evident that Gilead distorts Christian ideas as much as it affirms them.

Recall that “unbabies” are quickly disposed of. This practice violates the Christian ban on infanticide as it pertains to handicapped newborns. A second distortion of Christianity becomes evident when the protagonist sees a pillow inscribed with the word *faith* and reflects, “I wonder what happened to the other two pillows . . . hope and charity” (110). As with other belief systems, Gilead edits out aspects of Christianity it does not find congenial. These discarded elements include the core idea that Christianity is a universal faith to be accepted in everyone’s heart, not just a tool of social control to be imposed on the gullible masses by an unbelieving elite.

This becomes clear when the commander to whom the protagonist is assigned has her put on a showgirl costume and takes her to a sex club called Jezebel’s. Not only is the existence of a sex club in Gilead surprising in itself, but it is filled with prostitutes (including the protagonist’s friend, Moira) who mingle with the men who make up Gilead’s ruling class. Inside the club, which occupies a former hotel, Gilead’s normal prohibitions on sex outside of marriage, revealing female dress, alcohol, smoking and lesbianism are suspended. When the protagonist notes how incongruous Jezebel’s seems given Gilead’s enforced moral codes, the commander replies, “everyone’s human” (237).

After the protagonist asks the commander what that means he makes the following significant remark:

“It means you can’t cheat Nature,” he says. “Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s

Nature's plan. . . . Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many clothes in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day (237).

Previously an Aunt had told the protagonist that "men are sex machines . . . it's nature's way. It's God's device" (144). But with that partial exception, the commander's rationale is conspicuous in how much it differs from the official doctrine espoused by Aunts and other representatives of the regime. The commander makes no appeal to God's device or Christianity. He does not cite any concepts, distorted or otherwise, from Platonism or other belief systems that the regime has long rummaged through for rationalizations. The commander rather justifies the club on the grounds that the sexual opportunities it makes available for its male clientele are nature's way.

The existence of Jezebel's and the commander's defence of it suggest that the regime's ostensibly biblical belief-system has been a facade all along. This is in keeping with an earlier conversation in which the commander suggested that some ideas can be safely known by a select few, but become "dangerous in the hands of the multitudes" (158). At first, the protagonist cannot tell whether the commander is speaking in earnest. But her trip to Jezebel's makes clear that men at the top of Gileadean society do not take seriously the social code they impose on everyone else. The official ideology of Gilead turns out not to be biblical fundamentalism, but cynicism.

Gilead's distorted affirmation of so many different systems of thought may be less chaotic and random than it initially appears. While the sources vary, the scraps of these different philosophies all perform a common function. It is that of providing propaganda to justify Gilead's pervasive sexism in the minds of those

who are made to live under it. In this way the collective function all of Gilead's philosophical fragments calls to mind a final idea from Plato, the noble lie.

A noble lie is a grand falsehood with a civic purpose. It is propagated by authorities who know it to be false, in order to foster one or more cooperative identities on the part of the populace.<sup>14</sup> Plato's noble lie is of course the myth of the metals. It explains how children can be born to parents with greater or lesser abilities, and justifies separating them from their families. While Gilead's public ideology touches on matters beyond family structure, justifying a eugenicist social order is a central purpose that it shares with Plato's myth.

This is not the only similarity between the two civic falsehoods. In introducing the myth of the metals, Socrates describes it as "a Phoenician story," or what one translation calls "an old Phoenician thing" (414c).<sup>15</sup> Such phrasings reflect the fact that Plato's noble lie repurposes cultural concepts already in circulation. In particular, Plato's myth combines two earlier narratives, the Cadmeian myth of autochthony (according to which inhabitants of Thebes were descended from people who sprang from the soil), and the Hesiodic myth of ages (in which different epochs are represented by different metals).<sup>16</sup> Thus both Gilead's propagandists and Plato's furnish new rationales for their respective societies by fusing and repurposing concepts already present in public consciousness.

If the non-Platonic elements of Gilead's official ideology collectively contribute to a noble lie, we are still left with the question of why it is formed from these particular fragments. Is some commentary being offered on the belief-systems in question? Three of them, Christianity, Marxism and feminism, have often been compared to different aspects of Platonism, and some scholars have even argued for affinities between Platonism and Freudianism.<sup>17</sup> Is there some reason these

particular systems of thought are invoked by Gilead? Or is their appropriation incidental, and the real cause of their use is not anything internal to the belief systems themselves?

### **Corruption in Gilead: Two Explanations**

These then are the two challenges facing any attempt to explain Gilead's Platonic echoes. We need to make sense of the fact that they recall Platonism in a way that also distorts it. And we need to explain why Gilead does the same to doctrines beyond Platonism.

Atwood seems to be dramatizing the way in which various philosophies can be twisted to justify an illiberal social order. If this much seems reasonably apparent, the novel leaves open two different understandings of the factors that contribute to this type of intellectual misuse. One view, which we can call the internal explanation, points to features internal to the philosophies themselves. The other, which we can call the external view, places the blame not on the doctrines in question but on the Gileadean regime and only the regime. Both explanations are worth examining in turn.

The internal explanation is called to mind by scenes in the novel that seem to reflect a liberal feminist sensibility. Such a sensibility is evident in the negative depiction of gender separatism, as it is practiced both in patriarchal Gilead and by more "utopian" strands of feminism. The protagonist also has frequent flashbacks to the time before Gilead, during which her mother is depicted participating in Take Back the Night marches and other activities representative of 1980s feminism. At one point the mother attends a rally in a park where "some women were burning books" (38). Upon closer examination the books turn out to be pornographic magazines. At the time of the novel's publication

there were intra-feminist debates over the efforts of prominent anti-pornography feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who sought to legally classify pornography as a form of sex discrimination, and to grant women the ability to seek legal damages in response to the harms pornography was said to cause.<sup>18</sup> By associating anti-porn feminism with book burning the novel recalls the criticism, often made by liberal feminists, that seeking to suppress pornography through legal means was an illegitimate form of censorship.<sup>19</sup>

If an understanding of liberal feminism helps make sense of more than one scene in the novel, an understanding of liberalism may explain why Gilead chooses to appropriate the philosophies it does. According to the internal explanation, Platonism and the other doctrines are particularly susceptible to such appropriation because each is inadequately committed to liberal values such as egalitarianism and individualism.

The charge that a particular theory is all too likely to be twisted to sinister political ends is a familiar one in political philosophy. A prominent example is found in the work of Judith Shklar. In her famous essay “The Liberalism of Fear,” Shklar argues that political doctrines that were inadequately cosmopolitan were liable to be appropriated by twentieth-century dictatorships. As Shklar put it:

A concern for human freedom cannot stop with the satisfactions of one’s own society or clan. We must therefore be suspicious of ideologies of solidarity, precisely because they are so attractive to those who find liberalism emotionally unsatisfying, and who have gone on in our century to create oppressive and cruel regimes of unparalleled horror.<sup>20</sup>

Shklar's category of "ideologies of solidarity" is naturally read as a reference to nationalism and socialism, which Shklar implies can lend inadvertent support to fascism and Stalinism respectively.<sup>21</sup> Shklar's remark suggests that we should be wary of milder forms of solidarity, such as liberal nationalism or democratic socialism, for fear of such moderate philosophies degenerating into their more extreme counterparts.

Ronald Beiner makes a charge similar to Shklar's in regard to Nietzsche, whose writings were famously seized on by Nazi Germany. While noting that Nietzsche's ideas were distorted by the Nazis, Beiner writes, "he was nonetheless complicit in the Hitlerite appropriation of his legacy because there were things in his oeuvre that invited that appropriation and that made it attractive for Hitler to lay claim to him just as Lenin and Stalin had laid claim to Marx."<sup>22</sup> Despite differences in their analyses, Shklar and Beiner both cite internal features of the philosophies they are concerned with in explaining their vulgarization by illiberal regimes.

The internal explanation frames Gilead's appropriations in a similar light. It is not that Platonism and the other philosophies justify a misogynistic dictatorship when they are rendered accurately. It is rather that it is comparatively easy to rummage through them for elements that, with a bit of retooling, can be used to justify a regime like Gilead. What makes Platonism and the other theories more susceptible to such use is their inadequate concern with moral equality, individual rights and other liberal values. While there are liberal strands of feminism and Christianity, Gilead engages illiberal versions of both. Plato's endorsement of a noble lie, not to mention his rejection of democracy, illustrates his distance from modern liberal egalitarianism. Marx explicitly criticized rights

as reflecting an overly individualistic conception of human beings that ignores our social nature.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Freud's notion of penis envy, although not offered as a political concept, exhibits a familiar political problem in characterizing women as psychically damaged and inferior to men.

The external view offers a different explanation of Gilead's appropriations. It says we should look not to the doctrines themselves but to Gilead in explaining the regime's philosophical distortions. This explanation is called to mind by the frequency with which corruption occurs in Gilead in areas beyond philosophy.

The novel often draws attention to corrupt renderings of words and phrases. For example, the Mayday Underground, a resistance group, uses "mayday" as a password. The text draws attention to how the use of "mayday" as a distress signal originated as a corruption of the French phrase *m'aidez*. Similarly, the protagonist comes across a piece of graffiti in dog Latin, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. If *bastardes* and *carborundorum* were real Latin terms the phrase would mean "don't let the bastards grind you down." The corrupt Latin phrase was written by a handmaid whom the protagonist has replaced. Her corrupt phrase, like *mayday*, can perhaps be read as inspirational rather than threatening. The Gilead regime however deploys corrupt versions of historical phenomena in a manner that is more sinister.

"As we know from the study of history," the novel's epilogue states, "no new system can impose itself on a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter, as witness the pagan elements in medieval Christianity and the evolution of the Russian 'KGB' from the czarist secret police that preceded it; and Gilead is no exception" (305). Gilead incorporates ideas and practices from the pre-Gilead period by turning them into instruments of control.

As the protagonist remarks of Labor Day, "they still have that. Though it didn't use to have anything to do with mothers" (199). Labor Day in other words lives on, but in a form that is shaped by the goals of the sexist and authoritarian state. In a similar way, a museum in an old Massachusetts church repurposes the Puritan period by presenting it as a forerunner of Gilead: "Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors. Admission is free" (31). Needless to say, there are no museums honoring the more recent time when women could show their ankles in public. The past is edited to serve the needs of the regime.

According to the external explanation, philosophical concepts from the pre-Gilead period experience the same fate as do words, holidays and depictions of history. On this view, it so happens that the philosophies in question are those originally expounded by Plato, Marx, Freud and the rest. But the fact that Gilead deploys these particular doctrines is not due to anything distinctive about the doctrines themselves, any more than Gilead's other distortions are due to some distinctive trait about history or holidays. Gilead rather distorts philosophy because it distorts *everything*. Holidays, history, philosophy, science, religion: they are all just so much matter that Gilead and its representatives are happy to repurpose as reinforcements of an oppressive social order.

On the external view, Gilead could just as easily have redeployed any philosophy, as the distorted fragments of Plato and the rest are a result of the regime's own agency. Precisely because the doctrines in question are distorted, it is a mistake to think that any responsibility for their misuse lies in the doctrines themselves.

The larger context of corruption that calls to mind the external view is also consistent with the internal view. What separates the two explanations is not the larger backdrop of corruption against which Gilead's philosophical distortions takes place. It is whether we consider it incidental, or essential, that none of the doctrines that Gilead appropriates are explicitly liberal.

### **The Case for the External Explanation**

Which view best makes sense of Gilead's philosophical distortions? I suggest that we should favour the explanation that best corresponds to how actual states twist received philosophies to justify illiberal measures. Atwood draws attention to such a standard in the book's introduction, when she states that she wanted the regime she depicted to be plausible and "real." "One of my rules was I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the 'nightmare' of history" (xiv). Without wishing to suggest that interpretation must always defer to authorial intent, I suggest a rule similar to Atwood's in deciding between the internal and the external explanation. We should ask which would ultimately make Gilead more representative of regimes of distortion as they exist in reality.

By this standard, the choice between the internal and the external explanation hinges on how plausible it is to think that a real-world equivalent of Gilead or its representatives might twist an explicitly liberal philosophy to justify an illiberal order. It seems worth taking note therefore of a real world case that occurred when apartheid was in effect, and one of the racist system's intellectual defenders attempted to justify it on liberal grounds.

"Rawls, Justice and Apartheid," is a text by G. J. C. Van Wyk, a philosopher at the University of Zululand. Van Wyk was apparently unable to publish his essay,

knowledge of which only survives today because of an article by American philosopher Robert Paul Wolff, which describes a trip Wolff made to South Africa in 1986. Wolff characterized Van Wyk's essay as "by far the most curious bit of philosophical writing that I came across in South Africa." Wolff summarizes its argument as follows:

Leaving aside a lengthy and reasonably accurate summary of *A Theory of Justice*, the argument consists of an appeal, in the realm of what is called non-ideal theory, to Rawls' endorsement of J. S. Mill's well-known version of the white man's burden. Van Wyk cites Rawls' assertion [*A Theory of Justice*, p. 152] that "The denial of equal liberty can be defended only if it is necessary to raise the level of civilization so that in due course these freedoms can be enjoyed," and his subsequent explanation that "it does have to be shown that as the general conception of justice is followed social conditions are eventually brought about under which a lesser than equal liberty would no longer be accepted" [*ibid.*, p. 247]. Van Wyk goes on to rehearse a certain amount of South African history and contemporary experience in an attempt to establish that South Africa, and specifically the basic principle of *apartheid*, does as a matter of empirical fact meet the conditions laid down by Rawls. Inasmuch as "in due course" and "eventually" are terms susceptible of varying interpretations. Van Wyk is able to put at least the color of plausibility [if I may so speak] on his Rawlsian defense of *apartheid*.<sup>24</sup>

Wolff's summary of Van Wyk suggests that the latter viewed Rawls's remarks on non-ideal justice as detachable from Rawls' theory of ideal justice. This runs counter to how Rawls understood the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory. "The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems" at the non-ideal level.<sup>25</sup> Rawls's famous device of the original position is designed to show that discriminatory policies such as apartheid are indefensible. Indeed, it would be difficult to conceive a state policy more at odds with Rawls' theory of

justice than apartheid. Although Van Wyk is concerned with non-ideal justice, his attempt to construct a Rawlsian rationale for state-enforced racism does violence to Rawls's theory as it is concerned with both ideal and non-ideal justice.

*The Republic*, like *A Theory of Justice*, is a work of ideal theory. Socrates' goal is that of "making a theoretical model of a good city," a task that he carefully distinguishes from the claim that such a city can come into existence exactly as he has described it (472d). Just as Van Wyk's analysis is disfigured by racism, Gilead's public ideology is corrupted by sexism. In this way the twisted version of Rawlsianism that Van Wyk presents is a real-world example of philosophical corruption similar to that which Platonism undergoes in Gilead (with the small difference that Van Wyk is not an official representative of the apartheid state). Rawls' work is synonymous with liberal egalitarianism. As such, it would surely be wrong to blame Rawls for the racist appropriation of his work. By the same standard, it is wrong to blame the internal content of Platonism and the other philosophies for what Gilead does to them.

This understanding of Gilead is at odds with what to my knowledge is the only previous attempt to explain the regime's use of Platonism. "In its fundamental features," Vernon Provencal has written, "the Republic of Gilead is a satire of Plato's *Republic*. *The Handmaid's Tale* contains a profound critique of Platonic idealism."<sup>26</sup> A strength of Provencal's reading is that it also addresses the novel's treatment of "utopian" feminism and fundamentalist Christianity. Provencal argues that Atwood's novel brings out how the latter two doctrines share with Platonism the flaw of not paying adequate respect to our embodied nature: each in some sense "seeks the liberation of soul from body," which Provencal argues is a misguided project.<sup>27</sup>

The satirical reading cites the content of Plato's theory to explain its use by Gilead. In this way it is a version of the internal explanation. It suffers in three ways in comparison to the external view.

First, the satirical reading does not account for Gilead's appropriation of Marx and Freud. The novel itself never seems to suggest there is some feature common to both doctrines as well as Platonism, Christianity and utopian feminism, and it is hard to think of any element common to all five theories. Second, the satirical reading struggles to account for the degree to which Gilead distorts Plato. As noted above, Plato may not have been a feminist, but his theory was progressive in the degree to which it endorsed gender egalitarianism. Insofar as his vision of justice avoids the defining injustice of Gilead, Atwood's sexist dystopia is too different from Plato's ideal city to serve as a parody or satire. Of course satires inevitably differ from their targets through exaggeration and other ways. But here the relation is one of total opposition on a subject central to both Plato and Atwood's texts, the relation between the sexes. Finally, the satirical reading's emphasis on the internal content of Platonism would seem to require coming up with a different explanation for Rawls' distortion in South Africa, despite the similarities between that case and what occurs in Atwood's fiction.

For these reasons we should favour the external reading. It characterizes Gilead's ability to distort so many pre-existing doctrines so extensively as a sign of the regime's unchecked power. The regime's representatives can draw from Plato and the rest as they please, because they need not worry about being challenged by a free press or by scholars able to exercise any degree of academic freedom. The philosophies Gilead distorts have no public presence, effectively no reality, beyond that which the regime constructs. The distortions in this way are

an immediate consequence of the regime's dystopianism—of its illiberalism. The external reading moreover does not struggle to make sense of real-world distortions of any philosophy, liberal or otherwise, by illiberal regimes. Already in the case of Gilead, it regards blaming a given theory for its misuse as a form of blaming the victim. This judgement remains unchanged when we apply the external standard to appropriations of impeccably liberal doctrines.

The external explanation does not prevent us from noting and criticizing genuine affinities between Plato and Gilead, such as their mutual hostility to democracy. There is no suggestion in the novel however that Gilead is undemocratic *because* of Plato. The sheer scope of the regime's distortions rather suggests that its oppressive practices are not sourced in any of the philosophies it corrupts. In Gilead, the desire to control the populace, particularly the female populace, is prior to any engagement with philosophical texts. And so it assaults texts with the same drive to control that it brings to bear on the bodies of handmaids. Because the regime is untroubled by what the texts actually say, nothing in the texts themselves makes them more or less likely to be twisted in this way, so as to serve the regime's one true philosophy, that of turning women into vessels of reproduction.

As noted above, the internal view has a long history in political philosophy. Such a view should not be mistaken for one that seeks to identify how a given regime accurately reflects or is causally influenced by a particular doctrine, which is of course unobjectionable. Our concern however has been with how illiberal regimes invoke philosophies in a manner that is not faithful to what they say. In the case of real illiberal regimes, the external view entails that the regimes themselves bear the blame for corrupt instantiations of the ideas they invoke.

This it at odds with how some philosophers have responded to state distortions of previous thinkers. “In the case of Marxism, you have a recoding by the state,” Gilles Deleuze once wrote.<sup>28</sup> Deleuze subsequently tried to write philosophy in a new style, one that would give his work “a means of escaping all forms of codification.”<sup>29</sup> A final lesson of Plato’s reception in Gilead is that the goal of writing in a manner that prevents a text from being “recoded” or misappropriation by a state is impossible.<sup>30</sup> Even an explicitly anarchist text, like a scrupulously liberal or an ancient Platonic one, is not immune to appropriation by representatives of illiberal regimes who are too prejudiced to accurately reconstruct a text’s meaning, if they are even concerned with fidelity at all.

### **Conclusion**

The external explanation of Gilead’s distortion of Plato might seem to ultimately offer a demoralizing lesson. This would be the case if it entailed that we can never find new meaning in a text beyond what an author has intended. But nothing in Atwood’s rendering of Gilead commits us to this pessimistic view. Gilead does not openly admit that it is going beyond what is present in the texts it employs. We thus avoid Gilead’s practice whenever we acknowledge that a text inspires in us thoughts that venture beyond those that the author likely intended. Not only this, but Gilead denies most of its female subjects the ability to determine possible alternative meanings, and so the ability to hold the regime accountable for its teachings, by denying most women the ability to read. When it comes to “misreading” that is done openly or in a way that allows others to check our interpretations, the novel never associates these practices with the authoritarian form of misreading practiced in Gilead.

Another way Plato's fate in Gilead's would be demoralizing is if it suggested that the philosophical texts could never influence political authorities or actors in a positive way. We might think for example that individuals in positions of power will inevitably distort philosophical doctrines to suit their own interests. Alternatively, reading philosophy might simply not have the motivational power to influence political actors one way or another.<sup>31</sup> But the novel does not support these pessimistic conclusions either. It is not just that the Quakers in the novel provide an example of a belief system whose adherents work actively, and sometimes effectively, to undermine the regime. Gilead, like every authoritarian regime, suppresses free inquiry as such. This of course is unsurprising. The freedom to examine, endorse and revise our beliefs represents a core liberal freedom that, when it is allowed to flourish, is fatally at odds with the conformity that authoritarianism seeks to impose.<sup>32</sup> Philosophy and the freedom to engage in it are corrupted and suppressed in Gilead, not because they represent a form of powerlessness, but precisely because they represent a source of political imagination that closed regimes are right to fear.

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<sup>1</sup> For critics who emphasize the novel's dystopianism, its depiction of a backlash to feminism, or both, see Lois Feuer, "The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38/2 (1997), 83-95; Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition." *Canadian Literature* 112 (1987), 9-16; David Ketterer, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia." *Science Fiction Studies* 16/2 (1989), 209-217; Shirley Neuman, "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 75/3 (2006), 857-868; and Fiona Tolan, "Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as Critique of Second Wave Feminism," *Women: A Cultural Review* 16/1 (2005), 18-32.

<sup>2</sup> My understanding of the novel's allusions to Plato owes a debt to Vernon Provencal. See his "'Byzantine in the Extreme': Plato's *Republic* in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Classical and Modern*

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*Literature: A Quarterly* 19/1 (1998): 53-77. Although I criticize Provencal's interpretation of Gilead as a satire of Plato's *Republic* below, my article was made possible by his.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Evans Grubbs, "Infant Exposure and Infanticide," *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Ancient World*, Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkins eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83-107. The possibility of a stranger adopting an exposed infant would explain how the rulers could "bring them back again," a possibility Plato refers to in the *Timaeus* (19a).

<sup>4</sup> John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe From Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 82.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998 [1985]). All quotations are from this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted all quotations are from *Plato: Complete Works*. John Cooper and Douglas Hutchinson, eds. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Julia Annas argues that the motives of Plato's egalitarianism distinguish it from feminism. See "Plato's *Republic* and Feminism," *Philosophy* 51/197 (1976): 307-21. For a view that associates Plato with feminism due to the rights that he extends equally to men and women see Gregory Vlastos, "Was Plato a Feminist?," *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, Nancy Tuana, ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994): 11-23.

<sup>8</sup> See Vlastos, "Was Plato a Feminist?."

<sup>9</sup> "Pen is Envy" also appears in Atwood's sequel novel. See *The Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 140.

<sup>10</sup> Grant Gillette, "Moral Authenticity and the Unconscious," in *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, Michael Levine ed. (Routledge: New York, 2000), 177-92.

<sup>11</sup> This is well documented by Tolan, "Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty." See note one.

<sup>12</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Feminist separatism is often credited to Cell 16, a Boston feminist group established in the late 1960s, who advocated celibacy as part of a commitment to what Echols terms "heterosexual separatism." See *Daring to be Bad*, 164. Second-wave feminists distinguished separatism as "personal practice" from separatism as a "political position." See "Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for The Women's Movement," Hyde Park Chapter, Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 1972. Available at <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/chisocfem.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Schofield, "The Noble Lie." *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*. G. Ferrari ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 138-164.

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<sup>15</sup> The second translation is from *The Republic of Plato*. Second edition. Allan Bloom, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1991 [1968]).

<sup>16</sup> Catalin Partenie, "Plato's Myths", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/plato-myths/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche famously termed Christianity Platonism for the masses, while Karl Popper (however implausibly) joined Plato with Marx as a progenitor of modern authoritarianism in *The Open Society and its Enemies Volume One: The Spell of Plato*. Fifth Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1966). For affinities between Platonism and feminism see the essay by Vlastos cited above in note seven as well as the volume in which it appears. For affinities between Plato and Freud see John Farrell, "The Birth of the Psychoanalytic Hero: Freud's Platonic Leonardo," *Philosophy and Literature* 31/2 (2007), 233-54. According to Farrell, "Freud's Eros is a mirror image of the Platonic and finds there its true model. Freud was aware that, when it came to the doctrine of Eros as the fundamental intellectual force, he and Plato were in agreement. The difference between them arises only when we set Eros in relation to truth. For Plato, Eros ultimately seeks truth as its fulfillment, however much human beings must strain the horses of their nature in the right direction. Freud's Eros, by contrast, is an Eros of error: it achieves fulfillment in the life of fantasy" (246-7).

<sup>18</sup> *The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the debate see Nadine Strossner, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women's Rights*. Second Edition. (New York: New York University Press, 2000 [1995]).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Nancy Rosenblum ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 36.

<sup>21</sup> For Shklar's hostility to liberal nationalism see Sanford Levinson, "Is liberal nationalism an oxymoron? An essay for Judith Shklar," *Ethics* 3/105 (1995): 626-645. For Shklar's opposition to socialism by the time she wrote "The Liberalism of Fear," see Andreas Hess, *The Political Theory of Judith N. Shklar: Exile from Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2019), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Nonsense Upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man*, Jeremy Waldron ed. (Routledge: New York, 2015), 137-50.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Paul Woolf, "Philosophy in South Africa Today," *The Philosophical Forum*, 18/2-3 (1986-7), 98-9. Square brackets in original.

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<sup>25</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Provencal, "Byzantine in the Extreme," 73.

<sup>27</sup> Provencal, "Byzantine in the Extreme," 73.

<sup>28</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Nomadic Thought," in *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-74*. David Lapoujade, ed. Michael Taomina, trans. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004): 252-61, 253..

<sup>29</sup> François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*. Deborah Glassman trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 13. This remark is by Dosse, paraphrasing Deleuze.

<sup>30</sup> This would explain how Deleuze's own work could be appropriated by members of the Israeli Defense Forces to justify Operation Defensive Shield, a 2002 military incursion in the West Bank. See Eyal Weizman, "Walking Through Walls: Soldiers as Architects in the Israel Palestine Conflict," *Radical Philosophy* March-April/136 (2006): 8-22.

<sup>31</sup> For an example of this view see Richard Posner, *Problematics of Moral and Legal Philosophy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> For discussion see Ronald Dworkin, *Why Academic Freedom? Freedom's Law: The Moral Reading of The American Constitution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 244-60.