

BOOK REVIEW

The Rhetoric of Plato's Republic. By JAMES L KASTELY. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 262. Hardcover, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-226-27862-9.

While acknowledging that the *Republic* is doing many things, Kastely argues that Plato's book should be read primarily as a work of rhetorical theory. The preface and first chapter give an overview of Kastely's explanation for this unusual view, which is recapitulated in the study's concluding chapter. The nine chapters in between offer a step-by-step commentary on the *Republic* (using Tom Griffith's translation and rarely mentioning other dialogues). Because his commentary endeavors to find consummate unity in the apparent chaos of Plato's book, Kastely necessarily makes many specific claims along the way that could be debated, but his deepest convictions are clearly reiterated throughout the study, and here I will focus mainly on some salient aspects of his general argument.

According to Kastely, the main goal of the *Republic* is to encourage philosophers to foster a mode of persuasion that will be relevant and beneficial to non-philosophers facing the practical, contingent realities of political life in a democracy. Philosophy would thereby persuade citizens to desire the foundational values proper to their democratic political world. "If political identity is a consequence of participation in a culturally valued narrative, Socrates must point this out and then replace the current narrative with a new one that alters the citizens' desire" (212). Sentences having this sort of structure (if x is the case, then the *Republic* must be doing y) are common in Kastely's study, reflecting the way he builds up a framework of claims and key words that guide his extended reading of the *Republic's* trajectory, which he calls a "narrative arc" (213).

In order to make this argument about the *Republic* as a whole—to show that Plato's work ultimately coheres around the systematic promotion of a liberating philosophical rhetoric—Kastely develops an expansive, flexible account of what rhetoric is or could be. Rhetoric here refers to the potential for a revolutionary sort of narrative to persuade the general public that certain values extolled by

philosophers, such as justice, are desirable. In the first book of the dialogue, Plato shows us that Socrates' way of talking may overpower but does not really persuade its audience, which includes the general public. Thus, as a mimetic example of what philosophical rhetoric needs to do in response to "the failure of Book I" (45), the *Republic* is seen to be a rhetorically motivated narrative meant to change the desires of the citizenry, but not by persuading people to adopt a fixed ideological position; instead, it could free them to reconstitute their own beliefs. Kastely's Plato thereby takes the notion of rhetorical persuasion into unfamiliar territory, where rhetoric becomes a practice designed to persuade the general public to desire this same rhetorical practice, which would be a philosophical "way to think about and speak about justice" (22).

Kastely adds a new and unusual angle to recent scholarly efforts (such as Christopher Rowe's 2007 *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, for example) that have sought to explain Plato's authorship in terms of purposeful rhetorical strategies. Where some might take Plato to have designed the *Republic* to educate readers about truths that can be found by way of careful investigation, Kastely turns his focus (and locates Plato's focus) away from truths and inquiry per se and toward the problem of how to talk *about* philosophical truths and inquiry. Insofar as such truths or values are always historically determined and learned by way of preexisting cultural discourses, Plato's main concern in the *Republic* is accordingly to intervene in this passive acculturation and to empower readers so that they may participate in democratic life with greater awareness of their discursive conditioning. The kind of conversation pursued by Plato's characters, made particularly appealing by its use of nonliteral imagery, could show readers how to reconsider afresh the values on which their society is based.

This book seems decidedly contemporary to me, both in its conviction that philosophy is obliged to assist the general public in a project of democratic renewal and in its call for a radical questioning of cultural constructions. Indeed, Kastely's references to discourse, rhetorical constructs, and the like make Plato sound rather like Foucault, although Kastely here never mentions the latter; he finds such notions expressed by Plato himself. And Kastely makes a point of distinguishing Plato's conception of philosophical rhetoric from "a deconstructive moment in which philosophy encounters the inherent instability of its own discourse" (210). Nevertheless, Kastely's take on Plato speaks more forcefully about the need for citizens to question their received opinions than about how such questioning is bound to lead toward democratic truths. Wherever it might lead,

Kastely's defense of Platonic questioning ultimately seeks to reaffirm and celebrate the most basic Socratic ideals of self-examination and collaborative inquiry.

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