

BOOK REVIEW

Plato's Republic: A Critical Guide. Edited by MARK L. MCPHERRAN. Cambridge Critical Guides. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 273. Hardcover, £53.00/\$90.00. ISBN 978-0-521-49190-7.

As McPherran observes in his introduction, this collection of twelve essays is not for those just beginning to explore the *Republic*, but is most suited for scholars pursuing more advanced paths of academic study. Each of these essays is clearly written and well organized, and the book offers a fresh and thought-provoking body of inquiry. While accessible to all readers who have studied the *Republic*, this book will resonate best with philosophers drawn to the kinds of logical quandaries that arise when one looks for consistency in the arguments deployed by Socrates over the course of a Platonic dialogue; most of the essays revisit fairly specific cruxes that have been previously identified and pondered by modern scholars. (Zena Hitz on degenerate regimes and Malcolm Schofield on music are notable for addressing neglected topics.) Most of the papers here had their genesis in a colloquium on ancient philosophy held at the University of Arizona, Tucson; the resulting collection brings together distinguished philosophical perspectives on a full range of topics, including politics, moral psychology, education, mimesis, the divided line, and the structure of the dialogue.

In the present review, it will be possible only to indicate some trends and exceptions found in the volume. An installment in a series of guides to philosophical criticism, the book presents a fairly homogeneous picture of how contemporary scholars approach Plato's dialogues. Issues of character, setting, and the like are largely ignored in favor of analytic literalism. The work here is dominated by the careful (sometimes superfine) teasing out of logical claims and arguments, arguments that Plato is understood to be endorsing, but which nonetheless require further explanation. Guided by the assumption that Plato must have meant to communicate a consistent, coherent, logical, and (more or less) linear series of arguments, the authors regularly address certain apparent inadequacies—unfortunate or infelicitous misunderstandings that stem from Plato's indirectness as well as from our own limitations.

Accordingly, these scholars often set out to reconstruct Plato's arguments, correcting mismatches between the author's form of expression and our own powers of comprehension. In these readings, puzzling parts of the *Republic* present a challenge to the dialogue's status as a logically coherent whole. So, for example, Rachana Kamtekar is concerned with rescuing Socrates' defense of justice from being occluded by the apparently irrelevant but lengthily elaborated ideal city of the *Republic*; she does this by viewing the city as a primarily ethical (rather than political) part of the dialogue's argumentation. Nicholas D. Smith answers the "happy philosopher problem" by suggesting that the return of (potential) philosophers to the cave can fit into the logic of the dialogue if we understand happiness in terms of Socrates' explanation of psychological harmony. Christopher Shields, arguing that the soul in Socrates' account may be understood as having aspectual rather than compositional parts, is able to reconcile the soul's tripartition with its immortality. Shields thereby "saves Plato" (167), or our interpretation of his text, from a contradiction that would ultimately seem to undermine Socrates' explanation of justice. And Malcolm Schofield reconciles two seemingly incompatible versions of mimesis presented in the *Republic* by directing our focus to the importance of music, using evidence from Plato's *Laws* to support his striking claim that "the few pages on music in the *Republic* give us a keener insight into its theory of the shaping of the human soul than anything else in the dialogue" (246).

Some of the essays are less conclusive. McPherran observes multiple ways in which the Myth of Er seems to weaken "the *Republic*'s entire project of adumbrating a theory of justice" (135); unlike his fellow contributors, however, McPherran displays an unusual willingness to leave a puzzle standing, and he invites readers confronting Socrates' account of the afterlife to "admire and commiserate with Plato on the size of the problem he raised but did not solve" (143). In an essay containing references to an amusing range of modern Atlantises, Julia Annas anchors the Atlantis story in the *Republic*'s emphasis on the intrinsic value of virtuous behavior; at the same time, Annas suggests that the story (like Socrates' description of the cave, she might have added) may really have been too seductive for Plato's purposes.

The contributions by G. R. F. Ferrari and Rachel Barney, which open the volume, are distinguished by broader and especially fertile topics. Ferrari confronts the underlying and pervasive problem of Socrates' reluctant participation in the dialogue's recorded conversation. Socrates' role as an internal narrator, observes Ferrari, draws attention to Plato's authorial control. And Barney takes

the highly original approach of considering ring composition, typically associated with Homeric verse, as a philosophically significant aspect of Plato's writing.

The essays in this book rely on various translations of the *Republic* and Plato's other works, with transliterated Greek provided for key textual details. Each essay is accompanied by endnotes, while the back matter contains a bibliography of works cited, an index of passages, and an index of names and subjects. The book is handsome, well edited, and—given the range, density, and number of contributions—pleasingly slender.

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