COLLOQUIUM 8

YET ANOTHER WAY TO READ THE REPUBLIC?

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ABSTRACT
It is argued that a variety of attempts by commentators to identify the underlying doctrines of the Republic have all failed and that the nature of the difficulties that confront anyone who attempts to identify them has too often been misunderstood. Plato’s principal intention in the Republic was to present his readers not with a set of doctrines, but with an aporia and to challenge those readers to think their own way through it and out of it. Accounts of the character of Glaucon, Adeimantus, and other members of Socrates’ audience, of the exposition of the diagram of the Line, of the justifications of justice, and of Plato’s jokes are advanced in support of this interpretation. And it is finally suggested that Plato directs his readers’ attention to one possible way of resolving the central aporia.

In this paper I argue that in the Republic Plato’s primary concern is to present us not with a theory, but with an aporia. It is an aporia that Plato confronted as a result of developing a number of independent lines of thought about Forms. The outcome of these developments had been a characterization of Forms such that it had become puzzling what kind of educational transformation a mind must undergo, if it was to become capable of apprehending Forms. The Republic is often interpreted as if its primary purpose was to present and to defend a set of theses both about the nature of Forms and about the nature of that educational transformation. And commonly those who interpret the Republic in this way conclude that Plato was in a variety of ways wrong-headed and mistaken, the evidence for this being drawn from what are taken to be the unsatisfactory arguments that Socrates advances to his interlocutors.

Against this I want to suggest that Plato’s views and arguments are not to be identified with those put into the mouth of Socrates, that Plato was well aware of at least some of the incoherences and confusions in those views and arguments, and that his presentation of them is an invitation to his readers—and doubtless originally to his hearers—to join him in thinking through the aporia with which he is engaged. I do not expect those who know the text of the Republic best, the philosophers and scholars who have commented on that text, to find this interpretation compelling, in part because the assumptions that I bring to the text are in important ways at odds with theirs. I therefore begin by identifying and putting in question some of those assumptions.
I. The Project: Putting the Commentators to the Question

The literature on the Republic is so vast that it seems foolhardy to add to it. It seems that everything worth saying must have been said and indeed, were we to read our way through the commentators, ancient, medieval and modern, as a prologue to writing about the Republic, death would intervene before we began to write. Yet this Great Too Much itself poses an initial question: Why did it not inhibit more writers in the latter part of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twentyfirst?

Consider the genre of the one-volume or long essay introduction to the Republic, taking note only of what is in English. Such introductions rely on translations and the first of them were sequels to two nineteenth century translations, that by Davies and Vaughan, published in 1852, and that by Jowett, published in 1871. The earliest commentaries were both by pupils of Jowett, Bernard Bosanquet and R. L. Nettleship, in 1895 and 1901. Bosanquet used Davies and Vaughan, Nettleship generally followed Jowett, although making his own translations when he quoted. There is then a gap of fifty years until N. R. Murphy’s The Interpretation of Plato’s Republic in 1951. But after that no decade lacks its commentary: R. C. Cross and A. D. Woollery in 1964, Leo Rauch’s Monarch notes in 1965, a volume of essays edited by Alexander Sesonske in 1966, Alan Bloom’s translation and commentary in 1968, Nicholas P. White in 1979, Julia Annas and C. D. C. Reeve in the nineteen eighties, Nickolas Pappas, Sean P. Sayers and Daryl H. Rice in the nineteen nineties, Harry Eyres in 2001, Basil Mitchell and J. R. Lucas as coauthors in 2003, Stanley Rosen in 2005, the Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic in 2006, and last, but not least, the Cliffs Notes, of which there are two sets, a shorter one by Mary Ellen Cross in her Greek Classics in 2001, preceded by a longer one by Thomas Thornburg, in 2000. This makes a total of eighteen one volume commentaries in English, all of them of some value and some outstanding, in just over one hundred years. Whence this astonishing flow?

Part of the answer is: the market. Introductory philosophy teachers often use the Republic and the production of English translations for them matches that of commentaries: two in the eighteenth century, four in the nineteenth, at least fourteen in the twentieth, one already in the twentyfirst. Commentaries, like translations, sell. And publishers believe that commentaries can mediate between the Great Too Much of Platonic scholarship and the basic needs of unsophisticated students and of their teachers, who may themselves be philosophically sophisticated, but are rarely Plato scholars. Yet on the face of it the Republic is not an obscure text, but strikingly accessible. Certainly students do need to be guided through its