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Newsletter of the Society for the Study of Greek Political Thought

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C. D. C. Reeve, Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's "Republic"

(Princeton, Princeton U. P. 1988), pp. xv + 350, \$35.00/£20-90. ISBN 0 691 07320 0.

C. D. C. Reeve has written a book that contains stimulating insights and arguments. His analyses of individual passages are both original and plausible; the reader will learn much and be goaded to rethink numerous aspects of his understanding of the Republic. Yet this estimable material is embedded in an overall interpretation of the work that is so wildly implausible that one wonders how Reeve can seriously advance it.

In his Preface Reeve says that his intention is to explode four "interpretive myth[s]" about the Republic. Very briefly, the myths are as follows (pp. xi-xii): (a) that the work contains a theory of transcendent, separate, knowable forms, that alone are completely real and completely knowable, in contrast to the sensible world, which is neither; (b) that the Republic is "neither a philosophically nor an artistically unified work," in that Books I and X do not seem to fit, the three central images of Sun, Line, and Cave are not philosophically coherent, and for other reasons as well; (c) that the political theory of the work centers upon a totalitarian police state; (d) that the work's central argument is vitiated by equivocation, in that "Plato sets out to defend justice but ends up defending something else altogether." In countering the myths, Reeve attempts to present a unified interpretation of the Republic, free from these defects.

Because orthodox interpretations of the work are predicated on the myths, Reeve resolutely places himself in opposition to traditional scholars:

Philosopher-Kings is a revisionist work, a work which casts the Republic in a new and heterodox light." (p. xii).

An additional aspect of Reeve's interpretive stance bears mention. His

approach to Plato is that of the analytical philosopher. He is a professor of philosophy and it is primarily for other philosophers that he writes (p. xii), although, while portions of the work will be tough sledding for non-philosophers, he hopes to attract a wider audience as well. The reader cannot but pause when Reeve claims that central elements of the scholarly consensus on the Republic are completely wrong. What appears to move Reeve is his desire to rescue Plato from an unspoken fifth interpretive myth, that the Republic is not a sophisticated philosophical composition, when assessed against contemporary standards. Reeve's self-consciously philosophical stance appears to lie behind his attempt to uncover a side of Plato that has not only gone unnoticed for hundreds of years but is also central to the argument of the work.

In discussing the work I will say something briefly about the interpretive myths before turning to the central argument.

Clearly, the four myths are a mixed lot. Leaving aside the rhetorical excesses of Reeve's specific accounts, I think it is fair to say that versions of all four are indeed interpretive orthodoxy among Plato scholars--to the extent that a consensus can be found within this deeply divided group. However, in three of the four cases, Reeve's presentation is forced. For instance, in his discussion of Book I, he attempts to demonstrate its integral connection with the rest of the work. On the whole, little in his discussion is surprising or original. The most original portions, his analysis of Thrasymachus' argument (pp. 10-22), strike me as incorrect. For instance, his reinterpretation of Thrasymachus' response to Clitophon, which has long puzzled commentators, leaves us with a view that amounts to a restatement of Clitophon's position--or at least presents no reason why Thrasymachus finds it necessary to reject Clitophon's suggestion (pp. 11-15, esp. 15). At the conclusion of his discussion of Book I, Reeve states that he has shown that "Book I is clearly a cohesive and intelligent component of the Republic as

a whole." (p. 23) But few commentators would disagree. For instance, on page 1 of his translation of the Republic (Indianapolis, 1974), G. M. A. Grube writes that Book I "forms an excellent introduction to the whole Republic." On this point there is near universal agreement.

Reeve makes the stronger claim that Book I is "a brilliant critique of Socrates, every aspect of which is designed to reveal a flaw in his theories." (p. 23) But if we set aside the overstatement here, we still have a claim that will generate little controversy. Many commentators have read Book I as depicting Socratic moral and political theory; to the extent that Plato moves beyond this in the remaining Books it is not surprising that the weaknesses of Socratic thought are apparent in Book I.

Reeve bases his interpretation of the Republic as a whole most heavily upon its psychological doctrines, in the light of which the metaphysical and epistemological views are interpreted. Thus Plato's psychology is "the royal highroad to understanding his metaphysics and epistemology." (p. xiii) Probably Reeve's most impressive achievement is to integrate these aspects of Plato's view into a tightly knit system. A representative claim is that the four cognitive states presented in the image of the divided line "are not the component faculties of a single psyche, but the complete 'mind frames' of psyches of different types," in which kinds of desire are integrated with their corresponding cognitive states (p. 56).

An idea of how radical Reeve's conclusions are is seen in his account of the metaphysical views that his system requires, his assault upon the first of the four myths. His position defies brief restatement. Roughly, central to Reeve's account is a view of the good as an ordered system in which all desires can be satisfied. On earth such a system is instantiated only in the just city constructed by philosopher-kings. The form of the good, then, is interpreted in the light of the

political activity of the philosophers: "We know that the good itself is the structure of the polis in which the philosopher-king believes he will best satisfy his ruling desire for the pleasure of knowing the truth." (p. 99) This demythologized good is one aspect of Reeve's de-Platonized theory of forms. He wages frontal assault upon the separateness and transcendence of the forms, arguing that the Republic contains a theory of forms very different from that of the other middle dialogues (Meno, Phaedo, Symposium, Phaedrus). In the other middle dialogues forms are self-predicating exemplars that are known through recollection. Reeve argues that because recollection and self-predication are absent from the Republic, the metaphysical theory in this work should be identified more closely with those of the later dialogues. The Republic thus constitutes a break from the problem-ridden metaphysics of the middle dialogues, which Plato criticizes in the Parmenides. This account runs up against the problem that the Phaedrus, which is generally dated on grounds of both stylometry and substance later than the Republic, contains the theory of recollection. Undeterred, Reeve argues that it must come earlier (p. 299 n. 56).

There is a great deal more to Reeve's account than I can mention here. His discussion continually fluctuates between points that are highly interesting and others that can be dismissed out of hand. Throughout his psychological, metaphysical, and epistemological discussions, he sheds interesting new light on numerous issues. One of many brilliant insights is his elaboration of the well-known fact that, as described by Plato, each of the parts of the soul has cognitive components. Again, unifying psychological, metaphysical, and epistemological doctrines, Reeve argues that not only does each part think, but the thought processes of the different parts can be identified with the different cognitive stages on the divided line. Other aspects of Reeve's attempt to systematize the Republic seem forced. Examples are his search for movements

from appetitive to honor-loving to philosophic souls in Republic I, and in subsequent stages of the development of the just city. Moreover, one of his central insights, building on his analysis of the good, that each type of man, ruled by a particular psychic urge, identifies the good with the structure of the particular kind of polis in which that urge could best be satisfied, is improbable, to say the least (on which, more below). But again, other points are illuminating, e.g., the account of the relationship between "science" and dialectic on the divided line (Chap. II, sec. 9).

In regard to things political, Reeve argues that Kallipolis is intended to further the happiness of all inhabitants, with all aspects of the state carefully tailored to this end. He defends Plato from specific objections to his allowing his rulers to lie, and his treatment of invalids, infants, women, slaves, poetry, and the apparent absence of individual freedom in the just city. The result is a relentlessly cheerful view of Plato's state: "Each of its members has his needs satisfied, and is neither maltreated nor coerced nor the victim of false ideology. Each is educated and trained so as to develop a conception of the world, and his place in it, which is as close to the truth as his nature, fully developed with an eye to his maximal happiness, permits. Each has his ruling desires satisfied throughout life. Thus each develops his real interests and is made really happy." (p. 231) Reeve presents this view as "unorthodox," a corrective to previous misbegotten scholarship in which Plato's political theory has been unjustly reviled (p. 170). But aside from the sustained effort to cast Plato in the most favorable possible light, little here is striking or particularly controversial. Possible exceptions are Reeve's attempts to sort out different stages in the development of the ideal polis (Chap. 4, Secs. 4-8) and his attempt to reconcile the discussions of imitative poetry in Books III and X (Sec. 13). But for students of Plato's political theory it must be noted that this chapter is the least interesting of the



book.

In closing I will briefly comment upon Reeve's central metaphysical argument, as this strikes me as indefensible, gravely weakening the thesis of the book as a whole. As noted above, one of Reeve's major claims is that the good is the structure of the just city, ruled over by philosophers. This claim is central to his identification of each type of man's conception of the good with the type of polis in which his ruling desires would be satisfied. Reeve's main argument for this claim is both hasty and surprisingly weak. Very briefly, on the basis of a single passage wrested from its context in Book X (601d1-602a1), Reeve presents the bald statement that according to Plato "only users of a thing have knowledge of it." (p. 83) (He also finds support for this view in Cratylus 390b1-c12, cited in the notes, p. 292 n. 31.) If, as we know, the philosophers in the just city are knowers, it follows that they must be users. What then do they use? The art of polis management, "for they spend fifteen years engaged in it before they can have knowledge of the good (539e2-540c2). What they have knowledge of in actual use, then, is a polis." (p. 83) Since the culmination of the philosophers' education is their ascent to knowledge of the good and what they know is the good polis, it follows that the good must be the good polis.

Even if this brief summary does not do full justice to Reeve, if this statement is even roughly correct, the position is so far-fetched that the reader must be brought short. It is obvious that only the most careful presentation of the evidence could lead the reader even seriously to entertain Reeve's view. But in this respect Philosopher-Kings is deficient. In fact, Reeve's view stands in clear defiance of the central text, Rep. 539e. The crucial sentence in 539e, in Grube's translation, is as follows: "...after that [five years of training in dialectic] they must go down into the cave for you, and they must be compelled to rule on matters of war and the government of youth, so that they shall not be

inferior to others in experience." This is the only passage in the Republic in which Plato directly discusses the philosophers' need for practical administrative experience. What is especially notable is that, according to Plato, the reason that the philosophers need this training is "so that they shall not be inferior to others in experience" (539e4-5). Thus Plato distinguishes these fifteen years from other aspects of the philosophers' curriculum. The fifteen years are intended to supplement the scientific training that is necessary to grasp the good with practical experience necessary for successful political rule. But for Reeve, administrative experience is an essential accompaniment of dialectic: "the five year course in dialectic and the fifteen years of practical politics that would show him how to chart the pathways to the intelligible" (p. 97); "no one can know the good itself unless he has mastered the mathematical sciences and dialectic and has had fifteen years' experience in practical politics" (p. 108).

Thus I believe that at the heart of the book lies an argument that is not adequately defended and flies in the face of virtually all conventional scholarship. In a book in which great care is devoted to many details, Reeve would have done well more carefully to establish the center of his interpretation.

George Klosko

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#### LONDON CONFERENCE 1989

The Society held a one day conference at University College London, organised by Fred Rosen (University College London). The following papers were given: Michael Stokes (University of Durham), 'Some Pleasures in Republic IX'; Stephen Everson (Oxford University), 'Moral Education and the State'; and Claude Pehrson (Middlesex Polytechnic), 'Plato's Gods'.