



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Why Plato Wrote by Danielle S. Allen

Review by: George Klosko

Source: *Political Theory*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 343-346

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23484425>

Accessed: 09-09-2017 14:18 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.


Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Sage Publications, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Political Theory*

Book Reviews

Political Theory
41(2) 343–354
© 2012 SAGE Publications
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
ptx.sagepub.com


Why Plato Wrote, by Danielle S. Allen. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
232 pp.

Reviewed by: George Klosko, *University of Virginia, Charlottesville*
DOI: 10.1177/0090591712470630

If Socrates, Plato's revered teacher, was an exclusively oral teacher, why did Plato find it necessary to write, especially in view of his denigration of writing in the *Phaedrus* and other works? To this question, Danielle Allen provides a political answer. She believes Plato wrote in order to influence Athenian culture and politics. He "wrote—not solely but consistently—to change Athenian culture and thereby transform Athenian politics" (p. 4). In order to make this case, Allen proceeds from two directions. Part I of the book examines Plato's philosophy of language, to support her claims concerning his faith in the efficacy of the written word. Part II is a detailed exploration of Athenian politics and culture in the late fourth century—largely after Plato had died—in order to demonstrate the extent to which his efforts succeeded.

Allen's attention to Plato's philosophy of language is in contrast to the more common practice of beginning accounts of his political theory with his metaphysics. In her view, Plato cared deeply about language that works, and so about symbols, of which there are good and bad forms. "Images" (*eidôla*), imitate only appearances. The other kind of symbols, referred to by terms such as "theoretical models" (*paradeigma logôî*) or "paradigms" (*paradeigmata*), are based on truth (p. 29). According to Allen, Plato views the philosopher in the *Republic* as a "model-maker," that is, a maker of symbols that are rooted in truth, and that symbols so constructed have the power to "mold souls" (e.g., p. 50). Because the power of symbols can be conveyed in written as well as spoken language, in writing the dialogues, Plato too was a maker of symbols. Famous images and allegories in the *Republic* are symbols of the proper sort; the work "both is itself and also conveys theoretical models" (p. 75). In Allen's view, Plato's faith in the power of language, including written language, was "optimistic in the extreme" (181n29). Plato "makes the strongest possible

case that I know of for language as a potential cause of social and political change” (p. 6).

Having established Plato’s belief in the power of writing, in Part II of the book, Allen argues that his writings had the desired effects. Mainly through examination of fourth-century political speeches, she argues that Plato introduced a new conceptual vocabulary into Athenian culture and politics. For instance, a series of speeches discuss rehabilitative conceptions of punishment and accompanying vocabulary that she identifies as distinctively Platonic. In addition, she claims that Plato’s views helped to foment a late fourth century “culture war” that broke out in Athens. She also considers legislative reforms in Athens that may have been influenced by Plato’s writings. For instance, military training for young men was likely reformed during this period along lines put forth in the *Laws*. While some evidence Allen examines seems to me rather forced, proper assessment of this material requires greater expertise than I possess. An outstanding feature of Allen’s book is her ability to combine philosophical sophistication and originality with unusual mastery of late fourth-century Athenian politics and culture—far beyond the competence of most Plato scholars.

In the book’s final section, “Epilogue And to my Colleagues,” Allen makes a case for the kind of endeavor in which she believes Plato engaged. One reason she is interested in this kind of activity is her view that it can be effective in the contemporary world as well.

As one can tell from this brief summary, Allen breaks new ground in regard to both Plato’s philosophy of language and his influence on Athenian culture and politics. However, even though her accomplishments in both areas are impressive, I believe she overstates her case in both.

I believe Allen’s account of Plato’s philosophy of language is weakened considerably by inattention to his moral psychology. What is missing is recognition of Plato’s belief in the power of appetite and extraordinary measures that must be taken to make people virtuous in spite of it. For instance, Allen interprets what she calls the “garden of symbols” described in *Republic III* (401d–02c) as demonstrating the great effects that symbolic representations can have on young children, before they develop the ability to reason. What Allen leaves out is that, in order to work effectively, artistic symbols must do so in a completely controlled environment, in which they do not have to compete with conflicting symbols of the wrong kind. In a nutshell, one of Plato’s principal political arguments is that, because of the power of appetite, in order to make people virtuous, one must raise them in an environment that is free from artistic media that appeal to appetite in destructive ways. Hence of course Plato’s insistence on censoring not only poetry but all other artistic media.

It is largely because of the need to control the environment that philosophers must also have political power. In several contexts, Allen discusses a passage in Book VI in which Socrates says that the philosopher rulers will look toward the “natures of justice, beauty, moderation, and the like,” and impose these on their subjects’ souls (*Rep.* 501b; Grube/Reeves, trans.). Allen rightly says that this description of the philosophers’ activity concerns what she identifies as the good form of imitation (pp. 36–37). However, she overlooks the immediately preceding passage, in which Socrates says that the philosophers cannot succeed in their imitative tasks unless they begin by wiping the state clean: “And you should know that this is the plain difference between them and others, namely, that they refuse to take either an individual or a city in hand or to write laws, unless they receive a clean slate or are allowed to clean it themselves” (*Rep.* 501a). The reasons for Plato’s strictures here are given earlier in Book VI, as Socrates describes the overpowering force of public opinion, which shapes all souls in a corrupt city, especially those of people with outstanding abilities, who receive special attention from the powers that be. Against this force the philosopher cannot hope to prevail, which is why he stays out of politics—taking shelter as from a storm of dust and hail (esp. 490e–96e). A good deal more evidence can be produced to support this account of Plato’s view. Especially significant is Socrates’ argument concerning the need for most people to be “enslaved” to the philosophers, if they are to be conditioned properly (590c–91a). Also notable is Socrates’ casually brutal account of how the just city can be most easily brought into existence: by driving all inhabitants over the age of ten out of the city and then raising the children properly (541a). I should also mention Plato’s position in the *Laws*, that if you want to make people virtuous, waiting until they are born is too late. You must start conditioning them while they are still in their mothers’ wombs (*Laws* 789a–e). And for the just city in this work as well, Plato of course proposes extreme censorship.

In other words, because Allen pays little attention to Plato’s moral psychology, she overlooks the importance of different kinds of contexts in which symbolic representations function. Even if Plato believed that language possesses the power that Allen describes, because of his moral psychology he would have had little faith in its ability to have significant effects under ordinary circumstances. Just as the philosopher himself is powerless to counteract the overwhelming force of public opinion, the same is true of philosophical compositions. Accordingly, in regard to the question of how effective Plato believed proper language could be in existing societies, the proper answer is surely “not very.”

Properly considered, I believe, Allen’s evidence concerning the actual effects of Plato’s works supports similar conclusions. Throughout the book,

she does not clearly distinguish two accounts of Plato's intentions. In many contexts, she argues that Plato intended for his works to "transform" Athenian society. For instance: Plato sought "wholesale transformation of Athenian life in the direction of the ideals outlined in the *Republic*" (p. 77). But Allen also makes numerous statements that are weaker, that Plato hoped only that his writings would have *some* effect. For example, Plato believed "philosophy can and should positively impact politics and, by writing his dialogues, he even acted on that theory" (p. 89). Once we distinguish these claims, I believe we will see that Allen's evidence supports only the more modest claim. Even on her interpretation of the evidence, Plato's writings had some effect on the conceptual vocabulary of Athenian politicians. His views helped to frame important political issues concerning the rise of Macedon and perennial competition between oligarchs and democrats, and may have inspired modest institutional reforms. While these effects should not be denigrated, they fall far short of wholesale reform of Athenian democracy. Moreover, if we accept a toned down view of Plato's intentions, the modesty of his aims does not support Allen's claims for Plato's wildly optimistic view of the power of language.

In conclusion, then, Allen's book uncovers a new dimension of Plato's political theory, which she develops with exceptional imagination, philosophical acuity, and scholarly energy. But rather than giving us a new interpretation of Plato's political theory that could supersede existing interpretations, the result of her labors should be viewed as supplementing rather than replacing other accounts.

Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times, by Seyla Benhabib.
Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011. xii + 298 pp.

Reviewed by: James D. Ingram, *McMaster University, Ontario*
DOI: 10.1177/0090591712470633

At the beginning of her new book on human rights and cosmopolitanism, Seyla Benhabib retrieves a quotation from a 1985 article on narrativism and historiography by David J. Depew. "Cosmopolitanism," so Depew, "*considered as a positive ideal*, whether formally or materially, generates antinomies that undermine its internal coherence. . . . Considered, however, as a critical ideal, these difficulties largely disappear. The resulting conception of cosmopolitanism [is] a negative ideal aimed at blocking false totalization" (2).¹