Philosophers in the Republic: Plato’s two paradigms, by Roslyn Weiss. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 236. H/b $49.95.

Roslyn Weiss’s book Philosophers in the Republic opens with a mission statement:

The modest aim of this book is to show that Plato’s Republic contains two distinct and irreconcilable portrayals of the philosopher. That this is so is something of which I am deeply confident. I am less sure, however, of why this is so: it is one thing to read a text, quite another to read the mind of its author. (1)

Her main thesis, that there are two irreconcilable portrayals of the philosopher — one running from Republic 5.473c to 6.490d and 496a to 502c, the other from 6.502c to 7.541b — is by no means modest: as stressed on the dust-jacket, this thesis is bound to be controversial. W’s modesty thus pertains to giving reasons why Plato should have wanted to present two different kinds of philosophers. This is of course not to say that there is no support for W’s main thesis: in the first three of five chapters, W does a splendid job in combing the text for support of her claim, highlighting passages that others neglect, setting them in new and illuminating contexts.

How do the two kinds of philosophers differ? W notes that the natural or genuine philosopher, coming about by chance (32-33), described in Book 6 does not govern the city sketched in Books 4-5, but a ‘better city, which although it appears only briefly (500d-502c), nevertheless offers a distinct alternative to Callipolis.’ (9). By contrast, philosophers described in the bulk of Book 7 are produced by design to rule Callipolis (8). However, since these differences are extrinsic to what a philosopher is, and thus too weak to secure the claim that there are two kinds of philosophers, I shall here concentrate on the intrinsic differences that W finds.

According to W, the most important intrinsic differences between the two kinds of philosophers are that the philosopher by nature has love (erôs) of truth (14-15), and a full set of moral virtues in addition to the intellectual virtues (16-20). By contrast, the philosophers by design do not love truth (cf. 53; 72), nor are they intrinsically motivated to act justly: ‘it is likely that they would regard it as an unwelcome means to desired ends’ (114; 153-4). This difference in regard for justice, W claims, can be seen in differing attitudes towards ruling: while philosophers by nature are willing to rule, although they have no obligation to do so, the philosophers by design are not willing, even though they do have an obligation to rule (W shows that arguments for this obligation are fairly weak, 98-107). W correctly points to the abundance of terms related to compulsion in Book 7 to highlight that philosophers by design need to be compelled to rule. For W, this is to be expected, as these philosophers are to be rulers of Callipolis, ‘a city marked by repression, social stratification, and discipline’ (8).

W’s observes acutely and insightfully how the philosophers are portrayed in different parts of the Republic. I should like to draw attention to critical points which the reader may want to pursue further in assessing the merits of W’s argument. A central concern is the interpretation of a passage which seems to bode trouble for W’s interpretation. According to W (41-43), Plato finishes one portrait of the philosopher at 502c, only to start drawing a new one: the subject of rulers ‘has to be taken up as it were from the beginning’ (at 502e). However, this passage, as well as the structure of Books 6 and 7, rather support the traditional reading, namely that Book 7 does not present a new portrait of the philosopher, but deals with a different question.

The content of Books 6 and 7 seems to depend fairly clearly on the problem identified at 471c-e: whether the city described, i.e. Callipolis, can really come about. Socrates’ answer, that it can come about only if philosophers rule, invites two further investigations: (a) What is a philosopher?, and (b) How does a philosopher come to be in the city? As W sees correctly, (a) is the topic of the bulk of Book 6 (with the announced end at 502c). But this pushes back the question: if the best city is only possible with real philosophers in it, then surely it can come into being only if philosophers come into being — hence (b):

(a’) Now that this difficulty has been disposed of, we must deal with what remains, namely, (b’) how the saviors of our constitution will come to be in the city, (i)what subjects and ways of life will cause them to come into being, and (ii) at what ages they’ll take each of them up. (502c; tr. Grube/Reeve)

Clearly, b’ is the task of Book 7, its structure is dictated by tasks (i) and (ii): at the end of Book 7, 541b, both are explicitly ticked off as done. There seems to be little indication (or reason that W can think of) for introducing yet another type of philosopher. That the topic is taken up ‘as it were from the beginning’ (hôsper ex archês) certainly does not need to mean that the interlocutors have to think about what a philosopher is from scratch. It is likely, given the topic just announced, that they are trying to secure the origin (archê) of the philosopher. Since the two tasks identified at 471c-e (a and b) are complementary, the pictures drawn of the philosopher should also be complementary, rather than irreconcilable.

But what, then, of the major differences that W so meticulously presents? I think that W has not eliminated all reasons for seeing the portraits in Books 6 and 7 to be reconcilable and continuous. As regards willingness to rule, the traditional reading sees continuity where W does not. Famously, Socrates raises the point that those who have escaped the cave may be unwilling to go back down. W finds this discontinuous with the picture drawn in Book 6, where philosophers would rule if they were not prevented from doing so (24-32). However, even W allows that the “good” philosophers in Book 6 may refrain from engaging in politics when it is too dangerous to do so (cf. 496d), thus minding their own philosophical business only as a last resort (27; cf. 152). But why would not Book 7 philosophers likewise be reluctant to go back down only as a last resort? W thinks that there is no danger involved in going back down into the cave (153); the text at 517a (‘… if they could somehow get their hands on him [sc. the philosopher], wouldn’t they kill him?’) may suggest otherwise. Further, in Book 6 Socrates contends that real philosophers should, once they have done military service and politics, do nothing but philosophy (498c). Since Socrates there equates the life of doing purely philosophy with living happily, he sets up the problem taken up in Book 7, whether compelling the philosophers to go back down takes away their happiness (519b-e). Again, there seems to be greater continuity between Books 6 and 7 than W’s argument suggests, as the description of the philosopher’s nature in Book 6 prefigures issues that are taken up when the philosopher is set in the context of Callipolis.

Next, while I cannot here fully appreciate W’s rich discussion of justice that runs through the whole book, I should like to point to one crucial passage:

No one whose thoughts are truly directed towards the things that are, Adeimantus, has the leisure to look down at human affairs or to be filled with envy and hatred by competing with people. Instead, as he looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think that someone can consort with things he admires without imitating them? (500b-c, tr. Grube/Reeve)

 W takes from this that philosophers in Book 6 are just and good rulers (if they rule): ‘Should the necessity arise for him to form not only himself but others in accordance with what he sees, he would be, both privately and publicly, a good craftsman of moderation, justice, and demotic virtue generally.’ (29). However, since the statement is general (‘no one…’) and since philosophers in Book 7 do study things that are, it, and W’s interpretation, would seem to apply to philosophers in both Books. Moreover, this passage again seems to work towards setting up the problem addressed in 519b-e, namely that real philosophers have no leisure to deal with things that change. If they are to rule, they must be compelled to do so. This would explain at least some of the emphasis on compulsion in Book 7: the founders of Callipolis have to apply an external force to the philosophers to counteract their intrinsic propensity to stay with the objects of thought that philosophers (as per 474c-480a) love so much.

Two interesting chapters on Socrates round off this well-produced volume. In the first one, W seeks to distinguish Socrates as yet another type of philosopher. However, since ‘Socrates is left virtually undescribed in the Republic’ (162) almost all the characterisations of Socrates are gathered from other dialogues such as the Apology, Crito, Euthyphro, and Gorgias, as if there was a coherent, fixed, and transferable portrait of Socrates. The difference between Socrates and the philosopher-types of the Republic is that Socrates has the virtue of piety which, like him, is ‘virtually undescribed in the Republic’ (162). Unlike philosophers in the Republic, a) his piety makes him fight for the souls of fellow Athenians even in the face of danger, and b) ‘Socratic piety depends on his having opinions and not knowledge about the Good’ (160). While W concedes that there is much common ground between Book 6 philosophers and Socrates, she argues that he is completely different from Book 7 philosophers (152-6). However, contrary to W’s intriguing argument, there seems to be some common ground between Socrates and Book 7 philosophers: none of them want to rule. As W points out, Socrates ‘because of his service to the god (Ap. 23b-c), has “no leisure worth mentioning either for the affairs of the city or for [his] own estate”’, nor would he spend his time on anything other than philosophical conversations (154). So, if one wanted Socrates to rule, one would have to compel — just like the other philosophers.

The final chapter contains a good statement and discussion of a host of problems that inevitably arises when teaching Book 4 of the Republic: Why is moderation not defined as the virtue concerned with curbing one’s appetites? And why is justice not defined as an other-regarding virtue, but rather as a reformulation of moderation? (cf. 184). W answers that the common conception of justice as other-regarding virtue can hardly shown to be profiting to the agent (184). So, if Socrates is to rise to the challenge posed by Glaucon and Adeimantus to show that justice is profitable to the agent, ‘he must find a way to make justice self-regarding’ (185). The strategy is first soften up the conception of moderation, and then to assimilate justice to moderation, as moderation ‘can be defended as something desirable in itself for oneself’ (187).

This is not the place to go through these arguments at length, nor to predict whether W’s thesis will eventually replace the standard interpretation. This is the place to say that W’s book is a challenging and worthwhile read, forcing the reader to think through a central theme of the Republic afresh.

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