

**Mark McPherran, ed., *Plato's Republic: A Critical Guide*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 272. ISBN 978-0-521-49190-7. pp. \$68.00.

The title of this volume, *Plato's Republic: A Critical Guide*, is misleading. Presumably the purpose of a "guide" is precisely that: to direct a reader through Plato's extraordinarily rich dialogue. Because it is students who most need such guidance one might reasonably expect a book such as this, which is an entry in the "Cambridge Critical Guides" series, to have been composed with just such a target audience. As the following sentence from the book-jacket makes clear the publisher marketed it with this in mind: "This volume will be essential to those looking for thoughtful and detailed excursions into the problems posed by Plato's text and ideas."

Unfortunately readers approaching this book with such an expectation will be disappointed. For in fact it is no more than a collection of papers that were presented at the "Thirteenth Annual Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy" (p. ix) in 2008. (Three additional papers were subsequently included.) Other than all being about the *Republic*, these papers neither have thematic unity nor were crafted or assembled with pedagogy foremost in mind.

The first two chapters, by G.R.F. Ferrari and Rachel Barney, discuss the literary form of the dialogue and so might be construed as something of an introduction to a reading of the *Republic*. But these are then followed, rather surprisingly, by Julius Annas's "*The Atlantis story: the Republic and the Timaeus*." Chapters 4–7 do track the order of the dialogue itself. In Chapter 4, Rachana Kamtekar analyzes the arguments Socrates deploys against Thrasymachus's claim that the life of injustice is superior to the just life. This is then followed by Nicholas Smith's discussion of why the philosopher (in *Republic* VII) is forced to return to the "cave" (city). In Chapter 6, Zena Hitz offers an interpretation of the degenerate regimes that Socrates describes in *Republic* VIII and IX. Chapter 7 contains Mark McPherran's discussion of the myth of Er in *Republic* X.

After this, however, the volume has no discernible order. Christopher Shields discusses Plato's psychology in Chapter 8. James Lesher and Hugh Benson address issues concerning the divided-line in Chapters 9 and 10. C.D.C. Reeve discusses education in Chapter 11. For some reason, Malcolm Scholfield's essay on music, a topic discussed by Socrates early in the *Republic*, concludes the volume. While all these papers are competent works of contemporary scholarship and are written clearly they do not offer much by way of a "critical guide."

Advanced scholars too will be only minimally rewarded by this volume. There are, to be sure, interesting bits. Ferrari's analysis of Socrates as the "internal narrator" (p. 18) of the *Republic* is meticulous, and the philosophical lessons he infers from this literary datum are worth considering. What Shields has to say (on p. 157) about "spirit" (*thumoeides*) is interesting as is his argument that Socrates's description of the tripartite soul in Book IV is not at odds with his assertion that the soul has no parts in Book X. Lesher's discussion of the meaning of *saphêneia*, usually translated as "clarity," and how

this word functions in the divided-line passage, contains some useful philological material (on p. 174–180). Schofield's discussion of the vital role that music plays in the education of the guardians is insightful.

Barney's essay deserves special mention. She argues that the *Republic* is constructed as a "ring-composition" (p. 34) and from this she infers the following hermeneutical principle: "to read a philosophical work as ring-composed is to approach it with the *expectation* that earlier topics will be reverted to later on, and with the presumption that the earlier discussion is provisional while the later one is complementary, principled, and authoritative" (p. 48). In other words, she argues that the dialogue should be read as a whole. This is sage advice but unfortunately the contributors to this volume do not follow it. Most simply isolate a difficult passage or problem they detect in the text and then proceed to forge a conceptual solution to it. In other words, they follow the standard—the literally, "analytic"—approach of most contemporary scholars. The results, while never unintelligent, are by and large rather disappointing.

To return to the blurb on the book-jacket: "These essays," it boasts, "provide a state-of-the-art research picture of the most interesting aspects of the *Republic*." This statement is not only preposterous, it is disturbing. First, what exactly is the "art" of which these essays putatively represent the cutting-edge? In reality, none of these papers is groundbreaking. Instead, they are works of academic scholarship that treat familiar problems in familiar language. Those who participated in the Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy are recognized scholars but typically are rather narrow in their philosophical purview and accustomed, above all else, to discussing their work with the reasonably like-minded people who attend conferences such as these. They do not address positions that would seriously challenge their own.

Two examples. First, consider again Barney's essay on "Platonic ring-composition." Except for a single mention (on p. 38) and one footnote that is no more than window-dressing, she does not discuss Eva Brann's masterful work *The Music of the Republic*, a significant portion of which is devoted precisely to the ring-structure of the dialogue. Brann's reading of the dialogue—indeed, her entire philosophical approach to it—is remarkably different from Barney's and surely would deserve inclusion in a genuinely "critical guide." Second, consider Smith's essay on the cave. Here he tackles what he calls "the happy philosopher problem" (p. 84). In telling his famous story in *Republic* VII Socrates seems to imply that those (philosophers) who are forced back into the dark pallor of the cave (city) would have been much happier had they been allowed to stay above ground basking in the sunshine. How, then, could it possibly be just to make them so unhappy? Smith claims that other discussions of this problem "have failed to provide fully adequate solutions" (p. 98). His paper purports to remedy this failure.

But a possibility that Smith does not seriously entertain, one that would deeply challenge his own reading of the passage, is that this "problem" cannot be solved and in fact was intentionally left unsolved by Plato in order to force the reader to question whether the putatively just city Socrates has constructed in Books II–VII is deeply if not

fatally flawed. Smith nods in the direction of such an interpretation (on p. 89) and in a footnote he says, “For examples of this approach, see...” (p. 100). He then proceeds to list several authors. But he dismisses them all when he next states that “this general approach has been adequately critiqued, in my view, by several critics. See especially Brickhouse 1998” (p. 100). This last reference is to Thomas Brickhouse’s contribution to another anthology, *Plato: Critical Assessments*, of which Smith himself was the editor. (Furthermore, Brickhouse and Smith have co-authored several books.)

It is important to emphasize that there is nothing intrinsically objectionable about Smith’s procedure here. After all, his is a short paper and his footnote is designed only to record competing interpretations of the passage. The objection offered in this review is not to Smith’s paper itself, which in fact is tightly argued and merits an equally well argued response from a critic. Instead, the complaint here is directed at Cambridge University Press. By packaging what amounts to a conference proceeding—whose participants were rather insular and so tended to speak and refer to those they already know best—as a “critical guide” the publisher is guilty of false advertising. This volume does not represent, to cite again the awful blurb on the book-jacket, “a state-of-the-art research picture.” Instead, it is a compilation of papers written by a group of scholars who got together to enjoy each other’s company in the warm sunshine of Arizona. From such a distinguished press, whose “critical guides” and various “companion” volumes are now proliferating, students deserve better.

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