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Review of McPherran, M. L. (ed) *Plato's Republic: a critical guide*. Cambridge, 2010.

Cambridge University Press presents its new series of scholarly guides dedicated to specific philosophical works and the *Republic* is the first work of Plato to receive a volume. The 273 pages constitute a remarkable piece of contemporary scholarship, both when it comes to the valuable (although unevenly distributed) contribution to the present state of Platonic studies, and when it comes to the (poor) cooperative and dialogical work this scholarship is able to produce. As is now customary in the academy, this volume brings together papers presented in a conference – in this case the Thirteenth Annual Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy; but if the purpose of such an enterprise is to keep the community informed about agreements and disagreements in the recent analysis conducted by experts in the field, this book falls short. Obviously, when some of the best and most serious international scholars were brought together to discuss one single book, agreement could not to be expected. However, what we see is that disagreement is not present either, or worse, what is noticed is the lack of dialogue itself. The model of a guide – an assistant companion to a philosophical journey that would present information and arguments in a structured way – is itself misleading, as well as its general organization in chapters, since, in the words of the editor, this is “a series of reflective essays rather than providing systematic and comprehensive descriptive coverage of that text” (p. 2).

The book opens with G. R. F. Ferrari's (*Socrates in the Republic*) insightful description of the *Republic* as an internally narrated dialogue, which would contrast Socrates' character, in for example his sincere hesitation or reluctance to speak, to Plato's calculated composition strategy. This composition strategy would consist in a conscious shift from the “inquisitorial dialectic of Book 1 to the didactic-cum-investigative dialectic of Books 2–10” (p. 28). This conclusion has an evident connection to R. Barney's defense of ring composition as a philosophical method in the following chapter (*Platonic ring-composition and Republic 10*). According to Barney, the *Republic* is constituted by five themes – (A) katabasis and return; (B) death; (C) the challenge and the answer; (D) the city and (E) poetry and the arts – ordered as concentric circles according to their first presentation and their (sometimes complex) resolution, all of them “united to the inner dialectical core” (p. 43). When Ferrari's reader is confronted with Barney's claim that the ring composition is a proper form of the method of arguments to and from first principles, she cannot help but ask how the change in the persona of Socrates might explain the differences between presentation and resolution of themes; or if concentric circles would be compatible with a change between inquisitorial and didactical dialectic. Unfortunately not a single line is devoted to an attempt to weave the two hypotheses or to explain why they are incompatible. Next we find J. Annas' comparative reading of the *Republic* and the *Atlantis*

myth (*The Atlantis story: the Republic and the Timaeus*), an analysis that simply takes for granted (i.e. from her previous work) the argumentative role of the city in the *Republic* as only an illustrative device to show that virtue is to be pursued whether recognized or not. If the reader wonders why she is supposed to accept this, all she can find are challenges to Annas' position, for example in the contributions of R. Kamtekar and Z. Hitz, and not a single word of response. Indeed R. Kamtekar's interesting analysis (*Ethics and politics in Socrates' defense of justice*) claims that the account of justice in the city ensures that the justice in the soul remains connected to the justice of actions, answering to Sach's notorious charge of fallacy in the *Republic*. While this point of view still maintains the general thesis that Plato's ultimate goal is to subordinate politics to ethics, it is far from Annas' position, quoted by Kamtekar, according to which the *Republic* is "no serious matter for political discussion" (p. 66). A similar solution to the political concern in the *Republic* is suggested by Z. Hitz (*Degenerate regimes in Plato's Republic*). If, on the one hand, Hitz claims that for Plato the political theory is submitted to moral theory, inasmuch as the choice of lives are made by individuals; on the other hand, she sees in the argument of the degenerated regimes in Books 8 and 9 a different function of reason which Plato could not have addressed through a simply ethical approach. According to it, reason is not only the part of the soul that produces virtue or, when neglected, shadows of virtue, but it is also an organizing principle, responsible for the definition and the structure of all the regimes, and this allows Hitz to conclude that "attribution of the dominant ends of 'wealth' and 'liberty' to the regimes ought to be understood as involving a critical judgment" (p. 121). This structural understanding of reason would clearly have consequences for Plato's account of the tripartition of the soul, the psychic justice and the different choices of life standards, but this is not Hitz's concern.

We have to wait for M. McPherran's chapter (*Virtue, luck, and choice at the end of the Republic*) to bring some light to the problem of life standards, more specifically to the necessity and contingency in the choice of lives as it is described in the myth of Er. McPherran claims that, despite all the defense of justice and knowledge throughout the *Republic*, Plato's attempt succumbs in face of the evidence provided by its ending myth that the important choices are made in a state of lack of freedom, since Lachesis order the lots attribution, and of relative ignorance, since the choice is presented as an automatic reaction to the suffering experienced in one's previous incarnation, in a kind of causal chain which shows that reason is not the only and maybe not the most important agent of choice. If Plato's intention was "to keep the gods clear of responsibility of *our* wrongdoing and consequent suffer" (p. 135), and to prove that the justice is good by itself, the *Republic* would eventually provide only instrumental reasons for being just, based on the pain connected to injustice, while reason would still have to prove its contribution to happiness. This problem of the rational soul in book X is also addressed by C. Shields (*Plato's divided soul*) in its apparent contradiction with the city-modeled tripartition. Claiming that the tripartition is neither necessary nor exhaustive and that the

soul cannot be considered an aggregate of independent parts, Shields suggests that they should be understood as aspectual parts, i.e., properties or features of the soul that would allow Plato to explain the phenomenological datum of internal strife. This device, argues Shield, would never compete with Plato's thesis that the soul is essentially one and rational. Needless to say, the aporia with which McPherran ends his chapter is deepened by Shield's claim about the rationality of the soul and Plato's defense of knowledge as a condition for right choice and happiness seems to be undermined by this series of isolated arguments. Unfortunately the situation does not seem to improve with N. Smith's courageous approach (*Return to the cave*) to the problem of the happiness of a philosopher who must rule. Making the point that the return to the cave is just because it generates psychic harmony, Smith argues that not being immediately willing to do so reveals an epistemic fault in the individuals who have contemplated the good and hence a extraordinary kind of injustice, connected with the excessive happiness of the rational part of their soul. However, the consequence of this bright solution is highly controversial: those who must return to the cave are not yet philosopher-kings, but only philosophers, and this is not due to the city but to an educational deficiency in them, that would only be overcome by fifteen years of political apprenticeship. This overview shows that the connection between justice, happiness and reason is challenged in various ways by different contributions to this volume, and the reader still wonders if this different challenges can be unified in one strong argument against Plato's most important claim.

Another example of lack of dialogue is the parallel between Lesher's and Benson's conclusions about the divided line. Reviewing the occurrences of *sapheneia* in Greek Literature since Homer, J. H. Lesher (*The meaning of "saphēneia" in Plato's Divided Line*) claims that the criterion of differentiation between the stages of the line should be understood as "full, accurate and sure awareness of an object" (p. 171) rather than clarity in thought or expression. Of course this raises some problems about the two upper sections of the line, whose difference, according to Lesher, would then be between visible shapes and intelligible realities. This is exactly the thesis challenged by H. Benson (*Plato's philosophical method in the Republic: the Divided Line (510b–511d)*), who claims that the difference between the two upper sections of the line is about the complete or incomplete employment of the method of hypothesis: dianoetic thought confines itself to what he calls the "proof stage", while dialectic embraces both the proof and the confirmation stages. Going much further than simply stating the difference between philosophy and mathematics, Benson's description of the two uses of the method of hypothesis suggests a confrontation between Socratic examination of the consistency of an interlocutor's beliefs – a refutation according to opinion that would still draw consequences that are not genuine – and Platonic dialectic, which would test the consistency of features of a Form and would hence arrive at conclusions that are neither contingent nor artificial. The fact that both Lesher and Benson do not offer direct arguments against each other thesis

leaves the impression that the ancient quarrel between propositions and objects in Plato's theory of knowledge is still a matter of taking your pick.

Also evident and silent is the dispute about Platonic education. C. D. C. Reeve (*Blindness and reorientation: education and the acquisition of knowledge in the Republic*) understands books 2 and 3 as a proposal for the education of appetite and spirit, a thesis rejected thirty pages later by M. Schofield's remarks (*Music all powerful*) on how music *in senso stretto* develops the learning element in us (*to philomathes*), the same one that, once fully-fledged, turns into philosophy. Reeve emphasizes the role of objects in education, stressing the difference between reliable and unreliable paradigms, whose difference should not be considered metaphysical. However, to defend this position, he commits himself to a very disputable thesis, namely that "countenancing the good (...) is a precondition of countenancing any form" (p. 223). On the assumption that the form of the good should be understood as a principle of rational order and intelligibility, Reeve defends knowledge in restricted Platonic sense as a piecemeal infallible un-hypothetical cognition of a variety of Forms, acquired after the knowledge of the good, i.e., during the fifteen years that Smith has understood as a political, and not philosophical, apprenticeship (once more no word is to be found about the discrepancy between the two chapters). Schofield, in his turn, gives the volume an impressive end in defending the central importance of unconscious assimilation of right content in Plato's educational project, based mostly on the Damonian thesis that musical modes are expressions of thought and character, and on the perception of what he calls the audible structure, i.e., music's internal rational structure, which makes reason a condition for its full appreciation. These assumptions allow Schofield to defend musical mimesis as an effective character modeler, whose exceptional power can also be found in the description of justice in the soul as harmony: "learning to sing and play in such rhythms and modes will gradually shape the soul into concordant structures" (p. 238). The reader once again wonders about the rational structure and its precondition to knowledge: could music provide us the cognition of a rational structure of reality that would allow us to know Forms or would this be only possible by contemplating the Good?

This concise presentation aims both to show how inspiring are the theses addressed in the book and to share the frustration caused by the inability of the authors to transform a series of contributions into a dialogue, especially when all of them have as their theme one single work, and especially when this work is the *Republic*. What may appear to be only a question of what a book of scholarship is or should be is actually a Platonic question about academic practice and unity, be it in politics, in writing or in pursuing philosophy. A patchwork of doctrines recalls the bazaar of constitutions of a democratic state, and while we all must go there to choose the regime each of us would like to live in, this possibility of choice is only the point of departure for philosophy. Examining one's own premises and consequences under dialectical procedures is a condition for real community. No one says it is easy, but it is

the property of beautiful things to be difficult.

Carolina Araujo
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro
Capes/CNPq/Faperj