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Book Reviews

CURING BY KILLING

Stanley Rosen: *Plato's* Republic*: A Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. Pp. viii, 423. $45.00.)

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Stanley Rosen has done students of Plato the great service of writing up what he calls in his preface "the result of some fifty years of reflection" on the *Republic*. His book displays the amplitude and the attention to minutiae that is commensurate with so lengthy a span of thought. It reads as a discursive commentary, in the manner of Otto Gigon's *Gegenwärtigkeit und Utopie*—each page of the *Republic* receiving its meed of summary and analysis, distributed at an even pace as the paragraphs of Rosen's book tick by. Its ideal reader would be one who has set out to reread the *Republic* and has Rosen at his elbow to raise fresh questions and point out hitherto unsuspected details at every turn. The book is punctuated, however, with passages in which the author tells us exactly what he thinks is going on in the *Republic* as a whole; it begins with an introduction and ends with an epilogue that make the message unmistakably clear.

Rosen's Plato believes that human beings have cancer, and that the only drug that works on them, the drug of philosophic rule, is a therapy so powerful that it destroys the patient along with the cancer (pp. 10, 355; the extended metaphor is Rosen's). It is a cancer of the soul, an inner rent that is the result of a fundamental conflict between the interests of the individual and those of society, or between happiness and justice (pp. 10, 133, 350). People simply will not do the right thing unless they are put under the control of philosophers (p. 355), who are themselves split, as Plato certainly was, between their desire to improve society and their otherworldly, antisocial cast of mind (pp. 81–82, 143, 229). Alas, each "theoretically correct step" that philosophers take towards imposing justice on society is for that very reason a "practical step towards injustice" (p. 355), for it is not in human nature to be so malleable to the exigencies of a theory that requires that there be "one set of true principles for living a just, and therefore happy, life" (p. 354). And so it is that Callipolis, which purports to be the ideally just and happy city, in fact harms the interests of philosophers and nonphilosophers alike. The ordinary citizens can be expected to smart with resentment at the austerity of their lives (p. 308), while readers

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should smart with resentment at the force and fraud—the brainwashing—that is required to render it even partially acceptable to them, but cannot bring them true happiness (pp. 128–29, 183, 391). The philosophers, for their part, have their philosophic wings clipped by their involvement in politics, which entails restrictions both on the time they can devote to what should be the true love of their lives (pp. 210, 242) and on the diversity of such philosophic activity as they are eventually permitted to embrace (pp. 354, 374). In short, "the unification of theory and practice ... is impossible" (p. 355; cf. pp. 143, 242).

Despite suspecting that the feat is impossible, philosophers have ever been game to make the attempt—"because that is the goal of philosophy" (p. 355). Plato himself made his disastrous foray into practice with the tyrant of Sicily, and in the *Republic*, Rosen takes him to maintain at least "a daydream about the unity of theory and practice" (p. 143). If Plato writes the *Republic* in a spirit of wry disillusion, that is not to say that the prospect of philosophic rule, however distant, has lost its allure for him.

Watching Plato's philosophers roll their Sisyphean ambitions uphill, one might take the situation to be tragic. But this is not how Rosen portrays it. Daydreams, however deep, are not the stuff of tragedy. At times, indeed, the daydream may even shade toward the farcical, as when Rosen suggests that, because the philosophers of Callipolis will not be permitted to stretch themselves to the fullness of philosophy, their imagination in the matter of social reform also will be diminished, with the result that "the solution to the political problem is the production of a static society lacking in the most important political features, a kind of maimed society that is governed by political incompetents" (p. 284). This, as Rosen at once admits, is evidently "no real solution," and yet "we must continue to act as if such a solution were possible, for that is the only solution" (p. 284). Although this situation is certainly too bizarre to be tragic, it is also too poignant to be quite comic. Rosen's Plato is better described (I intend the description respectfully) as anticipating the theatre of the absurd.

Rosen dedicates his book "To the genuine Leo Strauss." Throughout his analysis of the *Republic*, he makes important use of Straussian themes while taking pains to distinguish his global interpretation from that of Strauss. The most fundamental idea that Rosen shares with Strauss is this: The *Republic* is motivated by the thought that we cannot all have justice, for the conflict between the good of the individual and the common good is insoluble. But Rosen parts company with Strauss on the question of how seriously Plato intends to recommend the ways of Callipolis. For Strauss, as Rosen understands him, Plato does not intend to recommend them at all; they are the pernicious outcome that inevitably awaits utopian stabs at justice; the moral, accordingly, is to avoid all such attempts and instead accommodate the interests of philosophers to public opinion (p. 5). Rosen's Plato, by contrast, thinks it truly desirable that philosophers should rule society; his *Republic* has at least that much of the political manifesto about it. His

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problem, however, is that he can conceive no way of achieving this outcome that does not involve pernicious practices, transforming the philosopher, despite his good intentions, into a tyrant (p. 10). Rosen's is a Straussianism of means rather than of ends.

Strauss regarded Plato as a consummate exponent of the art of politic writing, an art by which he implicitly enjoined politic speech on his fellow philosophers. Rosen chooses instead to emphasize Plato's adventurous frankness in the *Republic*, a work in which the authoritarian aspirations of the philosophic few are laid bare to the many (p. 5). He assumes that Plato was writing with a bold eye on the future and that he judged his own culture not so hostile to philosophy as to make the venture merely reckless (pp. 6–7). (Rosen argues that the moderate Straussian message of accommodation could have been presented directly, as in Aristotle's *Politics* [p. 5]. So could it have—but with only a fraction of the complexity that Strauss discovers in its indirect delivery.)

One technique of politic writing, however, Rosen also attributes to Plato: the intentional attribution of unsound arguments to Socrates as he works within the fiction to achieve salutary agreement (p. 233). But Rosen does not explain this as an argument of the dramatic action, a clue to the reader to discount the sincerity of Plato's wish to see philosophers rule; for he believes this wish is quite sincere. Instead, he resorts to more drastic explanations: Perhaps Plato is illustrating his belief in the defectiveness of all philosophic arguments; or perhaps he regards himself entitled by his intellectual superiority "to employ rhetorical tricks for our own good" (p. 234); or, more generally, "[W]e normally recur to bad arguments in politics" (p. 394).

Rosen throws out these radical suggestions with alarming *disinvoltura* and does not elaborate a defense of them. It seems to me that his approach to Platonic writing does not, in fact, require such recourse. He, no less than Strauss, is constructing arguments from the dramatic action—a fact he might have been ready to acknowledge had he not been intent in this book on differentiating himself from Strauss. His Plato seeks to impress on the reader that something desirable is, nonetheless, impossible; to that end, he deliberately derails his own advocacy for Callipolis by presenting the reader with obvious provocations (e.g., the proposal to expel everyone over the age of ten, p. 244) and suggestive but logically faulty arguments (e.g., the city-soul analogy, to which Rosen accords the force of "poetry" by virtue of the very deficiencies in its logic, p. 396).

If my own work on the *Republic* gives me reason to welcome Rosen's subtle account of the primacy of the individual in that dialogue and his focus on the peculiarity of the philosopher's involvement with society, it also gives me reason to resist his tendency to magnify each moment of awkwardness in Socrates' argument, each interpretive puzzle, into outright contradiction, paradox, and impasse. In *City and Soul in Plato's "Republic"* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2003; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)—a book with which Rosen engages at several

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points—I attempt to show that the city-soul analogy works formally as well as poetically, and that Callipolis is a happy city, indeed, the happiest of cities (*pace* p. 315). But I do not deny, in fact I emphasize, that its happiness pales beside that attainable by the individual philosopher and that such an individual will be prone to regret that the two kinds of happiness are linked. Whether one seeks to resolve or to intensify the overt puzzles in Plato's text is mostly a matter of temperament. The text has surely left enough unsaid to give leeway to either inclination. What Rosen has constructed in the space Plato has opened for him is a magisterial, comprehensive, and, in its essence, wholly original interpretation of the *Republic* that demands the attention of every thoughtful reader of Plato.

–G. R. F. Ferrari

LIVING WITHOUT THE GOOD

Joshua Mitchell: *Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. Pp. 226. $35.00.)

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Joshua Mitchell's *Plato's Fable* is an interpretation of the *Republic* that emphasizes the role of imitation. Mitchell contends that the human condition is such that we are perpetually trapped in "shadows from which there is no escape" (p. xii), which makes us, by necessity, "imitative beings" (p. 1). Imitation is problematic, he argues, because our imitations tend to become worse, not better, over time (p. 17). Liberalism has responded, unsuccessfully, to this problem with identity politics (pp. 4–7) and socialization (pp. 8–11). Plato's fable offers another possibility: Though our imitations "are durable and deep," they can be altered—but "only by reason" (p. 12). The reason required for such a change, however, is "divine reason" (pp. 16–18), not liberalism's reason, which is instrumental or calculating and serves the appetites (p. 14).

The difficulty is that divine reason requires illumination by the Good (p. 17), and the Good, in turn, requires a properly oriented soul for its reception. The *Republic* is a fable, Mitchell argues, that intends to use its lies in speech to heal the lies in the soul in preparation for the Good (pp. 39–43). But Socrates fails to turn his interlocutors' souls toward the Good (p. 46) and so can only describe the consequences of living without the Good (p. 75). Similarly, Mitchell claims to say not "what divine reason *is*" but only what it is set against (p. 16).

Socrates' failure to convince his audience leads to the discussion of the decline in regimes and souls, the longest and, I think, most valuable part of Mitchell's book. All defective regimes are fundamentally unstable because each filters justice through its particular lens and, therefore, fails to render to each his due. The sons of each regime realize their fathers' measures are

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