

PLATO ON JUSTICE

D. STAUFFER: *Plato's Introduction to the Question of Justice*. Pp. 144. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Paper. ISBN: 0-7914-4746-4.

This study examines the colorful exchange between Socrates and the coterie of interlocutors in *Republic* 327b–367e: the wealthy Athenian Cephalus, his traditionalist son Polemarchus, the feisty sophist Thrasymachus, and Plato's own brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus. Readers remember well the banter Socrates finds himself in regarding the question of whether justice is paying back one's dues, benefiting one's friends, or the interest of the powerful. Stauffer sees the initial discussions in the *Republic* as reflecting 'our ordinary understanding of justice' (p. 17), and claims that they 'dictate' the conclusions offered later, which are, in his view, 'mysterious' and 'paradoxical' (p. 1). Two points must be made here. One is that S. assumes the view that it is Plato we must deal with in works written by him, not the historic Socrates, and that there is unity in Plato's thought despite the many zigzags he represents the character Socrates as taking. The other point is this. Since he sees the model of justice being couched in commonplace views, S. concludes that for Plato justice does not have 'some "foundation" apart from the world of ordinary opinion' and that he is not attempting to deduce principles of justice from 'an independent and prior understanding of the good or the best life' (p. 135). Now that developmentalism is a moribund interpretative strategy in Platonic studies, the first point is inoffensive. It is the second that needs our careful attention.

The introduction is devoted to a discussion of the ways in which Plato is dismissed by contemporary justice theorists such as John Rawls and Richard Rorty for insisting that principles of justice lie in some transhistorical principle or foundation. S. claims that this criticism not only 'distorts' Plato's project in the *Republic* (p. 7), but also ultimately fails to justify why our beliefs about justice are sufficient to understand its nature. For S., Plato is best understood not negatively, as what pragmatists reject, but positively, as a 'decisive alternative' to Kant (p. 15). For, unlike Kant, who thinks that morality involves a strict separation of duty from advantage, on S.'s view Plato shows that moral life involves psychological coherence of belief and virtuous practice. This helpful juxtaposition of the two important ethical models turns out to be quite vacuous, however, for there is no sustained analysis, save for the few pages in the introduction and a few in the conclusion, of the ways in which Plato preternaturally 'solves' Kantian problems.

S. in Chapter 1 insists that Socrates' questions 'more than any obvious "thesis" Socrates might seem to promote or defend provide the best way of approaching the task of uncovering Socrates' true understanding of justice' (p. 21). Ergo, what Plato does not say is more important than what he does say. This methodology, sometimes associated with the followers of Leo Strauss, will not satisfy all of S.'s readers, some of whom, myself included, think that Socrates has a specific defense here, which for all sorts of reasons fails, and what he *does* say in it is the best and most obvious path to understanding of philosophical justice. The defense is what is now called the Function Argument. In Chapter 2, S. lays out Socrates' feeble attempts to block the general line of attack proposed by Thrasymachus that justice is not essentially a good thing, and even if it were, in practical terms it is not beneficial. In S.'s analysis, the two mainly disagree as to what true human good is, and what activities it requires (p. 93). Remarkably, S. overlooks the centrality of the Function Argument proposed by

Socrates (*Republic* 335d and 353b–e) that underlies the disagreement here with Thrasymachus and previously with others: namely, that the speciality (*ergon*) of a human being is to live thinkingly, and justice is the state of those who think well and hence can live well. This argument, which is mentioned cursorily by S. (pp. 112–13), is not just the foundation of Aristotle's 'virtue ethics' and the background of Stoic tradition; it is the foundation of the *Republic*. Indeed, it is only with a careful study of this defense that one can understand, in the author's words, Plato's 'strange and enchanting conclusion' that philosophy is the best activity of the thoughtful soul, and as such is the sustaining cause of justice in the person. This brings us to the second point mentioned above. The proposal that justice is the internal condition of human life is not a necessary and natural consequence of ordinary beliefs, as S. implies, but quite the opposite. It is because the ordinary beliefs about justice are found to be so inadequate that the fantastic conception of justice and all its attending metaphysics is ushered in on the back of the Function Argument. Socrates, at least, understands that his model of justice will be found by the ordinary folk not just out of this world, but out of theirs as well.

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THE PAST IN PLATO

B. WILKE: *Vergangenheit als Norm in der platonischen Staatsphilosophie*. (Philosophie der Antike, 4.) Pp. 276. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997. Cased, €63.00/Sw. frs. 100.80. ISBN: 3-515-06619-5.

This book argues that Plato's dialogues generally present the past as valuable in principle, but only refer to it selectively, in terms that suit his philosophical aims. The past's value extends beyond the exemplary constitutions and political morality of conservative Sparta, Athens during the Persian Wars, and Persia under Cyrus or Darius (all discussed in *Laws* 3), and ancient Athens in *Timaeus/Critias*, to the divine authority of political founders and other predecessors (Chapters 1 and 2). Both mythical and historical past are used in the dialogues to provide norms of moderation, friendship, respect, and virtue (Chapters 3–5). The value of the past follows from Plato's philosophy of history, W. argues (Chapter 6). Political and moral deterioration predominate over progress within each epoch of cyclic time, and political salvation depends upon conserving the original form of a virtuous constitution from moral decay.

Although discussion of Plato's political–philosophical aims does emerge in passages and sections drawing conclusions, W. focuses primarily on the relevant texts. In addition to the *Laws* and *Timaeus/Critias*, *Menexenus* and *Republic* are prominent, but most dialogues provide some evidence, and W. claims comprehensiveness (pp. 53–4). The method is literary–historiographical description and interpretation, and some important assumptions made about Plato's political philosophy are not subjected to systematic reflection or justification. The claim that the past has normative value for Plato is taken as demonstrated by survey of the textual evidence (p. 240). Another characteristic that the book retains from the dissertation out of which it emerged is its enormous wealth of scholarly references and sumptuous bibliography.

I am not sure W. does demonstrate that the past is profoundly important to Plato,