

Reviews

David C. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic*, Catholic University of America Press, 2008, 358+ pp.

When it comes to the really great thinkers of the Western intellectual tradition, often times it is friends and supporters who do more damage than enemies. I am not sure whether Karl Marx counts as a truly great thinker (Jacques Ellul thought him an important Christian heretic), but I am sure that he spoke for the greats when he commented that whatever he was, he was not a Marxist. For Plato certainly was not an early medieval Platonist just as Aristotle was not a late medieval Aristotelian, and Augustine was not a Cartesian Augustinian just as Aquinas was not a Kantian Thomist.

Plato, in the seventh letter—where he outlines his commitment to never write in his own voice—sought to forestall Platonism from the beginning, but in vain. Plato seems to have understood that once we admire a teacher of wisdom we – the followers—have to construct a containable intellectual system in the master's name and in doing so we have to tie up the ends he left untied and straighten out the bits we can't understand. Against the sage's sage advice, Platonisms have been with us for a very long time now. It is not surprising then that different Platonisms all suffer from at least one glaring fault: we are all lesser philosophers than Plato and thus our intellectual systems built in his name inevitably betray their ostensible master. But Schindler's text, casting aside small Platonisms of all colours and

revelling in the subtlety and power of Plato's dialogues, is like a child facing the wrong way (not looking at the cave wall) amongst Plato scholars.

The central problem any Platonism faces concerns adequately upholding the genuine transcendence of the meaning and quality of true reality without degrading or misreading the realm of tangible and historical particularity in which we live. The rush to theorize about Ideal Forms, extracted from the dialogic, the performative, the dramatic mode in which Plato carefully delivers them to us, produces many fatal caricatures of Plato's work. Thus small 'Platonist' doctrines, idealizations, analytical trivializations, systematized reductions and straw effigies litter the West's intellectual history. These Schindler deftly bypasses. By giving particular attention to the care Plato takes in showing us the double relation of The Good to both transcendence and immanence, and by taking careful note of the dramatic structure of the dialogues and the performative role Socrates plays in elaborating Plato's deepest philosophical insights, Schindler rescues Plato from many of his admirers and shows us the towering thinker that Plato is. Further this Plato is of no mere academic interest (historical irony intended) to Schindler but speaks powerfully to the great philosophical and political needs of our own times.

Schindler demonstrates a wondrous and abundant proficiency with the intricacies and technicalities of scholarly argument, but, delightfully, scholarly dexterity never takes centre stage in Schindler's work. For all the way through this remarkable text, one is in hot pursuit of those things that Plato himself most ardently pursues. And this—far more than its thrilling scholarship – is what one finds most unusual and vital about Schindler's text. For Plato abhors the violent moral relativism of misology and upholds right love for the divine as the core of the very 'this world concerned' philosophical way. Schindler is very much walking along side Plato in these concerns, even though such an abhorrence and such a love are now almost inconceivable to us in real life (though 'academic' scholarship *about* Plato on these matters is not uncommon).

In our times we are formed by the widespread cultural acceptance of modern secular liberalism where beliefs about ultimate concerns are matters of private preference and personal feeling and can only enter the public arena as banal

'motherhood statements', if at all. We are committed to 'tolerance' and we are committed to the morality of *not* bringing any serious substantively normative discussion of the common good into the political arena. For we must protect the inner sanctum of personal moral and religious freedom and we must uphold the public freedoms of the value free market and the merely legal regulation of public life at all cost—which is actually a very high cost to the moral health of the polis. Functionally (whatever we might say about religious freedom) we fictionalize all religious concerns and make them silent and subservient to the *real* public concerns of economics, trade, technology, the culture industry, "politics", entertainment and military power. No, contra Plato, we are dedicated to private moral relativism and an amoral public arena where due reverence to divinity is strictly excluded. In fact, the deeply entrenched culturo-political way of being in which modern liberal secularism is embedded puts us squarely on Thrasymachus' side of *The Republic* and should we hear Plato's voice at all, we cannot help feeling that Plato is an envious anti-libertarian fascist.

But, as Schindler well points out, Plato is not a fascist, and it is in fact we who are committed to the Hobbesian violence of mere power in upholding the 'right order' of an inherently competitive and atomistic society. It is we who are functional amoralists, functional atheists and functional epistemological nihilists in relation to transcendence: we *are* Thrasymachus, and we are structurally committed to violence, egotism and public immorality. It takes little perception to see that the political outworking of modern liberal secularism is the barbaric global exploitation of the peoples and resources of the earth for the inherently irrational 'ends' of the perpetuation of the power and luxury of those of us who benefit most from the prevailing status quo (for as long as the current conditions of exploitation can be perpetuated). Plato, if not read as an exercise in contemporary scholastic refinement, profoundly challenges how we live, what we believe and even who we are. This Schindler sees, and sees deeply.

Platonisms of other-worldly indifference to the lived political realities of life – be they dry Platonisms of analytical logical purity or wet Platonisms of romantic transcendental escapism – do not understand what is most pressing on the heart and mind of their master. But Schindler understands Plato. And with this

understanding he can see Plato's point in *The Republic*; Schindler sees the forest, he understands the trees in relation to the forest, and he does not lose the forest for the trees. It is quite remarkable to read a text on Plato where one can recognise the same pressing concerns that one hears in Plato's dialogues.

I do not really want to say much about Schindler's hermeneutics, other than that it is brilliant. But you should read it for yourself. I feel like I would be ruining a fabulous Chesterton detective story by telling you how Schindler effectively solves so many interpretive difficulties in scholarship around *The Republic*. But what this hermeneutic solution gives to us is more exciting than the hermeneutic tools he so skilfully fashions. Plato points us in a direction where we really *can*, in some measure, have transcendence in immanence. That way has been closed to us at least since William Ockham. If we can open that door again (though it would lead us to a new country and not back in time) then the deep philosophical aporia of modernity may be overcome at last. This is very exciting. You must read this book.

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