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Pursuing the Good, Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's Republic, by Douglas Cairns (Author, Editor), Fritz-Gregor Herrmann (Editor), Terry Penner (Editor), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, 352 p., ISBN 978-0748628117

'Pursuing the good' is an old subject in both social history of ancient Greece and Greek philosophy studies. There is hardly anything new when we talk about virtue or morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle. In the area of Greek history, many books and articles on or relevant to that theme have been written during the 20th century, and research still is going on in the new millennium. To take the most famous examples, A. H. M. Jones, Finley, de Romilly, and Kitto advocated the morality of Athens in 4th century B.C. In 1974, K. J. Dover published *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*, which turned out to be almost impossible to be surpassed in his days.[1] In 1996, however, Joseph M. Bryant published *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece* that deals with the same subject from a perspective of sociology, and in 2006, Gabriel Herman's published *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens*.

The area of philosophical studies devoted even more books and papers to the Plato's and Aristotle's ethics. This gives rise to the question whether we still need a book like *Pursuing the Good*, published in 2007.

The book contains 16 recent papers, most of which concentrate on ethics and metaphysics in the *Republic*, one of Plato's most famous works. We are quite familiar with the morality in Plato's time, but seldom consider the *Republic* as an ethical work, or an influential book that may have changed the author's contemporary moral concepts and ideas, as the *Republic* has long been taken as a standard work on political philosophy. Doubtlessly, this is what Aristotle had in mind when he criticized it in his *Politics*. Also Cicero discussed politics in his work under the same title. It was not until 1928 when H. R. Prichard's inaugural lecture 'Duty and interest,' that scholars reconsidered this opinion (p. 1). As this lecture served as the foundation of all the papers appearing in this book, the editors have sufficient reasons to describe it as one of the earliest works that tries to sum up the moral ideas in the Republic and prove this masterpiece of Plato to be a work dealing with both creative political innovations and serious ethical ideas.

In detail, the authors of the reviewed book made many innovative attempts at widening our understanding on ancient Greek world. Two points are worth mentioning: Christopher Rowe's analysis of the relationship of the ideas between the *Republic* and 'pre-*Republic*' texts, and Terry Penner and Timothy Chappell's emphasis on the role of methodology in the *Republic* and its possible effect on Plato and his readers, which had often be neglected by earlier critics.

In the sixth article of this series, *The Form of the Good and the Good in Plato's Republic*, Rowe emphasises the importance of Plato's earlier works in order to understand his conception of the good in the *Republic*. He claimes, 'in trying to understand Plato, we cannot afford to concentrate too exclusively on the larger context. We need to engage wholeheartedly with the fine detail of his arguments in all the dialogues, because the larger context, the synoptic viewpoint, either is itself partly a product of that detail, or at any rate can only fully be understood in the light of it' (p. 135). He goes on to complain that the earlier interpretations failed to 'read the text in sequence, and its various parts in their context. In particular, these interpretations miss the way in which — as I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated — the text builds on other, 'pre-*Republic*' texts' (p. 152). Starting from his own view point, Rowe gives an exhaustive description on how the conception of the good in the *Republic* can be derived from Plato's earlier ideas. As is final argument he states that in the *Republic* 'there is in fact relatively little that is new: a shift of perspective, perhaps, and of emphasis, but hardly more than that. That is, little seems to be added to the things that Socrates insists Glaucon

[1] GABRIEL HERMAN, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens, A social history,* Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 92.

has heard before — and which, I claim, may all, in one form or another, be found in 'pre-*Republic*' dialogues' (p. 152). At the end of the paper, the author also speculates about the reason for contemporary scholars' misreading of Plato: 'If we fail to understand this, I suggest, it will be because we are blinded either by assumptions about Plato's intellectual development, or by a sense that Plato's immediate successors, and generations of later Platonists, must have got it right when they made the master into a metaphysician instead of a Socratic ethical philosopher with a metaphysical bent.' (p. 152).

In my opinion, Rowe's argument is quite convincing. The *Republic* is not a revolutionary work, but has its root deep in Plato's (or boldly said: Socrates') earlier thoughts. Of course, there is something new: the conception of idea, the myth in the final book, and the accusation against poets all show that Plato were trying hard to establish a creative theory that differed from his past. A philosophy, however, is the product of its age and the author's background, which is particularly true for Plato's *Republic*. Throughout the *Republic* we can see Socrates' and young Plato's idea, sentiment and style inherited, and without realizing this we can never fully grasp the central spirit of the complicated theories put forward in Plato's *Republic*.

Another shining point of *Pursuing the Good* lies in its analysis on Plato's methodology. By now, there are relatively few detailed and complete studies on ancient writers' methodologies. The syllogism of Aristotle can only be seen as a brilliant exception, as in most cases such studies indeed would be fruitless. Many ancient writers prefer a free, natural, and adaptable style and do not aim to turn their different works into a scrupulous system. Therefore, we cannot find much stable and valuable methodology. Nevertheless, this is evidently not applicable to the figures such as Plato, Aristotle and St. Augustine, who have even more explicit thoughts than many contemporary writers. Two connected methods of Plato's are worth noticing: The literary narrations and the dialectic conversation, which were studied separately by Terry Penner and Timothy Chappell.

In the first paper of the series, '*What Is the Form of the Good the Form of?' A Question about the Plot of the Republic*, Penner passes judgment on Plato, saying: '…I do hold Plato to be not only the greatest of philosophers who also wrote, but also to be one of the very greatest writers in the Western tradition — in part precisely because of his qualities as dramatic representer of dialectical *agônes*' (p. 16). Based on that point, Penner naturally comes to the penetrating conclusion:

'One important consequence of this recognition is that it tells us that it will never be adequate to attempt to interpret argumentative steps in Platonic drama by simply putting the sentences involved into logical form, and then working from the meanings (or semantically interpretations) of the words in assessing the validity and soundness of the resulting formulations of arguments. 'Look, he says it right here!' One often hears from analytical philosophers arguing to a formulation of a Platonic argument, employing both exacting logical alertness as to so-called 'logical form' and also that careful philological attention to the words of the Greek text which analytical philosophers have inherited from the great nineteenth-century commentators on Greek literary, historical and philosophical texts, and on whose shoulders all who work on Greek culture still stand. The danger here for analytical philosophers is that with their careful attention to propositions and entailments, they take their eye off important questions of context, and off reality itself, on which Plato, like Homer and the tragedians, is also communicating to us — both those involving plot, and those involving what the actual truth is concerning the reality being discussed.' (p. 18).

Claiming that, however, Penner never transgresses the golden mean. On the one hand, he criticises analytical philosophers for their ignorance of literary matters (p. 16), on the other hand he shows his dissatisfaction with classicists who 'teach such literary works as the *Apology*, the *Protagoras*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* 'in a purely literary way', with only superficial attention to any details of argument' (p. 17). As a matter of fact, while analyzing their colourful literary character, Penner never denies Plato's dialogues the status of serious and academic philosophical works.

In 'Conversion or Conversation? A Note on Plato's Philosophical Methods (The 16th and final part of the whole collection),' Timothy Chappel studies Plato's methodology from another perspective. Considering all the works of Plato, Chappell points out that there are two natures in Plato's dialogues: Conversion and conversation. Chappell calls the conversion type 'Socratic dialogues,' best represented by the *Phaedrus*, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, the *Meno* (at times) and the *Republic* (p. 320). This philosophy aims at grasping a mystical vision, a transcendent insight into the Cause of Things (p. 321). For this conception, dialectic can have only instrumental value (p. 321). The conversation type dialogues (of which *Euthydemus* is the most important example) turn out to be different. These dialogues take philosophy to consist in the back-and-forth of conversation, in the social and intellectual interchange of friends, in the struggle to define a key term, in the delights of unarmed verbal combat, in what Nietzsche, with his usual memorable renom and spoton unfairness, called 'the knife-thrust of the syllogism' (p. 321).

Chappell further argues that both conceptions have their advantages and disadvantages. The conversional conception is a vision of where philosophy might take us of such gripping, breathtaking loftiness that to call it merely ambitious or far-reaching would seem a *phortikos epainos* (a praise that falls inelegantly short), but obscurity acts as its key disadvantage (p. 322). The conversational conception of philosophy has in its favour its studied sobriety, rationality and restraint, while it can make people enemies and not for entirely unrespectable reasons. What's more, the conversational conception does not require sincerity (p. 322-323) as is shown in *Euthydemus* for its parody, pretence and insincerity, joking and mockery (p. 323).

Both Penner and Chappell's observations are valuable to Plato's contemporary readers. Interpreting the *Republic*, we have to realise its literary colours, its conversional nature, and the disadvantage of lacking sincerity when we read about the conversation between Socrates and Thrasymachus; otherwise, we can easily be 'cheated' by Plato's particular methodology.

Next to the bright spots mentioned above, there are some arguable and ambiguous points in *Pursuing the Good*, as it is inevitable for such an ambitious work that tries to clarify so many abstruse concepts and theories. Penner's wish, the book may be of equal appeal to classicists and to philosophers (p. 15), who have remarkable different interests and studying methods, makes its difficult, is difficult to achieve.

The first and foremost problem is that this collection fails to define the natures of the *Republic* and Plato's earlier works. This defection is especially apparent when we take the 16 papers as a whole. Some previous arguments are unconsciously contradicted by their followers. In the final chapter, for example, Chappell calls the dialogues earlier than the *Republic* 'Socratic dialogues' (p. 321). As Socrates also served as a major part in many Plato's later works, it is quite reasonable to assume that it must indicate that the dialogues before the *Republic* actually reflected, or at least highly influenced by the teaching of Socrates, while the works later than the *Republic* reflect Plato's thought rather than Socrates'. In chapter 6, however, Rowe argues that 'we need to engage wholeheartedly with the fine detail of his arguments in all the dialogues' (p. 135) in order to gain a better understanding of the *Republic*. So, what is the logical ground for that if pre-*Republic* texts were of Socrates, while the *Republic* and the later dialogues are genuinely 'Plato's'? Of course, Rowe doesn't consider it fitting to draw a sharp distinction between the *Republic* and Plato's earlier dialogues, and he sees no reason to label all the pre-*Republic* dialogues 'Socratic'. So which dialogues are Socratic? Terry Penner's answer is even more confusing. As we have already seen, he objects to teach the *Apology* in a purely literary way, and argues 'in Plato, motivations, reasons, assertions and actions are all intellectual, general and philosophical in content.' (p. 16-17). But if Plato's earliest works such as the *Apology* are the reflection of his own philosophical thoughts, then what is the need of using the term 'Socratic dialogues' to describe Plato's works before the *Republic*?

It is true that the natures of Plato's early dialogues are hard to definite, and it is not surprising that different scholars may have different opinions about this problem, which maybe never will be solved. I want to point out, however, that this ambiguously may weaken the consistence of the whole work. It also confuses and inconveniences the readers. Perhaps the editors should have supervised these essays, or at least have added one piece of note for an explanation.

Another possible default of *Pursuing the Good* lies in neglecting the social background that helped to create the *Republic*. While advertising his work to both philosophers and classicists, Penner and the other authors wrote a book far less useful for people who are interested in ancient Greek history and Plato's life than a postgraduate of department of philosophy (even if he is studying Kant or Heidegger instead of Plato). Throughout the work there are abstract ethical conceptions and terms along with many Greek texts cited directly from the *Republic*. All in all, the aim of the book is to examine Plato's texts from a philosophical view; the social background is omitted as irrelevant to the topic.

In my opinion, even an academic philosophical book is a product of the author's time, and this rule is even more applicable for a Greek work like Plato's *Republic*. At his time many texts were used for delivering an oration, to teach students, or to make fun during a diet, as we can see in Plato's and other writers' books. Plato is not a scholar who lacks political ambitions. His *Republic* and the idea of the justice, the good and the ideal *polis* in it, is deeply influenced by the contemporary social environment. His political ideas were inspired by the Spartan and Cretan constitutions, his ethical views may equally be influenced by the changing moral standard at Athens and other parts of the Greek world. If the editors would have arranged to compose some essays on those aspects, the whole work would have been balanced and attractive. Equally regrettable is its lack of good in Plato's *Republic* to the later intellectuals' thoughts and their life styles. This, however, may have been too formidable a task for a book containing no more than 340 pages.

In sum, 'Pursuing the Good' is an innovative book, which contains both shining points and certain defaults. It proves that after 2000 years Plato's idea of the good can still be studied and discussed. This is nothing strange from the historic view of cultural evolution, for pursuing the good is an endless and eternal task for mankind's very survival.

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