

Egertsen resumé

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At forandre verden

En læsning af Platons politiske filosofi i *Staten*

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English Summary & Index

The present study of Plato's political philosophy in the *Republic* is a continuation of my extensive studies of Plato's conception of language in the *Cratylus*, of the ways of desire and understanding in the *Symposium*, and of the psychological anthropology of the *Phaedrus*, as well as shorter and more recent studies of his theory of education and politics in such works such as *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. The study of these specifically human topics, speaking and writing, drives and passions, learning and ruling, has eventually led me to the totality of human life, the political society, which Plato undertakes to explore in the *Republic*. This study presents a close reading of the *Republic* in the shape of a philosophical running commentary. The following overview presents some of the main perspectives of the interpretation, a summary of the separate chapters, and a translation of the index headlines.

1. The *Republic* presents an investigation of the *concept* of state by raising the question: What is a political community? This point of departure intends a qualification of common readings of the dialogue as Plato's presentation of an ideal state: Is the conception of the ideal state a blueprint for an institutionalized political constitution, implying that the proposals made in the *Republic* are measures to be realized as they are proposed? Or is 'ideal' rather to be taken in the spirit of Platonic 'ideas' and the investigation thus to be seen as a philosophical inquiry into an intelligible structure, of which existing states may partake through political constitution and rule? Both questions address the issue in a way that entails hermeneutic difficulties, and the question in the present interpretation is therefore coined somewhat differently: How is 'the political' as such constituted in the dialogue? It is maintained that the 'the political' does not primarily concern 'things' such as city state, constitution, law, social groups, rulers etc., but that we gain a closer understanding of Plato's issue and of the subject matter itself by applying a dynamic perspective. In this way Plato's occupation with the political can be seen to concern a reason-based formation and mastering of society, which is itself a rational outcome (division of labour) of human striving for the good life, and which is mainly realized through education – all of which consists in processes, functions, and relations.

2. From this point of view it becomes of interpretative importance to approach the dialogue itself as a manifestation of processes and relations; the *Republic* is a dialectical investigation with a dialectical starting point in consequence of the processual and relational character of its subject matter. The philosophical inquiry into the political is unfolded throughout the dialogue as a political-philosophical process of reasoning, not as the application on the political sphere of philosophical knowledge already gained. Philosophy must become political in order to deal with the

political. The composition of the work, in the sense of a structured, coherent unity of themes and variations, not only becomes of significance for the different thematic developments, but is also taken to express the subject matter as a whole, the political society as human production.

In addition to a focus on the common standards of philosophy and political rule implicit in this dynamic and productive (poietical) approach, the interpretation stresses the common origin of philosophy and politics in *critique*; in an affinity between the revelation of falsehood and of injustice connected to the basic distinction between opinion and knowledge. Reason thus performs critique of society in that the question of justice in the dynamic perspective entails the question of the origin of injustice. Reversely, the critique of the unjust society becomes a critique of reason, forcing philosophy beyond its Socratic immanence towards a recognition of reason's mediation with nature (desire) and community (society, political constitution) and thus of the limits to its power. A central issue of this interpretation is to accentuate and justify this reading of Plato's political philosophy as a kind of Critical Theory *avant la lettre*.

3. In the main the *Republic* must be read as an examination of the 'political man' or 'the political in man'. This examination is performed in a broadly social and functional context. To use modern terms: The political philosophy of the *Republic* is sociological and pedagogical in its scope, concerned with society and education, socialization, socialized consciousness, but not with law, lawmaking, citizenship, legal justice etc.. The question is not how to rule, but how to make man political. Plato's conception of man as a social product is radical and only equalled in importance in Marx and Critical Theory.

4. In its scope, the *Republic* performs a radical investigation of 'the problem of beginning', i.e. how the political society can be radically changed for the better, considering that its constitution is a product of the character of its members, and – conversely – the character of the individuals is a product of society. According to Plato, a break in this circularity necessitates a radical break with a dominant ethos that justifies itself by tradition or by what tradition sanctions as natural. Political philosophy or theory finds a critical authority beyond ethics in the standards immanent in reason. They alone can provide valid and mutually binding general standards for the human good. This aspect of Plato has been a provocation to conceptions of democracy to this day, and is still considered politically suspect, although Plato served as inspiration to humanistic educational theory in the inter-war period, and a discussion of universalism versus culturalism is permanent within theory of democracy. It has been an aim of this interpretation to argue, that Plato is fully aware of

the clash between truth and consensus that still challenges democracy, and that the *Republic* may be still be read as a thought-provoking *mirror-of-princes* written for democrats.

The *Introduction* discusses in general the notion of state or political community as a product of human activity and, consequently, as a product of political reasoning, theory, and philosophy, that is, as conscious effects and reflections of already mediated socio-cultural phenomena. This elaboration is provoked by a view prevalent in the Carl Schmitt renaissance of the late 1990s, when the present study was originally conceived. In this view ‘the political’ is an expression of something ‘natural’ in the sense of unmediated, pre-rational, pre-social, effectively ‘pre’ anything specifically human. Schmitt’s view is criticised, partly in order to show how it differs from the whole western tradition of philosophical inquiry into political community and political rule, partly in order to show how – in Schmitt’s own and Schmitt-inspired perspectives – the fact that the topic of politics cannot be conceived in any pure theoretical form transforms the very *theory* of the political to a decisionist stance. The aim of this discussion is not (only) to contradict a trend in contemporary political philosophy, but to embrace the core question of political philosophy: For what purpose, with which justification, and how, can reason be applied to the ordering and rule of human life and interaction? This is taken as a central issue of Plato’s *Republic*.

A second theme of the *Introduction* is the particular nature of political philosophy and its manifestations throughout its history. With Leo Strauss it is maintained that political philosophy is not just philosophy of the political, but philosophy which is itself political. Against Leo Strauss it is maintained that this essentially equates political philosophy with the Enlightenment project: How to make reason practical. Again, with Strauss, some questions are raised about the literary peculiarities of political philosophy and the attention to (literary) form and expression necessarily involved in the interpretation of many works of political philosophers; however, Strauss’ specific notion of a secret way of writing and – related to this – of a double truth, are not conducive of the interpretation presented in the study to follow.

Chapter II deals with book 1 as an overture to the dialogue as a whole, airing central themes later to be developed, elaborated, and connected. The chapter first announces the pivotal problem around which the *Republic* is composed and to which it seeks a solution: The problem of beginning. How is social and political change possible? How is individual change possible? How does knowledge come to be? How and where does political philosophy begin? Where does the *Republic* begin?

On one level, book 1 is purely negative: We learn what justice is not, in that the allegedly common views of justice discussed are shown to miss the mark. Cephalus and Polemarchus understand justice as the unquestioned commonplace best suited to their way of living. Thrasymachus is at least frustrated with the ways of the unjust world, but seems content to be right. The three positions are united in the absence of a notion of community. It is, however, impossible to conceive of justice without a concept of something common. This is taken to point further: it is impossible to form a conception of justice, of anything at all, without a community of some sort; it takes a community to make justice and a community to conceive of justice. In this way we are – negatively – prepared for Plato’s connection of the political community and the philosophical, discursive community.

On another level the three positions do present something positive in that they each express a part of the soul: desire (Cephalus), temper (Polemarchus), reason (Thrasymachus). Book 1 illustrates how the three parts or powers of the soul look in splendid isolation: They imply no political community, and no inner composition of the soul. Humans – even educated men – are like atoms, differing in the shape of their individuality, but as such without any medium of identification with each other. Socrates represents the process which may transport the parts into a harmonious whole.

Chapter III offers an initial identification of the over-all issue and the main agenda of the *Republic*. It is argued that the *Republic* is first and foremost and essentially a *political* work. The perspective is not: How do I become just, but: How do we all together, as a human society, become just? At this point the study takes sides; the essentially political interpretation enters into conflict with a number of essentially *ethical* interpretations. The argument *against* individualistic ethical readings is kept running throughout the study. A highly respected companion is here Julia Annas whose views on Plato’s political philosophy and philosophy of education are criticized; other steady companions are Wolfgang Kersting, Seth Benardete, and Stanley Rosen, who have all undertaken the immense work of writing full commentaries to the *Republic*; and not the least Allan Bloom’s brilliant translation with its enclosed interpretative essay.

Glaucon and Adeimantus are introduced as having different agendas. Glaucon’s agenda is mainly intellectual: How to apply philosophy to the question of justice? Adeimantus’ approach is concerned with the practical problem of beginning, that is, with the possibility of social change and individual education. The separate agendas may be recognized throughout the dialogue in the interchange of interlocutor and change of focus, and they thus unfold two sides of the issue in

question: Political philosophy as a form of knowledge, and political philosophy as a means to visualize and bring about an alternative to the dominant ideology, e.g. another beginning for individual and society. Both demand a defence of justice, but as such the demand is futile. We do not know what justice is, and if we did, it would not make any difference. We can only defend justice by producing it and showing it to be worthwhile.

At this point the interpretation again takes sides in stressing the dynamic tenor of the work. The negative, necessary circularity pointed out by Adeimantus, that the socially valid truths and opinions are reproduced in the individual and thus again reproduced in society, in combination with the premiss from book 1 that justice and community are interrelated, forms the basis of the analogy between individual and community, soul and society/state. It is argued (at length in ch. V.B) and maintained throughout the interpretation of the dialogue that the 'analogy' is not a literary device, let alone a mere metaphor, but the statement of a factual reciprocate, dialectic causality. It is not just a way of looking at or describing the human things – it is the way they are. It is further argued (and elaborated in ch. IV) that human beings in Plato's view are a product of society – for better and for worse – and therefore socio-culturally self-produced to an extent which is only equalled in later, mainly Marxian anthropology and sociology. The first *polis* constructed (the 'polis of pigs') is thus seen as an elaboration of the only natural elements of the state, reason and desire. In combination the two factors amount to a striving for the best that is realized through specialized community, a natural division of labour to fulfill natural needs.

The needs for regulation and protection that this first *polis* gives rise to, however, are no longer merely natural and therefore not a matter for a natural division of labour. They are *socially produced* needs and therefore require socially produced abilities. On this point the chapter offers a comparison of *Protagoras* and *Republic* with a view to man's social nature and the concept of virtue.

Chapter IV proceeds in reading Plato's philosophy of education in books 2-3 as an answer to the question of how to produce a social second-nature in man in respond to the second-natural need for regulation and protection. At this point the two-fold nature of Plato' reasoning in the *Republic* appears clearly: On the one hand the constitutive conception of a political society that is productive of justice and a happy pleasant life; and on the other hand a radical critique of contemporary society in order to reveal the causes of *injustice* and the hindrances to a better formation of individual and society. Section D of the chapter aspires to an original reading of Plato's philosophical pedagogy inspired not the least by the broad understanding of aesthetics found in the concept of cultural

industry as a schematism that constitutes a determining pre-conscious formation. In this connection two points of contention are addressed: Firstly, it is argued that the aesthetic formation is intended for every member of society, because it is to a great extent achieved through general media that cannot be confined to special members, such as sound, architecture, design, in addition to stories, and because it is vital to the coherence of the community, not only in order to develop the basic social virtue of *sōphrosynē*, but also to form a constitutive solidarity with a common project. Secondly, it is argued that the noble lie must be understood in contradistinction to the ignoble truth, and that the tale of the four metals is not a statement about human first-nature with a view to justify a class differentiation from birth. On the contrary: Plato regards individuals as individuals, differing in abilities and preferences, but how and to what extent they differ is indiscernible until pedagogy has been at work for at least ten years.

Chapter V deals with four issues in Book 4. Section A discusses happiness and wealth with a view to Aristotle's criticism that the whole cannot be happy if no single member is happy. It is shown that this criticism somewhat misses the point at this stage, which is a discussion of wealth. As will become clear at a later stage, happiness and pleasure are vital to Plato's political conception of a good and just life. Section B is dedicated to a discussion of various interpretations of the analogy between polis and soul including the classic discussion of a fallacy in Plato's analogous reasoning about justice (Sachs, Williams) and Ferrari's attempt to save the argument by considering the analogy a mere metaphor. Section C elaborates, in agreement with Schofield, a functionalistic and dynamic understanding of the analogy. The main conclusion of this chapter, however, concerns the *preliminary status* of the *Republic's* argument so far. Section D thus focuses on the limitations of the analogy, as well as of the whole construction as it is presented in Book 4, i.e. the absence of reason *within* the state. The state has been built from outside, by the reasoning process of Socrates and his interlocutors, by an external philosophical agent, not by an internal political agent. The state so far rests on ethics and has no reason of its own. The task for the subsequent inquiry is to install reason as the ruling function of society and thus complete the analogy between man and political community.

Chapter VI comments on books 5-7 with the political context as a constant frame of reference. The search for 'the philosopher-ruler' is interpreted as an attempt to grasp man as political being and to distinguish the specific interest and striving relevant for an individual partaking in political rule as such (i.e. irrespective of constitution). The question, however, is not just how man becomes philosophical and political, but how philosophy becomes political. The third wave, that

philosophers must rule, or rulers philosophize, stresses the necessity of a perfect union of these two functions, but it also continues the search for a point of beginning. The philosopher-king is the answer to the question of how the just state may come to be realized; this, however, raises the question of how philosophy is realized and how 'the philosopher' comes to be within the state, i.e. not just an ethically orderly character, but a character dominated by the love of truth and committed to the search for knowledge, and not just as a matter of chance, as is the case with Socrates and his well-bred interlocutors, but as a conscious political project of education. Section C of the chapter undertakes an interpretation of books 6-7 as a didactic parallel to the aesthetic pedagogy of books 2-3. The anthropological supposition is not that man is rational, but that man can learn. C i. deals with the first condition of learning, the distinction between *doxa* and *epistemē*. This is shown to be the beginning of a political awareness, too; the distinction is essentially a critical questioning of the opinions produced and held by society. C.ii. focusses on how Plato views the hindrances as well as the limits of the intellectual aspect of education. The central images of Sun, Line, and Cave are also read as composed with a view to the political context. Just as philosophy and knowledge would not (subjectively) be possible if man did not have the ability to learn, there would be no learning if there were no point of departure within the sensible world, that is, if the distinction of an object of knowledge was not to be found in the world of phenomena. It is taken as the main content of the Divided Line, that the world is essentially intelligible due to its relational character. The things in the lower sections of the line may be sensible and not intelligible, but the relation between them is intelligible and not sensible. Philosophy, knowledge, and a rational, enlightened political ordering of the world are all within the possible, although the problem of the beginning remains. Book 7 is understood as advocating a systematic education through a selective system as well as an obligation of the educated not to rest content with their own education but to take part in the administration and further education of their society as the only means of bringing about change.

Chapter VII mainly addresses the critique of democracy and the question of the proper harmony between reason and desire. It is maintained that the *Republic* so far has been concerned exclusively with determining the *concepts* of state and justice, not with any positive political plan or blueprint for a political community. The aim has been to develop philosophy into political philosophy, not to turn philosophy into politics. It still remains to be shown, however, that the philosophically informed life and society is worth striving for; that a harmonious ordering of soul and community by reason is also conducive of happiness. The reading presented in this chapter takes book 8 and 9 as an appeal to the democratic citizen who is at the same time also ruler. At this

point the analogy necessarily collapses. The democratic individual becomes one with society, and the question of political rule is therefore treated as a matter of self-government in the remaining part of the dialogue. The exposition of tyranny is understood as a worst case scenario, but also as a refutation *ad absurdum* of the claim of individual self-sufficiency. The claim basically ignores that individual freedom and self-realisation presupposes the protection of community and law. It is argued, consequently, that the tyrannical state in Plato's view is not a pre-political state of nature, but a post-political, socially produced state, a disintegration of society. This also holds good for the individual. Plato hereby again stresses the dialectic between individual and society, not least between individual and social norms and standards. What keeps democratic man and society from disintegration and procures a kind of equilibrium and stability is the habitual adherence to *nomos* and *ethos*, to common opinion. This keeps the worst excesses in check, at the same time preventing a rational and critical autonomy. Chapter VII provides a discussion of the role of lust and desire in the *Republic's* conception of happiness and the good life, including an interpretation of Plato's understanding of the unconscious. Again it is maintained that the deformities of the unconscious, in parallel to the deformities of society (in broad terms criminality, incompetence, and egoism), are mainly products of society, not natural conditions. The argument about the just life as ultimately the most pleasant life is referred to a conclusion in real lived experience: Try it, and you will know the difference.

Chapter VIII treats book 10 as an epilogue. Its main subject matter is of course art, but this must be interpreted in close connection to the function of the book, namely to overcome the *chōrismos* between the ideal and the real, between thinking and doing, between writer and reader. Art seems, first of all in the shape of drama, able to do this. Art is able to affect the mind and thereby produce an interpretation of the world that ultimately has practical effects. The chapter emphasizes Plato's occupation with art as *poiēsis*, more specifically as production of consciousness through identification. It is shown how and why this works in every spectator irrespective of education, producing a cultural sentimentality that clashes with otherwise produced social standards and virtues. Adeimantus' circle of ideology which prevents the production of real change for the better may be effective, but it is also self-contradictory. The emotional receptivity and identification of the theatre, illustrative of the democratic public sphere, constitutes a pseudo-community, which may, or may not, gain supremacy over standards of justice and decency and thus bring about the fall of political society. In the end it seems to be a choice left to the individual while there is still

something to choose between. The concluding myth of Er is interpreted with the help of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*.

The final two chapters pursue some thoughts on Plato as an inspirational source in philosophy of education. Chapter IX comments in detail upon Rousseau's close reading of book 7 of the *Laws*, arguing that this book contains most of his central themes and principles relating to early childhood formation. It is discussed why Rousseau called the *Republic* 'the most beautiful treatise on education ever written' in spite of his obvious disagreement with key issues of this work, such as aesthetic education, equality of the sexes, and philosophical rule. A second part takes up the question of Rousseau's 'Platonism', arguing that this must be answered first and foremost from the subject matter they had in common, i.e. education. Chapter X presents a summary of the basic tenets of the interpretation of the *Republic* and proposes two lines of thought on how Plato's political philosophy is still of interest: The first takes up the analysis and critique of democratic individualism as pseudo-individualism that permeates the *Republic*. It is argued that Rousseau's transformation of Plato's theory of education into a theory of 'private', individual education is closely connected to his exclusion of the aesthetic element, which is always trans-individual and always present as a socio-cultural factor and condition of education proper. The second line of thought takes up the problem of beginning, maintaining that while today any radical political reform is faced with the immense task of changing the determining capitalist mode of production, the distance between educational theory and practice is still comparatively short. In spite of dominating legislation aiming at the contrary, child care, pedagogy, teaching, and general education still take place in actual relations between actual human beings and thus, at least in a democracy, legislation dictated by economic standards cannot absolutely hinder the practice of educational standards dictated by reason and knowledge of the human soul. The greatest hindrance is the ignorance, on the part of the educators, of their own mass-produced consciousness and predispositions as well as the lack of reflection upon the permanent, pre-conscious socio-aesthetic formation of themselves and those they are educating. In order to change anything for the better, to phrase it with Plato, the philosopher must become a self-critical educator or vice versa.

To Change the World

A Reading of Plato's Political Philosophy in the *Republic*

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