

Title: Philosophy and/as Politics in Plato's Republic: Ancient and Contemporary Interpretations

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Abstract: With the proposal that philosophers become rulers or that rulers become philosophers, Plato in the Republic can be said to have left the subsequent philosophical tradition with the problem of the relation between philosophy and politics. In the first part of this paper I wish to show that already in the Republic the relation is more a tension than an identity. If the philosopher and the ruler should be the same person, the Republic does not try to hide the extent to which these two roles conflict, as seen especially in the account of the philosopher's descent into the Cave and the account at the beginning of Book 8 of how the ideal city will meet its end.

In the second part of the paper I consider Aristotle's response to Plato, evident not only in his explicit critique of the Idea of the Good in Nicomachean Ethics 1.6, but also in his insistence on a sharp distinction between politics, as concerned with the human good, and philosophical wisdom, as concerned with principles greater than us. Nevertheless, in Book 10 we learn that the best human life is one that transcends politics in being lived according to the divine element in us, which Aristotle, significantly borrowing the language used of the Idea of the Good in the Republic, describes as surpassing everything else "in power and honor." Correspondingly, in Book 12 of the Metaphysics, the unmoved mover as ultimate cause turns out to be that good towards which we aspire. We thus appear left with a tense, problematic relationship between politics (ethics) and philosophy not so different from that encountered in the Republic. If Plato, in attempting to reconcile politics and philosophy also shows them to be in conflict, Aristotle, in attempting to keep them sharply distinct, also shows them to be implicated in one another.

In the last part of this paper I turn to two very different contemporary readings/appropriations of the philosopher-king ideal, those of Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault. In courses from the 1920's Heidegger credits Aristotle with avoiding the confusion between ethics and ontology supposedly

found in Plato. Yet when Heidegger in 1933 assumes the Rectorship of Freiburg University and joins the National Socialist Party, he delivers a course on Plato's Republic that clearly seeks in the ideal of philosopher-kings justification for his own political involvement. Heidegger 'solves' the problem of the relation between politics and philosophy by simply collapsing the former into the latter: by, in other words, characterizing philosophy (in the form of ontology) as the only authentic politics and the philosopher as ruling just by virtue of being a philosopher. In contrast, Foucault's reading of the Republic in his 1982-1983 course, *Le Gouvernement de Soi et des Autres*, insists that the philosopher-king proposal, in claiming only that the same person should practice philosophy and politics, keeps the two completely distinct. Thus Foucault develops his own view that, if philosophy can play a role in relation to politics by transforming the subject who lives politically, it plays no role within politics. In these two opposed modern readings of the Republic can be seen the 'fallout' of the tension bequeathed by both Plato and Aristotle

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