Proposal for 20 minute paper  
IX Symposium Platonicum, Tokyo

The Republic’s Divided Imagination: from eikasia and dianoia to phantasia

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In this paper I will investigate the notion of imagination in the Republic. In general, the term “imagination” serves in English translations of the Republic to render the Greek eikasia, which refers to the lowest epistemological level illustrated in the analogies of the divided line and the cave. However, in the present study I shall focus on imagination as a more general psychological faculty involving images, a faculty which functions as an element of a model of mind and ultimately a key component in an account of consciousness. Central to this investigation shall, of course, be an interpretation of the divided line, particularly those sections corresponding to eikasia and dianoia. I will suggest that these two sections should be understood as belonging to the power which later in Plato and then in Aristotle and the Neoplatonists shall be referred to as phantasia. (I shall in the context of this paper only briefly indicate why we are entitled to translate phantasia as “imagination” and why we ought to admit the existence of a certain continuity between the use of this notion in Plato’s late dialogues, in particular the Sophist, and Aristotle’s psychological works). Thus, it shall be possible to conclude that behind the four-part analogy of the divided line, there lies a three-part model of the cognitive faculty constituted by reason, imagination and sensation. On the one hand, explicitly reading eikasia and dianoia as precursors to the notion of phantasia allows us to resolve various problems in the interpretation of the analogies of the divided line and the cave (such difficulties as are involved in explaining why Plato introduces eikasia, accounting for the nature of the proportions governing the sections of the line, identifying those whose cognition remains at the level of eikasia and understanding how hypothesizing functions at the level of dianoia). On the other hand, such a reading should also permit us to better understand the conceptions of phantasia elaborated in Plato’s later thought, in Aristotle and in the Neoplatonists. More generally, an examination of eikasia and dianoia in light of phantasia allows us to formulate with greater clarity the extent to which we might assert that the Republic contributes to a “positive” understanding of imagination.

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