Plato’s First and Second Revolutions

In this paper I shall compare and contrast some ‘revolutionary’ thoughts on women, property and justice to be found in the Republic and the Laws.

On the question of women, I shall argue that, with the exception of what is said about prospective female guardians, what is said about women in the Republic is relatively conservative; one has to wait till the Laws to find a statement about the equal education of all women (along with all men) that is really revolutionary.

On the question of property, I shall argue that, with the exception of what is said about property restrictions for the guardian class, nothing revolutionary is said about property in the Republic; in the Laws, by contrast, there is a major revolution proposed, in which, following a system characterized by a minimum of one and maximum of four property quanta, the guiding principle is one of distributive justice for all citizens.

On the more general question of justice, I shall argue that the definition of justice in the Republic is indeed revolutionary, but that the notion of justice driving the Laws, in which it is now much more clearly seen as a relational virtue than one defined in terms of balance of parts within an organism, is philosophically sounder, and has in fact become the basis for a good deal of contemporary political theory.

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