

D. C. Schindler

Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic.

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In this book D. C. Schindler offers an interpretation of Plato that continues the trend toward honoring the dramaturgical elements as much as the philosophical arguments. One eccentricity of the book is that such an interpretation is intended to help rehabilitate what Schindler regards as an impoverished conception of reason held by Western culture today. In this way, the book is not merely history of philosophy, but aims for something more contemporary.

In a substantial introduction, Schindler argues that despite reason coming under attack in previous eras, the present era is unique insofar as the attacks on reason have come from *within* the university. We reside in a misological era, that is, an era characterized by an 'utterly radicalized skepticism, followed all the way to its practical conclusions' (11). Schindler addresses four misological habits currently enjoying prominence: first, a trend to instrumentalize; second, an inability to integrate parts into comprehensive wholes; third, a harmful obsession with technology; and finally, a move to 'reduce thinking to politics' (19), where politics is defined in the most cynical sense. Out of this morass, there emerges the *Republic* and its central claim that the Good is both the primitive constituent of knowledge and the cause of everything. What this amounts to is the claim that there is an intrinsic connection between the 'orders of goodness and intelligibility' (27).

For Schindler, the first book of the *Republic* is absolutely crucial to the rest of the dialogue. It establishes a crisis of reason and gestures toward a resolution of this crisis. Indeed, the full weight of this crisis cannot even be fully understood until the crisis itself is resolved. The interaction between Socrates and his interlocutors in Book I, for instance, anticipates the cave analogy. It is littered with references to force, which alludes to the philosophers and the threat of violence with which they shall be threatened by the cave-dwellers. Socrates is obliged to speak even though there is no possibility of genuine communication. Thus, with no overt proposal as to what justice is—at 347a, even love of wisdom is not included as a viable candidate—Schindler concludes that Book I is 'essentially negative' (53).

In the latter half of the first chapter, Schindler focuses on Thrasymachus, and he argues that there is logical connection between Thrasymachus' argument about political power and a relativistic epistemology. Since epistemological considerations do not come

out until later, Schindler incorporates the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* into the discussion. For Schindler, Protagoras' thesis *pace* knowledge that man is the measure is analogical to the same thesis, *pace* justice, with reference to Thrasymachus. So, even though Thrasymachus is explicit only about the connection between power and justice, Schindler maintains that he is nevertheless committed to a form of relativism. Of course, Thrasymachus does not make the relativist argument precisely when one would most expect it (340d). Instead, he offers an argument from ideal conditions. Only when rulers are at their best are they infallible. Schindler's response to this textual anomaly is to give Thrasymachus sufficient credit to recognize that he cannot assent to Cleitophon's option without becoming bankrupt of power. To my mind, however, Schindler would do well to meditate on the fact that Thrasymachus is a sophist and thereby claims to possess determinate knowledge in the form of *techne*. This better explains both Thrasymachus' acceptance of the fallible/infallible distinction and why his argument from ideal conditions consists of various *technai*. In this way, it is doubtful that Schindler can justifiably ascribe relativism to Thrasymachus.

The second chapter draws out the triadic character of the good: things can be good intrinsically, extrinsically, or both. Justice is an instance of the latter. According to Schindler, this triad is unique to Plato; Aristotle, for instance, recognized only the first two. Schindler argues that Plato's third option is a consequence of his love for the whole. Appearances, while unstable, are still a legitimate part of the whole, and thus occupy a mid-point between being and non-being. The challenge, then, is to carve out a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. The Good, as that which establishes both ontological truth and epistemological access, is the focal point. According to Schindler, no interpretations of the Good have fully appreciated the dramatic context as a whole. An adequate interpretation must conceptualize the Good as a response to the challenges formulated in the first two books. Once properly understood, the Good's twofold nature—objective and relational—coalesces with current interpretations. For instance, whereas the teleological interpretation of the Good is relational, the unity interpretation encapsulates its intrinsic character.

Furthermore, the two-fold nature of the Good is expressed in all three analogies—the sun, the divided line, and the cave. Contra scholars who interpret each analogy individually, Schindler argues that they ought to be interpreted together. Crucial to Schindler's interpretation is that each analogy contains both an *ascent to* and a *descent from* the Good. Consider the cave analogy again. The reason philosophers return to the cave is due to their desire for the whole. In this way, Schindler claims that the character of Socrates represents the Good—Socrates is simultaneously both outside and inside the cave.

Given that the Good is the ultimate foundation for all intelligibility, it is not clear how the Good itself is to be rationally defended. In the fifth chapter Schindler confronts this issue by claiming that reason is fundamentally ecstatic, that is, it reaches beyond

itself and in so doing, becomes vulnerable to its critics. This ‘powerlessness’ is specific to all genuine philosophy; it can be contrasted with sophistry, which is exclusively concerned with power. This ineliminable ecstasy necessitates and legitimizes Plato’s recourse to imagery (i.e., the sun).

The final chapter is especially pertinent in that it deals with methodological issues and alternative positions. Ideally, these methodological and alternative issues would have been addressed in two separate chapters, with the methodological considerations coming at the start of the book. As should be clear by Schindler’s willingness to integrate other dialogues into his arguments, he rejects the developmental approach, and even thinks there are good reasons to hold that the *Republic*’s ascent/descent structure is reflected in the entirety of the Platonic corpus.

Schindler’s book fulfills its promise to pay close attention to the *Republic*’s dramaturgical components. What I take to be particularly compelling about Schindler’s reading is the claim that books subsequent to the first book of the *Republic* must be interpreted in light of the dialogue’s initial exchange. In this way, the thesis that Thrasymachus’ position logically implies Protagorean relativism comes to be decisive, although on separate grounds it is not wholly convincing. This is not to take away from Schindler’s textured analysis of the Good. Finally, despite Schindler’s insistence that the modern conception of reason can be at least partly rehabilitated by arguments found in the *Republic*, such a rehabilitation needs to confront those modern arguments against reason directly. Such a confrontation never happens here, with the result that the book’s introduction remains rather remote from the rest of the text.

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