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HARVEY YUNIS

1 The Protreptic Rhetoric of the *Republic*

In the *Republic* Socrates and his interlocutors consider the question of how one should live (352d). As befits a work of philosophy, the question is answered by Socrates by means of arguments that are intended to be compelling because of their logical and rational qualities. The characters in the dialogue demonstrate a great interest in the question, and in the arguments brought to bear, because they perceive that what is said about it will matter for, and may well determine, how they live their own lives (621c). How is the student of the *Republic* to react to Socrates' arguments? Students of the *Republic* are free to examine Socrates' arguments without feeling that those arguments may have any impact on how they will live their lives. That is an option opened up by the autonomy of reading and bolstered by the disciplinary practice of academic philosophy, which requires indeed the examination of the arguments but not the implementation of the results of that examination in one's own life. By long practice, it has been found possible, and often intellectually advantageous, to keep life and the study of life separate.

In this chapter I argue that Plato's purpose as a philosophical writer was not merely to present compelling arguments about how one should live, but to present them in such a way that the reader would be most likely to be compelled by them to choose to live in a particular way. This is not an entirely original idea; the urgency of Plato's writing has been evident to many of his readers for a long time. But at a time when writing and reading have many multifarious purposes and disciplinary habits are entrenched, it is worth examining anew Plato's practice as a philosophical writer.

Over the course of the conversation narrated by Socrates in the *Republic*, his two main interlocutors, Glaucon and Adeimantus,

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undergo a change. There are three closely related respects in which the change takes place.

First, Glaucon and Adeimantus change with respect to their views on justice. At the start of the *Republic*, neither Glaucon nor Adeimantus shares Thrasymachus' view that it pays to be unjust; and they incline toward Socrates' view that it pays to be just. But they are unconvinced that Socrates has actually refuted Thrasymachus in Book I, and in spite of their inclinations they lack complete confidence that Socrates is right about justice and Thrasymachus wrong. Desiring an argument in favor of justice that will wipe away all doubts about its unconditional utility, Glaucon eloquently presents a worst-case scenario that contrasts the lives of two men (358b–362c). One is just but deprived of all the goods of this world and burdened by all the evils; the other man is unjust but enjoys all the goods of this world and none of the evils. Adeimantus adds the condition that for both men the rewards and punishments of the gods and other men are to be ignored (363a–368c). If Socrates can show that this just man is better off than this unjust man, he will have demonstrated that it always pays to be just without regard for appearances and consequences.

Socrates' response to the challenge issued by Glaucon and Adeimantus, which extends to the end of Book 9, is successful: the brothers are led through precisely the sort of argument about justice that they wish to hear, and they acknowledge that Socrates has made the stringent case they requested (580b–d, 588b–592b). With respect to their views on justice, Glaucon and Adeimantus are changed: previously they were not confident that it always pays to be just under any and all conditions, but now, as a result of Socrates' argument, they have become confident that it does always pay to be just.

Second, the change that Glaucon and Adeimantus undergo in their views on justice can be traced back to a change in their values – which is at the heart of the *Republic's* argument. To make his argument about justice in response to Glaucon's challenge, Socrates undertakes to show what justice is in and of itself, without regard for how it is viewed or what consequences it entails (358b). For only if justice is seen in this stark light, isolated from the good repute in which it is generally held, will it be possible to demonstrate that justice is a good that by itself outweighs all other goods. Socrates argues that justice is a condition of the soul akin to health in the body; it is

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the condition in which all the parts of the soul perform their proper function and the soul as a whole functions in its proper way (Book 4). Socrates then shows that the good that consists in the excellence of the soul outweighs all other goods by itself (Books 8–9).

From the beginning the brothers leaned toward justice and were not overly enamored of worldly, material, conventional goods. So we should not suppose that in the course of the *Republic* Glaucon and Adeimantus undergo a complete change in values, just as the change in their views on justice was essentially a matter of degree. But their values do change to some degree and in a particular direction. Whereas previously Glaucon and Adeimantus were not convinced that the good of the soul was absolutely superior to all other goods, they learn from Socrates' argument that the good of the soul is such that in comparison to it all other goods must always be deemed inferior. They learn to value the soul more than they did before, and they value worldly, material, conventional goods less.

Third, Glaucon and Adeimantus are indeed characters in a fictional work of literature, so on one level it makes no sense to talk about the lives of these characters outside what is represented in *Republic*.¹ But this work of literature, far from being fantastical, possesses verisimilitude to an extraordinary degree: the imagined world created by the author corresponds in vivid detail to the real world inhabited by the author and reader. This verisimilitude is a product of Plato's art.² By the act of imagination initiated by the author, the reader is encouraged to suppose that, as a result of the change in their values and their views of justice, Glaucon and Adeimantus will now tend to make the choices they face solely on the basis of justice and to disregard the consequences and other features of their actions.

¹ Like Socrates, Thrasymachus, and the rest of the characters in the *Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus were historical persons; in fact, Glaucon and Adeimantus were Plato's brothers. The point at issue here concerns solely how Plato represents them in the dialogue; see Ferrari 2003, pp. 11–36.

² The realistic style of the dialogue has had the consequence of inducing readers, among them some ancient and modern scholars, to suppose that the Socrates presented in Plato's dialogues is a historically reliable account of the actual Socrates and his views. Despite considerable effort and ingenuity on the part of its adherents, that supposition has never been convincingly demonstrated, and no particular version of it has ever won more than a passing endorsement from the scholarly community; see Nails 1995. On Plato's creation of a literary Socrates, see Michelini 2003.

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In accord with Er's mythic tale of choices and fates that closes the *Republic* and illustrates the benefit of making choices based solely on justice (614b–621b), the reader is also encouraged to suppose that Glaucon and Adeimantus are better off now in their new, changed condition at the end of the *Republic* than they were at the beginning.

Plato's overarching purpose in writing the *Republic* was to effect a change in his readers similar to the change that Glaucon and Adeimantus undergo at Socrates' hands in the fictional world of the dialogue. This purpose can be summed up in the word protreptic, from the Greek *protrepein*, which means "turn (someone) forward," hence "propel," "urge on," "exhort." Plato uses literary art, which in his case includes but is not limited to philosophical argument, to move his reader toward a greater readiness to adopt a just way of life. The full acquisition of virtue involves a long and complex education, as can be seen, for instance, in the account of the education of philosophers (Books 6 and 7). Protreptic discourse is not educational discourse as a whole and does not by itself bring about education in virtue. Rather, protreptic addresses the initial or preparatory stages of education. It aims to get education in virtue under way, to get the reader or auditor turned and moving in the right direction, and to make the acquisition of virtue an urgent priority.

Protreptic is not the name of a particular genre of discourse of fourth-century Greece despite the fact that certain fourth-century discourses refer to their protreptic function explicitly. Rather, protreptic refers to a function of discourse without regard to the form in which the discourse is cast. Protreptic is explicit when the writer or speaker addresses the recipient of his discourse and discloses his protreptic purpose explicitly. This occurs, for instance, in Isocrates' letter *To Philip*, exhorting Philip to lead a panhellenic expedition against Persia (*protrepein*, 5.17, 116); in Plato's *Euthydemus*, where Socrates demonstrates what, in his view, an exhortation to pursue wisdom and virtue would be like (*protreptikoi logoi*, 282d); and in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, a lost work addressed to Themison, king of Cyprus, exhorting him to take up philosophy. In the *Republic*, the protreptic function is implicit, because the author never addresses the reader in his own voice and never says what his purpose is.³

³ See Slings 1999, pp. 58–164, for a survey of protreptic discourse in fourth-century Greek literature. On protreptic discourse in Plato, see Gaiser 1959; Festugière 1973;

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This rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. First, what did it mean for Plato to write literature that was intended to change his readers' values and views of justice, and what were the parameters and premises that made this protreptic literary project worth undertaking? Second, who was Plato's audience in the *Republic*? Third, how does the view of the *Republic* as protreptic square with Plato's views on political and philosophical discourse? And fourth, how is Plato's protreptic purpose reflected in the text and argument of the *Republic*?

I. WHAT WERE THE PARAMETERS AND PREMISES OF
PLATO'S PROTREPTIC ENDEAVOR?

The change that Plato sought to effect in his readers cannot have been as specific as that which Glaucon and Adeimantus are portrayed as undergoing. Whereas the fictional characters have specific, well-delineated views when the work opens and acknowledge their specific, new positions by the end, readers in real life would come to the *Republic* with a range of views on justice and the soul, and the extent to which the experience of reading the *Republic* might move them closer to Socrates' position would also vary. But this unavoidable range of views in an unknown readership was of no practical consequence for Plato.

Plato could bank on the fact that, at least outside his own circle, no potential reader of the *Republic* had as firm a conviction about the absolute utility of justice as that which Socrates secures for Glaucon and Adeimantus in the course of the *Republic*. Glaucon, who is well informed, claims never to have heard such an argument before (358d). But if there were such a reader, for him the *Republic* would merely be redundant. Rather, Plato was addressing readers who – for any reason whatsoever – were less than fully convinced that justice was always more profitable than injustice, and that category included virtually everyone. When Glaucon and Adeimantus issue their challenge to Socrates in Book 2, they formulate an extreme

Gallagher 2004. On Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, see Düring 1961. Only after the classical period did protreptic become a recognized genre for exhorting the reader to take up philosophy, as the *Protrepticus* of Iamblichus (late 3rd, early 4th century C.E.), or some other formal schooling, as the *Protrepticus* of Galen (2nd century C.E.), an exhortation to study medicine.

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case: they pit justice against whatever other goods can possibly be conceived, and they do not presuppose that any particular objection to justice is more telling than any other. The result is that anyone who harbors any doubt about the absolute utility of justice can look forward to Socrates' response as a potential answer to his or her particular concerns about justice. Glaucon and Adeimantus speak for themselves and for any readers who, like them, are well-intentioned, intellectually honest inquirers into the value of justice. They speak for Thrasyachus, the professional sophist who rejects justice on the grounds that it is a sham and by itself does the just man no good. They speak for people of ordinary intellectual attainments who, like Cephalus and Polemarchus in Book 1, have some regard for justice, based on the good repute that it enjoys, but have never sorted out how justice ranks in comparison to other goods, especially the material and social goods that they pursue. And they speak for the many who view justice as indeed a good thing, but one acquired solely for the sake of other good things and of no inherent value itself (358a). In short, there is no one who could not see in the challenge presented by Glaucon and Adeimantus a basis for having his or her own qualms about justice answered, whatever those qualms might be. Plato thereby ensured that virtually anyone who read the *Republic* would have good reason to take it seriously and attend to his project of changing their values.

Yet Plato could not hope to control how readers would read his book and thus how they would be affected by it. He was aware that, whatever the author's purpose in writing a book, readers have their own purposes, many of which cannot be anticipated, let alone controlled, by authors. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates says (275e):

Once a thing is put into writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know to address the right people and not the address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs the help of its parent [i.e., the author] to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (trans. Hackforth)

So Plato would scarcely expect that he could change the values of every reader who picked up the *Republic* or that even sympathetic readers would necessarily adopt Socrates' position on justice and the soul with all the enthusiasm demonstrated by Glaucon and

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Adeimantus. As Polemarchus says at the opening of the *Republic* (327c): "Could you persuade us if we refused to listen?"

The situation Plato faced as author is a rhetorical situation: addressing an audience that is considering a particular issue, he wants to change the way the audience thinks about that issue, but the only means at his disposal to do so are the resources of language. Given the (inevitable) limitations of those resources, the basic principle of rhetorical art is to focus on what lies within the author's control – the artistic manipulation of literary resources – and to relinquish the contingent – the actual response of actual readers. Recall Aristotle's definition of rhetoric, which became the operative definition as rhetoric developed into an art: "Let rhetoric be defined as the ability to see in each case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1).⁴ Thus Plato's strategy was to exploit the available literary resources in such a way that an unknown reader would most likely be moved as close to Socrates' position on justice and the soul as was possible. The function of protreptic being to guide the reader or listener to adopt some attitude, protreptic is a form of rhetoric because it acknowledges a division between the responsibility of the author or speaker and that of the reader or listener. The author or speaker does what he can to guide the recipient toward a particular course, but it is up to the reader or listener whether or not to follow the guidance that has been offered. Protreptic rhetoric focuses on making that guidance as forceful as it can be and concentrates on the effect of the discourse on the recipient of the discourse, but, pursuing the task as a matter of art, it is not essentially concerned with the outcome, that is, how the reader or listener will respond.

Plato's protreptic task in the *Republic* is in certain respects parallel to the task that, as Plato represents it, Socrates undertook among his fellow Athenians. In the *Apology*, Socrates describes the nature of his philosophical activity in Athens (29d–30b):

I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as

⁴ On the intrinsic ends of rhetoric and its status as an art, see Garver 1994, pp. 18–51.

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possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul? . . . I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls. . . . (trans. Tredennick)

It is unlikely that Socrates' protreptic activity had much success in changing his fellow citizens' values. There is no sign that such a change took place. And it was that very protreptic activity that, as Plato portrays it in the *Apology*, contributed to their willingness to convict him of impiety and corrupting the youth.⁵ Yet Socrates insists on his pure motives and on the inherent value of his protreptic activity among the Athenians. That activity is, he says, "what god commands and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to god" (*Ap.* 30a). By making Socrates into a civic philosophical hero Plato has endorsed the view that even though Socrates may have failed in his attempt to change his fellow citizens' values, his protreptic activity was nevertheless worthwhile.⁶ So too Plato's protreptic endeavor in the *Republic* should be judged with respect not to its ultimate success in changing his readers' values (which cannot in any case be measured) but to its aims, purposes, and methods. We can presume that the same combination of diffidence and determination that Socrates expresses when he agrees to take up the challenge issued by Glaucon and Adeimantus – "the best thing is to aid justice as best I can," says Socrates (368c) – will also have informed Plato's work as author.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider what kind of change would have to count as success for Plato's endeavor. Even Thrasymachus, the thoroughgoing amoralist, shows interest in Socrates' conversation with Glaucon and Adeimantus (450a–b) and Socrates is keen to maintain that interest (498c–d). But there is no sign that Thrasymachus is ultimately changed and no reason to believe that

⁵ Cf. especially *Ap.* 30b: "if I corrupt the youth by this message, the message would seem to be harmful, but if anyone says that my message is different from this, he is talking nonsense." For fuller discussion, see Yunis 1996, pp. 153–56; Burnyeat 1997.

⁶ A similar endorsement can be seen in the *Gorgias*: Socrates claims that he is the only true political expert and the only (Athenian) citizen truly engaged in politics (521d), even as he admits that in the democracy he is helpless to change politics for the better (521e–522a).

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Plato expected to convert followers of Thrasymachus among his contemporaries. Yet if, as a result of reading the *Republic*, individuals who are already inclined toward justice and the soul, like Glaucon and Adeimantus, have those inclinations deepened to the point of certainty and acquire an immunity to the amorality of Thrasymachus, that would be a highly significant achievement and would amply justify philosophy's work in the public realm. But no matter how much or little any reader valued justice before he began reading the *Republic*, if Plato were to move that reader even slightly closer to Socrates' view of justice and the soul than he was before, that would not be an insignificant achievement. From Plato's perspective, insofar as a reader learned to care even slightly less about wealth, power, and prestige and slightly more about justice and perfecting his soul, he would be better off (472b–c): he would be more likely to make the choices he faced on the basis of justice than on any other criteria.

II. WHO WAS THE AUDIENCE THAT PLATO SOUGHT TO INFLUENCE WITH THE *REPUBLIC*?

The *Republic* belongs to a cultural development that began in Greece in the latter part of the fifth century B.C.E. and accelerated in the fourth – the rise of popular prose literature. “Popular” must be defined carefully because in this context it means something different from what it means today. As made evident above all by Athenian tragic poetry, a highly refined form of mass entertainment, it is not possible to draw a clear line between a sophisticated, highbrow culture of the elite and a crude, undemanding culture of the masses.⁷ In the first half of the fourth century, when the *Republic* was written, most of the population in the stratified societies of the Greek world had neither the education nor the leisure to read and understand formal literature on their own. So the new prose literature was not popular in the sense that it offered entertainment or instruction to masses of unsophisticated readers in the manner of a modern bestseller.

⁷ Halliwell 2002, pp. 90–91. Nevertheless, Aristotle divides the audience of the theater into educated spectators and vulgar spectators, and advises appropriate entertainment for both types (*Politics* 1342a16–27).

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Yet whereas in previous centuries literacy had been monopolized by experts and aristocrats, in Athens around the mid-fifth century the opportunities for literacy and the uses of literacy among the populace at large began a period of dramatic growth, as did the production and distribution of books.⁸ And beyond the highly literate individuals who belonged mostly to the upper classes, individuals without the skill to read formal literature on their own might gather in groups to hear works of written literature read aloud.⁹ The circulation of texts and the number of readers now reached the point where authors, in their capacity as private individuals, began to address the public as a whole through written texts. Thus the new prose literature existed outside the state institutions of assembly, courts, and theater. Those were the arenas of the two traditional modes of popular communication, poetry and oratory, which reached their audiences strictly in live performances regulated by the state. Avoiding both the constraints of democratic competition and the religious scruples attached to public poetic performance, the new prose authors addressed the public with a freedom of expression that was unprecedented in the Greek world.¹⁰ The new prose literature was popular in the sense that it bypassed the existing forms of mass, oral communication to address an anonymous, amorphous, growing audience of readers.

Surviving fragments of comic plays of Plato's day reveal that Plato was well known to the Athenian public as an intellectual, a stock figure in Athenian comedy. Some fragments contain jokes that presume at least a vague awareness of some of Plato's basic ideas and terminology.¹¹ Since he was a prolific writer and avoided any prominent role in Athenian public life, this evidence attests to the fact

⁸ On literacy and the rise of literate culture in fifth- and fourth-century Athens, see Harris 1989; Thomas 1989; Thomas 1992; Yunis 2003b.

⁹ We cannot trace the extent of this phenomenon, but we know that it took place. On reading aloud to groups in fourth-century Athens, see Usener 1994; Thomas 2003.

¹⁰ On the new prose literature and freedom from democratic constraints, see Yunis 1998. On freedom of thought and expression in Athens, see Dover 1976; Wallace 1994.

¹¹ The evidence was collected and discussed first by Diogenes Laertius (3.26–28) (2nd–3rd century C.E.) and more recently by Webster 1953, pp. 50–55. The following fragments of Athenian Middle Comedy (ca. 400–325 B.C.E.) refer to Plato's ideas or terminology (cited from Kassel 1983): Alexis 98, 163; Amphis 6; Cratinus junior 10; Epicrates 10; Theopompus 16.