



## **Kenneth Dorter, *The Transformation of Plato's Republic* (Lexington Books, 2006), 395 pp**

by Geir Þórarinnsson

It should not come as a surprise to anyone that scholarly interest in Platos *Republic* is as strong as it has ever been. This important dialogue continues to receive much attention. Kenneth Dorters *The Transformation of Platos Republic* [henceforth *TPR*] makes a valuable contribution to the scholarly discourse on this central Platonic dialogue. Dorter offers an ambitious interpretation of the entire dialogue based on what he takes to be the dialogues underlying organizational principle. The result is a powerful and enticing reading of the dialogue as a unified and coherent whole.

*TPR* is divided into 11 numbered chapters in addition to an introductory and a concluding chapter as well as a short preface, a bibliography, an index, and (according to the table of contents) a page "about the author" (allegedly on p. 397, although no such page is to be found). Each chapter has notes at the end of the chapter. The first 10 numbered chapters roughly (but only roughly) correspond to the *Republics* division into Books (e.g. ch. 2 of *TPR* covers *Rep.* Book 2 up to 376c, ch. 3 covers the rest of Book 2 and Book 3 up to 412b etc.). The discussion in each chapter is centered on the major theme of each Book: theories of justice in ch. 1, the origin of the city in ch. 2, education of the guardians in ch. 3 etc. Thus chapters 1-10 constitute almost a continuous running commentary on the whole dialogue. Chapter 11 discusses Platos *Timaeus* and is the only chapter focusing on material outside of the *Republic*.

As Dorter notes in the introduction, there has long been widespread dispute over the organizational principles of the *Republic*. It has, for example, been argued that Book 1 is an earlier treatise to which the rest of the *Republic* was later added, that Book 10 is a later edition etc. This is what C.D.C. Reeve called the second interpretative myth about the *Republic*, i.e. that it "is neither a philosophically nor an artistically unified work" (Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Platos Republic*, 1988: xi). It takes the different parts of the dialogue to be fused together somewhat awkwardly to create a Frankenstein-esque dialogue. This myth which emphasizes the disunity of the dialogue probably has few serious defenders today. Like Reeve, Dorter rejects it. His fundamental insight is that the (seemingly rough) transitions in the dialogue actually serve its organizational scheme (the organizational scheme with which Dorter is working is laid out in table I.1 on p. 7) and that a pattern of development of models from simple ones to more complex ones throughout the dialogue serves the same overall purpose (p. 369).

Dorter notes a structural symmetry between Books 1 and 10, that Book 10 seems structurally to mirror Book 1. Books 2-9 describe the rise of the just city whereas Books 10-11 portray the decline of the city and injustice, again structurally mirroring



Books 24. In between there are the central Books 57 which depict the best city. Dorters contention (p. 7) is that this organizational scheme symbolizes the divided line set forth at the end of Book 6 (509d ff.) and reflects the philosophers ascent from the cave and subsequent return (p. 7). Thus on Dorters interpretation the narrative progresses from *eikasia* (imagination or fancy) to *pistis* (belief or faith) and reaches a climax in *dianoia* (scientific thought) and *noesis* (understanding or dialectical thought) before regressing back again. The correspondence between the overall structure of the dialogue on the one hand and the divided line and philosophers ascent and descent on the other is discussed only briefly in the introduction but is likely to be received with some scepticism.

One interpretative consequence of Dorters reading is the view that Platos philosophy is instrumental rather than foundational (p. 351), i.e., "it is not intended to present us with finished doctrines, but rather with models to focus our thinking". In other words, Platos dialogues are intended to *show us how* to think about virtue or knowledge or reality etc., rather than make known and disseminate Platos doctrines or settled views about these things. This is a controversial claim and might have been discussed more thoroughly. But Dorter does not flesh out the distinction between "instrumental" and "foundational". On his interpretation, however, the pattern of how Platos models are developed throughout the dialogue and transformed from simple, rigid, and easily graspable to subtle and nuanced, less rigid, and more complex serves the same purpose. This pattern of transformation is the central theme of this book. In the form of a sustained exegesis *TPR* argues that "less adequate formulations [are used] as stepping-stones to more adequate ones" (p 112). Thus, for example, the model of the tripartite soul argued for in Book 4 (436a441c) becomes increasingly nuanced while the distinction between the parts becomes ever more vague; by Book 6 the soul is thought of as a single stream which flows in different directions. The transformations, on this interpretation, are intended to be instrumental in focusing the thought of the reader.

To his discussion of the *Republic* the chapter on the *Timaeus* is appended in order to attempt to undermine the notion that Platos dialogues contain any foundational or dogmatic metaphysics, as opposed to an instrumental metaphysics designed to guide ones thinking about the intelligible reality. The chapter focuses on arguments designed to soften the dogmatic impact of the *Timaeus* and distance Plato from the seemingly authoritative conclusions of the dialogue. But it does not attempt to spell out what it means to understand Platos metaphysics instrumentally.

*TPR* presents an incisive interpretation of an essential dialogue as an artistically as well as philosophically unified whole, and as such it is sure to be well received. The interpretation itself is more controversial. Nevertheless, Dorters reading of the dialogue is both clever and often compelling and merits attention of all students of the *Republic*.

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