

Dissertation Report by Mgr. Pavel Hobza, Ph.D.

Dissertation: Justification of Political Authority and the Political Position of the Non-Philosophic Citizen in Plato's Republic

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The author deals with Plato's political philosophy, as is developed primarily in the *Republic*. According to the traditional interpretation the philosopher-rulers' competence to rule is based on their knowledge of the Good. Those who do not have the access to the Good are excluded from the political life and have to obey the philosopher-rulers; their relation to the philosopher-rulers might be even considered that of slaves to their masters. Since this political account is grounded in the metaphysical knowledge of the Good, the author calls it *metaphysical justification*. He is however persuaded that the traditional metaphysical justification is not appropriate and proposes the so-called *naturalistic justification*. Although, in particular aspects and themes, he draws upon previous interpreters, he develops quite original and elaborate interpretation of Plato's political philosophy which, moreover, enables to rethink the traditional portrait of Plato as a strict metaphysician.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters, which gradually develop the main thesis, leading from analysing the metaphysical justification to dealing with the naturalistic justification to a sketch of political philosophy. Thus, the structure of the dissertation is clear and intuitive and enables the reader to have a clear overview of the whole issue.

As to the quality of the dissertation (arguments, use and range of literature, etc.) it is very high. The author repeatedly shows his very good knowledge of literature (primary and secondary) and especially his ability to argue for his theses. In this respect, parts of the third and fourth chapters are very good examples of his sovereign and well-educated approach. For although his main theme is Plato's political philosophy, in these parts he deals with his metaphysics, epistemology, and theory of knowledge, thus demonstrating his ability and competence to profoundly deal with Plato's complex thought. The quality of the dissertation is also guaranteed by the fact that its substantial parts have already been published as papers.

Hence, I take the dissertation to be very good and fully recommend it for defence.

In what follows, however, I would like to raise some possible objections to the author's general methodological approach to Plato together with some more or less critical remarks. His approach can be seen as analytic, belonging thus to the tradition of how analytic philosophy treats and interprets philosophical text, namely, it is mainly concentrated on arguments. Although in most philosophers the analytical approach appears to be unproblematic (after all, philosophy is about arguments), in case of Plato one should be more careful. For, unlike most philosophers who express their thoughts in a sort of philosophical or scientific treatises, Plato wrote dialogues, which, moreover, are very stylistically and rhetorically elaborate. Hence, in order to understand what Plato

wants to say, it is not enough to analyse his arguments but also (or even especially) the dialogical situation in which the arguments are expressed (the dialogical situation might relativize or, in extreme cases, even undermine the relevance or meaning of an argument).

Of course, it is not place here to set up all the principles and implications of the dialogical approach. At any rate, if the author were to take the dialogical approach into account, he should pay attention to two things: 1) He should prove that (how far) Plato really wants to establish a political philosophy/theory in the *Republic*. 2) It should be always established that a particular passage (may it be in the *Republic* or other dialogues) is really relevant for the author's arguments, that is, that the dialogical situation does not somehow contradict or undermine Socrates' arguments.

Ad 1) Usually it is taken for granted that the *Republic* develops Plato's political philosophy/theory. However, from the dialogical context it is not clear whether Plato lets Socrates develop political philosophy for its own sake, or whether he uses his reflexions about the ideal state for other purposes, e.g., treatment of justice or education. The author deals with this problem only briefly in the *Introduction* (p. 18). One of his arguments for the *Republic's* political philosophy is Aristotle's testimony: "Aristotle thought he understood Plato's political views, at least enough to criticise him in his *Politics*." (p. 18) The problem is that Aristotle's testimonies concerning his predecessors (including Plato) are utterly unreliable (cf. Ch. H. Kahn's critique of Aristotle's testimony about Socrates in *Plato and the Socratic Dialogues*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 79-87; as to his approach to the Presocratics see H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*). So, if Aristotle sees the *Republic* as advancing political philosophy, it has no value for the interpretation of the *Republic* (it may be only relevant for the understanding of Aristotle's interpretational approach).

Moreover, as W. Wieland argues in the case of Plato's assumed theory of Forms (*Platon und die Formen des Wissens*), Plato does not develop a *theory* of Forms, that is, he never uses Forms in a thematical way, he only occasionally mentions them in order to prove or argue for something else (e.g., the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*). If so, we are not, according to Wieland, entitled to reconstruct a coherent *theory* of Forms from scattered, unthematically used mentions of Forms. Similarly, we could argue that it is not clear whether we are really entitled to reconstruct a coherent political theory from Socrates' treatment of the ideal state in the *Republic*.

Ad 2) In chapter IV the author wants to establish that also the non-philosophic craftsmen have some epistemic competence similar to that of the philosophers themselves. He believes to establish it by the assumption that similar to the philosophers the craftsmen too can have knowledge of Forms: "We will agree with Fine that the many kinds of knowledge (ἐπιστήμαι) in the polis all begin with Forms." (p. 120) In Plato, knowledge of Forms is usually the prerogative of philosophers. So, it is not quite easy to follow the author's argument. Yet, he bases it on a famous passage from Book X of the *Republic* where Socrates puts forwards his three-level ontology: 1) The Form of bed made by god; 2) A bed as produced by a carpenter looking at the Form of bed; 3) A bed painted by an artist. Of course, it follows from this passage that a craftsman has to have some access to, or knowledge of, Forms. However, the problem is how far this passage is representative of, or similar to, Plato's conception of Forms as outlined in other passages throughout his dialogues. His purpose in this passage is very particular. He strives to discredit poets (and artists in general) by showing them as being far removed from the truth. Thus, it is a question of whether Plato does not adapt his conception of Forms to this particular dialogical purpose. In other words, Plato may have adapted his conception of Forms to suit his particular dialogical purpose without taking these adaptations to be seriously meant to be the parts of his own conception. Moreover, apart from the dialogical situation this passage has a very unusual and rather problematic implication for Plato's conception of Forms. For Socrates here speaks of a Form of an artifact (by the way, there is only one other passage in the

Cratylus where there is a mention of a Form of artifacts). Does this mean that Plato thought that there are really Forms of artifacts? This assumption would be very problematic. Hence, these reflexions suggest that we should be very careful in interpreting particular passages from Plato's dialogues and should pay attention not only to their arguments but also to their wider dialogical situation and context.

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