The Protreptic Rhetoric of Plato's *Republic*

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Over the course of the conversation narrated by Socrates in the *Republic*, his two main interlocutors, Glaucon and Adimantus, undergo a change. They change with respect to their views on justice, becoming convinced that it always pays to be just under any and all conditions. They undergo a change in their values, becoming convinced that the good of the soul is such that in comparison to it all other goods must always be deemed inferior. Finally, in accord with the mythic tale of choices and fates that closes the *Republic* and illustrates the benefit of making choices based solely on justice, the reader is also encouraged to suppose that Glaucon and Adimantus are better off now in their new, changed condition at the end of the *Republic* than they were at the beginning.

I wish to argue that Plato's overarching purpose in writing the *Republic* was to effect a change in his readers similar to the change that Glaucon and Adimantus undergo at Socrates' hands in the fictional world of the dialogue. This purpose can be summed up in the word protreptic, from *protrepein*, to "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 towards a greater readiness to adopt a just way of life. Protreptic discourse is not educational discourse in general and does not bring about philosophical education as a whole. Rather, it addresses the initial or preparatory stages of education, aiming to get education in virtue underway. In fourth-century Greece, protreptic is not the name of a genre of discourse 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. 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.

This paper is divided into four sections. First, what did it mean for Plato to write literature that was intended to have a particular effect on his readers, 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 Adimantus 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 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 Adimantus issue their challenge to Socrates in book 2, they formulate an extreme 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. There is no one who could not see in the challenge presented by Glaucon and Adimantus a basis for having his or her own qualms about justice answered, whatever those qualms might be. Plato thereby insured 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, attentive readers would necessarily adopt Socrates' position on justice and the soul with all the enthusiasm demonstrated by Glaucon and Adimantus.

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. Although those resources are surely potent, they are also limited. Thus Plato's approach is necessarily rhetorical: he relinquishes the contingent – the actual response of actual readers – and focuses on what lies within his control – the artistic manipulation of literary resources. He seeks 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 towards a particular course, but it is up to the reader or listener whether or not he will 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, maintaining the rhetorical stance, it does not attempt the self-defeating step of presuming it can control 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, … Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as 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, which, as Plato portrays it, contributed to their willingness to convict him of impiety and corrupting the youth. 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" (*Apology* 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.

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 Adimantus – "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. No matter how much or little a 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: 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 and accelerated in the fourth – the rise of popular prose literature. "Popular" must be defined carefully. 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 was directed at the Athenian or Greek population as a whole and designed to entertain or instruct them in their leisure time in the manner of a modern bestseller.

Rather, the new prose literature was popular in the sense that it bypassed the existing forms of mass, oral communication to address an anonymous, amorphous, yet growing audience of readers.

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. Whereas in previous centuries literacy had been monopolized by experts and aristocrats, 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. 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.

Even if, as a matter of fact, most of the readers belonged to the upper-class because they were the ones who mostly had the appropriate skills and leisure, the audience of the new prose literature was defined not by social, economic, or professional status but by moral and political status: individuals who were responsible for both their personal welfare and common affairs, who had choices to make, individually and collectively. The classical prose authors evidently wanted to reach as many readers as possible and to persuade them to their view, creating and expanding their audience by the very act of writing artistic prose for an anonymous public.

The hallmark of the new prose literature, and the surest sign of its quest for a broad audience, was literary rhetorical art, that is, a pervasive concern with form and its effect on the reader. The prose authors devised idioms, styles, and literary techniques in the attempt to win readers over to a particular view of things, while imbuing their texts with the immediacy and compelling quality that mark the best of Greek poetry and oratory. This was neither fine art (or art for art's sake), a notion that had yet to develop, nor generic art, since the literary genres were only in the process of formation. Rather, this was art deployed for didactic or persuasive purposes, and it was the specific purpose of each author that dictated the shape of his art. Isocrates, for instance, criticized Plato for being abstruse and thus useless to the citizen in need of concrete advice on political engagement. Isocrates may simply have been wrong about Plato's ability to appeal to a broad audience; but even if he was correct (which we cannot know and have no reason to believe), that does not alter the fact that Plato wrote in a manner that *he* thought would, or perhaps could, captivate and instruct the reading public.

To take the most fundamental example: before Plato philosophers treated arcane subjects in technical treatises that had no appeal outside small circles of experts. These writings, "on nature," "on truth," "on being" (etc.), mostly in prose, some in verse, were demonstrative, not protreptic. Plato, on the other hand, broke away from the experts and sought to treat ethical problems of universal relevance and to make philosophy accessible to the public. His dialogues are distinguished from traditional philosophical treatises not simply with respect to their dialogue form, but with respect to the artistry with which the dialogue form is executed. The artistry of the *Republic*, as in most of Plato's dialogues, lies chiefly in making philosophy an exciting, but ordinary task. To take a small but potent example, nowhere is that artistry more palpable than in the *Republic's* justly famed opening line: "I went down yesterday to Piraeus

with Glaucon, the son of Ariston" – Katšbhn cq j e„j Peirai© met¦ GlaÚkwnoj toà 'Ar…stwnoj

(327a). The line is utterly innocent, shockingly offhand. The effect is to lull the reader into accepting the momentous conversation on justice that follows as arising naturally in consequence of a chance, everyday encounter. Thus the *Republic* undertakes not so much an implicit protreptic, as I described it earlier, but a disguised protreptic: disarmed by the naturalness of the conversation and intrigued by its unfolding drama, the reader is tricked into following closely the very argument that may ultimately change his values.

The *Republic* is exceptional among contemporary prose literature not just for its artistry, but also for the difficulty of the protreptic task that it undertakes. In contrast to Thucydides, Isocrates, and other fourth-century prose writers, only Plato went so far as to encourage his readers to reject society's inherited norms entirely (regarding such basic matters as marriage, family life, private property, and religious belief) and to accept in their stead norms that were derived from an idiosyncratic, idealist vision of reality and articulated by an autocratic philosopher. In this respect the *Republic* represents the pinnacle of the protreptic effort that is evident throughout Plato's writings. All the dialogues, especially the shorter, aporetic ones, possess protreptic qualities, inasmuch as they contest conventional values, inculcate philosophical method, and offer Socrates as a model. But the protreptic task of the *Republic* is blunter. Spelling out in full the consequences of putting oneself under philosophy's rule, the *Republic* pressures the reader to decide – right now, so to speak – how he or she stands with respect to philosophy.

III How does the view of the *Republic* as protreptic square with Plato's views on political and philosophical discourse?

On this question, I will just summarize two points. Underlying both points is the notion, evident in several Platonic dialogues, the *Republic* above all, that philosophy has an obligation to convey its guidance to the public at large.

First, recall the dilemma of political discourse faced by Socrates. On the one hand, Socrates will not cater to the desires of the democratic beast. On the other hand, though Socrates used his elenctic method to turn his fellow citizens towards philosophy, and though the attempt was entirely honorable (*Ap*. 29d-30b, quoted above), that endeavor failed and ultimately proved as destructive to him as he feared direct political engagement would have proved. Reflecting on this dilemma in the *Republic*, Socrates describes the philosopher in a democracy: struggling to survive, he crouches behind a wall for safety, conducting philosophy in bitter isolation (496c-e).

Written protreptic, circulated in the public domain, offered Plato an escape from the Socratic dilemma of political discourse. Plato's written protreptic has the same philosophical and political aim as Socrates' protreptic elenchus: it offers philosophical guidance to the public at large without compromising the philosopher's freedom of speech. But unlike Socrates' elenchus, Plato's written protreptic does not plunge the philosopher into perilous contact with the democratic masses. It allows him to conduct political discourse from the safety of his isolation and also does not intrude on his professional activities in his school. And though Plato's written protreptic is often rhetorical – in the sense that it uses form for effect

in a calculated manner – it is not rhetorical in the sense condemned by Plato in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere, namely, that, like flattery, it caters to irrational desires.

Plato was surely aware that his written protreptic could not be guaranteed to change his readers in the way he intended – a point I mentioned above. But, like Socrates' elenchus, it was nevertheless an honorable thing for him to attempt. In fact, since at the time that Plato wrote written protreptic was experimental and had no track record, it would have been dishonorable not to attempt it. The *Republic* is Plato's most extensive, most direct attempt to explain to the public what philosophy is and why political power should be entirely vested in the philosophers. In that respect, the *Republic* constitutes an attempt – an improbable one, but nevertheless a serious one – to foster the very situation that would enable the just city to come into being, namely, the situation in which the public understood, and therefore accepted, that their welfare depends on handing political power over to philosophers like Plato.

Second, discussing mimetic art in book 10, Plato demonstrates the harm done to the city and the soul by the very process of poetic mimesis (595b-608b): poetic mimesis increases the soul's receptiveness to and its appetite for the destructive pleasures (602b-606d). But this section of the argument also contains the suggestion that the philosopher has an interest in harnessing the affective power of mimetic art – in prose – for his own educational and protreptic purposes (608a):

> So long as [poetry] is unable to make good her defense [against our argument] we shall chant over to ourselves as we listen to her this argument that we have given [i.e., the *Republic* itself] as a countercharm to her spell, to preserve us from slipping back into the childish loves of the multitude. (trans. adapted from Shorey)

With regard to its status as a countercharm to poetry, the *Republic*, a mimetic work of art in its own right, can be seen as a philosophical prose epic: it rests not on poetic inspiration, but on philosophical knowledge and authority; it ties the pleasures of mimesis not to conventional values, but to philosophical ones; it appeals not to the appetitive pleasures, but to those of reason; it enters the public realm not to garner fame, but for the sake of the public good. The *Republic* challenges and aims to supplant Homer, the reigning master of affective art, popular imagery, and conventional values. But it does not compete with Homer for public approval, a contest that it does not seek to win and could never win.

IV How is Plato's protreptic purpose reflected in the text and argument of the *Republic*?

I omit a discussion of the numerous rhetorical and narrative devices dispersed throughout the *Republic* (analogies, similes, images, myth) to focus on one protreptic moment that goes beyond these conspicuous rhetorical devices. In book 5 Socrates speaks of three "waves" (κυματα) that he fears will overwhelm the interlocutors (457a-c, 472a, 473cd): the common training of men and women (451d-457c), the holding of wives and children in common (457d-465d), and – the biggest "wave" – philosopher-kings. These features of the just city are "waves" because, although they are entailed by the argument, they are so bizarre that even interlocutors as sympathetic and astute as Glaucon and Adimantus will likely find them ridiculous and impossible ever to enact. Believing that his project of responding to Glaucon and Adimantus hangs in

the balance, Socrates gives vent to his apprehension: beyond the metaphor of waves, which he embeds in an extended προδιορψϖσιω – the rhetorical figure used to anticipate an obstacle – Socrates and the interlocutors first go back and forth over their readiness to withstand the crisis (449b-451b), and then Socrates reveals the full force of the crisis only gradually, until he can delay no longer and finally announces the philosopher-kings in dramatic fashion (472a-473e).

The threat posed by the "waves" is not to the argument itself; there is no dispute that the just city requires those arrangements for it to be just. Rather, the threat is to the interlocutors' ability to accept what the argument plainly demands. Socrates is not subject to this threat: it is in his nature to serenely follow the argument wherever it leads and to react imperturbably to whatever the argument demands. But Socrates is unique in this respect. It is appropriate for Plato to dress up this moment with displays of emotion and dramatic tension because it raises a fundamental protreptic problem: if the interlocutors – and the reader – see the validity of Socrates' argument on justice but are reluctant to act on it because it strikes them as impossibly far-fetched, how can they – interlocutors and reader – be encouraged to overcome their reluctance and act on the argument anyway? After all, the point of the entire endeavor is not merely to know the truth about justice, but to know it and to live it. This is a problem of the will and is properly attacked by rhetoric.

Socrates' demonstration that the just city is not a fantasy, but a real possibility, however remote (473b-502c), is part of the answer to this problem. But only part: Socrates' anxiety about the "waves" and the nature of the metaphor itself indicate that what threatens the argument is a feeling, or perhaps an intuition, that philosopher-kings are simply preposterous. Among Plato's readers, that feeling would be tenacious and not entirely allayed by yet another argument. Plato's task was to convey not just a counterargument, but also a counter-feeling, that philosopher-kings are, or at least could be, natural. The image of the cave (514a-521a) contributes greatly to this task. The cave image depicts conventional values (according to which philosopher-kings are preposterous) as unnatural, and it explains the fact that the unnaturalness of these values has generally gone unnoticed. The cave image also portrays the acquisition of philosophical values (according to which philosopher-kings are appropriate) as a natural process, akin to the healthy physical process of rising to the light and air, of gaining mobility and sharpening the powers of perception.

But this protreptic moment has another dimension, which is directed not at the interlocutors, but just at the reader. The manner in which Glaucon and Adimantus react to the "waves" and end up as true believers functions as what might be termed epideictic protreptic. The very spectacle of these Athenian gentlemen coming to accept the naturalness of philosopher-kings allows the reader to feel, or at least imagine, that perhaps he too can withstand the "waves" and come to accept philosopher-kings as natural. The ground is prepared when Plato creates all the literary fuss – the wave metaphor, the raised tensions, the calculated delay – that precedes the announcement of philosopher-kings. The fuss assures the non-philosophical reader that his own highly skeptical reaction is not inappropriate and not being ignored. Yet after Glaucon admits that many people will react violently to the notion of philosopher-kings (473e-474a), it comes as a mild surprise that he and Adimantus calmly listen to Socrates, follow the argument, and ultimately embrace it with little difficulty.

Philosophically sophisticated readers of the *Republic* have often found Glaucon and Adimantus,

here and elsewhere in the dialogue, too deficient in critical faculties, too ready to accede to Socrates' argument, and therefore ineffectual as partners in dialectic. But Glaucon and Adimantus serve another purpose. Though they are interested in philosophy, they are not philosophers themselves. They are sufficiently conventional in their values that Socrates has reason to worry about how they will react to the "waves." As demonstrated by their challenge to Socrates in book 2, Glaucon and Adimantus are sufficiently critical to make Socrates work to convert them and to give readers the impression that their conversion is a significant accomplishment. But they are neither so critical nor so recalcitrant that they will not be won over to Socrates' view of things.

Contrast Plato's aporetic dialogues, in which Socrates' interlocutors are left uncertain what, if anything, has been established with regard to whatever question is at hand. And in the *Gorgias*, for instance, though Callicles wavers for a moment (513cd), he refuses to accept Socrates' radical views on justice even though those views have been secured, as Socrates says, "with arguments of iron and adamant" (508e-509a). Examples are easily multiplied: these dialogues demonstrate the critical faculty at work and nurture it in the reader, a clear philosophical priority. But it is not clear in these dialogues whether the gulf between philosophy and non-philosophers can possibly be bridged. Some characters in these dialogues are intrigued by philosophy; some are repelled; none is, so to speak, converted. Whereas the sympathy for Socrates' project evinced by Glaucon and Adimantus in the *Republic* hinders their critical faculties, it allows Plato to demonstrate that his protreptic endeavor is, like the just state itself, not a fantasy but entirely possible, however remote it may seem. Glaucon and Adimantus are not and do not become philosophers in the course of the *Republic*. But they submit themselves to philosophy's rule, and they do so for the right reasons, thereby becoming exemplary for Plato's readers in the public domain.