

DIALOGUES ON PLATO'S *POLITEIA (REPUBLIC)*

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Plato's and Aristotle's 'Bad' Summaries of the *Republic*

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1.1.

The age-old question about what Plato really wanted to teach us in his *Republic* receives a pertinent (if surprising) answer from Plato himself with the 'bad' summary of it that he offers in the opening pages of his *Timaeus*¹. This summary is usually deemed disappointing, since one would have expected a penetrating synthesis, capable of capturing what is most representative of the essential nature of the great dialogue. Contrary to our expectations, however, it deals only with the communality of women and strictly related topics, something no-one nowadays would consider the most important point made in all ten books of the *Republic*. Indeed, not even a superficial modern summary would treat this particular *nomos* as a key element of so complex a whole (at most, it could be mentioned as an enlightening detail, or maybe as evidence that even Plato sometimes got lost). So it seems barely credible that Plato himself could have felt satisfied with the synthesis given in his *Timaeus*. A question therefore very likely to arise is: why offer so unrepresentative a summary?

Our perplexity is reinforced by a sentence at *Ti.* 18c which is seldom commented upon, where it is said that the topics chosen for this particular summary are easy (or particularly easy) to remember because of their strangeness (*eumnēmoneuton ... dia tēs altheian*). Does the sentence suggest that the summary might have been prepared with the conscious aim of capturing the attention of a larger – and possibly not very competent – audience? If, on the contrary, Plato had in mind a body of professional interlocutors (or hearers, or readers), would the summary have been different? The *eumnēmoneuton* sentence is an indicator, at least, of the value Plato attached to such an overview.

A few lines below, at *Ti.* 19ab, Plato's Socrates offers a rather different key to the answering of our question when he points out that his account is being set out *en kephalutis*: "...Or has any point been omitted, and so worth being added?" he asks one of his interlocutors, and the latter's answer is: "No, that is what was said yesterday". The implicit meaning seems to be that no important theme in the talk of the day before has been omitted, i.e., that what has been selected for the summary is what really is of the greatest importance. The exchange is clear and reassuring, and it is certainly possible that, by inserting it, Plato wanted to forestall any residual doubts about the basic reliability of his summary. But are we sure that this was his real objective?

To our surprise, the respondent to Socrates is *Timaeus*. But no reader of the *Republic* would have a memory of *Timaeus*'s being present at the exchanges between Socrates, Thras-

¹ Especially Nails has recently endorsed the idea that the first version of the *Republic* had features corresponding to the summaries given in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Politics* (Nails (2002), 324 ff.). This sort of reading would undermine the very basis of the present paper, but substantial arguments to the contrary, which escaped to Nails' attention, have been adduced by Vegetti (1998-2007 I), 15-21. I dare to assume them as largely reliable.

symachus, Polemarchus and Cephalus, along with Cleithophon and few other silent individuals (I 328b), and Glaucon and Adeimantus. To assume that Timaeus was one of those silent people present at the exchanges held at the home of Cephalus is simply too charitable an interpretation, suggesting that Plato had just forgotten to mention him. And a poor explanation, I would say. Besides, Plato could hardly have persuaded himself that the communality of women is the most crucial point addressed in the course of the entire *Republic* – and hence a topic much more representative and meaningful than, say, that of the philosopher-king, or the overall strategy envisaged to produce a better *polis*, or the ascent of philosophers to a super-human knowledge. So he could hardly have expected to be believed when he maintained that no important point had been omitted in his *Timaeus* summary. We are accordingly almost obligated to assume that his goal was, not to offer a reliable account of the mammoth dialogue, but something different.

1.2.

This is true even if, in the opening pages of *Republic* V, Polemarchus explicitly requests from Socrates a detailed and well-argued account of the communality of women and related topics (449c–450a), and Socrates makes the overt claim that he is addressing a competent and open-minded audience (450d). These remarks imply that Socrates (i.e., Plato) is willing to offer such an account to the best of his capacity, and therefore expects it to be understood as largely reliable. Moreover at 453d (and again at 456c–457c; see also 452c, 461b, 463cd) Socrates treats his ideas about the communality of women as a law to be formally established. Few other points are treated as true *nomoi* in this dialogue. Among the few other asseverations treated as *nomoi* are those concerning poets and musicians (e.g., IV 424e), but not those concerning the establishment of three classes, for example. In treating the community of women as a *nomos* Plato sees it as something important, well developed, and to be taken seriously here as well as in *Republic* VIII 543a–c.

However, once more, this is only one facet of the story, for elsewhere (*Republic* VIII and IX) Plato's Socrates has a lot to say about – or, rather, against – the efficacy of *nomoi*, especially when showing how easily illegality can permeate almost every type of social order. So the stress upon treating the communality of women as a solemn law has to face serious doubts about the efficacy of *nomoi* in general, and it is far from clear whether this particular law could preserve its integrity in face of the risk that some citizen might adopt a tendentious interpretation, or application, of a particular feature of it. One could argue that this particular *nomos*, not unlike many other, might well prove effective at the beginning, but only for a while, since there is nothing to stop illegal practices from reasserting themselves in the future despite the stated *nomos* (for example because family links come to light and become acknowledged, at least partially and obliquely). So this is a further problem.

For these and other reasons Holger Thesleff was led to conjecture that the *Timaeus* summary goes back to a time when most of the *Republic* was still to be written. The poor account given in the *Timaeus*, combined with the discontinuity between treating the communality of women as a law and showing how easily laws can be disregarded, becomes understandable, Thesleff claimed, if we postulate at least two different stages in the composition of the dialogue as a whole. However, a powerful weapon against this conjecture is likely to stem from the *eumnēmoneuston* sentence mentioned above, for this sentence is there to remind us that this particular summary is not meant to function as a competent and professional overview of the most relevant and central points made in the *Republic*, but just to evoke some of the most striking points made in it. So in the *eumnēmoneuston* sentence we should see a warning against taking the *Republic* as a compilation made up of drafts going back to noticeably different

phases in Plato's thought. A diachronical approach to the *Republic* is worth pursuing, but the 'bad summary' of the *Timaeus* cannot be treated as evidence in support of such an approach.

1.3.

There is another very ancient 'summary' of the *Republic*, that authored by Aristotle. The case of Plato's *Republic* is in fact unique for having been summarized both by Plato himself and, a few decades later, by Aristotle. Because of the supreme qualifications of their respective authors, one would expect these summaries to be of the highest reliability, but we have already noticed how difficult it is to take the one proffered in the *Timaeus* as being even close to satisfactory. What about Aristotle's?

At *Politics* 1260b37–1264a1 Aristotle's extended discussion of certain points in Plato's *Republic* is the opening item in a rather detailed survey of the most interesting political treatises available at the time – or, to be more precise, of the political theories outlined by previous authors in one way or another. In this context, he discusses at length the thesis of the communality of women and related corollaries, and nothing prevents the impression that, according to Aristotle, the entire dialogue was devoted to arguments for the communality of women, children, and real estate, and to the outlining of a particular organization of the *politeia* (II 6, 1264b29–31). The point is reinforced by his explicit statement that large portions of the dialogue consist of mere "filler"² (*peplērōke*, 1264b39).

In view of these features, Aristotle's summary is likely to reinforce Plato's own selection of what is seemingly judged by him to be essential, significant, and salient. His remarks about the few topics he highlights, and about the abundance of supposedly irrelevant "filler" which makes up the ten books, seem to support Plato's own choice, much as if Aristotle too judged a number of other topics to be unworthy of being considered of the same value as the few ideas which are supposed to form the core of the political project devised by Plato.

On the other hand, Aristotle in no way suggests that he is offering a synthesis adapted to popular taste, and centred on what was *prima facie* realizable. On the contrary, he is trying to offer an account of the salient political theories put forward in the *Republic*, and expects readers to take his account, along with his well-argued objections, to be largely reliable. So, though not on purpose, Aristotle's own summary is such as to reinforce the 'bad' features of Plato's. It is true that he is strongly against the communality of women, children and real estate, but it is nonetheless precisely in these features that he thinks the truly relevant doctrines of the *Republic* are to be found, so much so that he can qualify all the rest as mere "filler". Readers of both summaries would therefore form approximately the same (wrong) idea of the dialogue.

As to why Aristotle made such a choice, it is not difficult to assume that he found it appropriate to pay particular attention to the doctrines he had selected because of his plan to discuss, in his treatise, certain ideas which he took to be not only radically opposed to those of Plato, but also endowed with a much greater appeal. Besides, when he wrote that ἐν τῇ Πολιτείᾳ κατὰ ὀλίγων ἀμυχαν δώκεται ὁ Σωκράτης, he was probably basing himself on an extrinsic criterion rooted in his own models: he was looking for explicit claims that could be treated as elements of a political theory, something relevant both in form and content, and this is where he found the most explicit ones. Besides, that Aristotle has often chosen this sort of approach to other thinker's doctrines, is well known.

² It is worth noticing that the charitable interpretation has led to totally innocuous renderings of the phrase (normally: "digressions"). A very charitable alternative indeed, given the very male expression chosen by Aristotle himself.