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“How does Plato teach the reader about justice through Socratic dialogue?”

For a first time reader of Plato, or someone unfamiliar with Socratic dialogue such as myself, the style of The Republic will likely be confusing. I found myself in such a situation, pondering questions such as, “Why, if Plato wants us to learn more about justice, does he propose so many conflicting and apparently insufficient explanations?” Plato clearly has some piece of wisdom about justice that he wishes to share with the reader, but his method for conveying this wisdom is strikingly unique. Having reflected on the text, I believe I now understand how Plato seeks to teach the reader about justice through Socratic dialogue in The Republic.

In order to understand Plato’s teachings, one must understand Socratic dialogue. From my understanding, it is a discussion over a universal principle by a small group of people, based around the Socratic method. The Socratic method comes from Socrates’ practice of opening a dialogue by asking for a definition of a principle such as justice, and then proceeding to point out contradictions the other’s beliefs.

Thus, the subject matter of The Republic is, by definition, a Socratic dialogue. With this knowledge, we can return to the earlier question of how Plato teaches the reader about justice in The Republic. By allowing the supporting characters to present their definitions of justice and then leading them to see contradictions in their beliefs, Socrates prompts the characters to think further about something they thought they knew. At the time of presenting their definitions, each character seems sure of themselves and confident that their definition is flawless. Only by deconstructing their views can Socrates prompt them to think deeper. In the context of the reader, he or she will likely begin to question their own definition of justice in the same way the characters in Plato’s book do. Prior to reading The Republic, it is safe to say that while the reader thought they knew exactly what justice is, despite never actually being asked to define it. Thus, to reiterate, the reader’s journey into deeper thought is only prompted by the journey of the characters in the book. This is in essence Socrates’ purpose with the Socratic method: to stimulate critical thinking and self-exploration.

Although it’s unclear at this point in the reading whether Socrates will go on to explain a viable definition of justice or if the Socratic dialogue will merely continue with no solution in sight, the point is that it doesn’t actually matter. The process of engaging in intellectual debate over personal values stimulates knowledge and intellectual growth regardless of whether a tangible solution is found. Often times in the Maieutic method, debates end in an intellectual gridlock. This is not failure. To summarize, in Plato’s Republic, the reader is not educated about justice through the end result, but rather through the process of getting there (or getting nowhere).

“I pledge that I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

James David Steen.”