

BOOK REVIEWS

Jonny Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. ix + 373 pp.

In this ambitious and wide-ranging book, Jonny Thakkar defends Plato's claim that philosophers should rule and shows how this can be realized in a liberal democratic context. In the first part, Thakkar provides an interpretation of the *Republic* that illuminates Plato's conception of both philosophy and ruling and so explains why Plato thinks philosophers should rule. In the second part, he shows how Plato's idea can be modified so that it is compatible with and yet enriches democratic liberalism. The result is not only a defense of the relevance of Plato's ideas for today but also a defense of the role of ideal theory for contemporary politics.

In chapter 1, Thakkar addresses Plato's conception of philosophy. According to Plato, a philosopher is someone who has knowledge of the forms. Thakkar rejects the 'two worlds' view, according to which forms are entirely separate from sensible particulars. He engages in detailed textual analysis to argue instead that forms are an aspect of the sensible world: to know the form of an object is to know how it is best for it to be; this requires knowing what it is for; and this in turn requires knowing the role it plays in the wider functional context of which it is a part.

In chapters 2 and 3, Thakkar shows how the philosophers' knowledge of the forms makes them uniquely suited to rule. According to Thakkar, a true ruler is someone who benefits his subjects by maintaining their souls in a good condition. Philosophers use their knowledge of forms in two ways when ruling. First, they attempt to understand the form of the city and shape their own society accordingly. This kind of theorizing is on display in the argument of the *Republic* itself: Socrates tries to understand how it is best for a city to be by understanding what it is for (satisfying social needs) and how it is best organized to achieve this purpose (each should do the work for which they are best suited). Second, philosopher-rulers ensure that models of ideals are disseminated throughout the city so that the citizens have the right conception of what is good, fine, and just, thereby shaping their souls so that they are in good condition.

In chapter 4, Thakkar argues that Plato thinks philosophers can rule even when they do not hold political office by engaging in ideal theory and communicating the results to their fellow citizens. Indeed, writing the *Republic*

was Plato's attempt to rule: by presenting his own picture of the ideal psyche and city, he furnishes his fellow citizens with a vantage point from which to criticize their own values and democratic society, thereby affecting their beliefs and shaping their souls for the better.

In chapter 5, Thakkar turns to the present. He argues that while Kallipolis is not logically or even naturally impossible (i.e., inconsistent with human nature), it may be practically impossible for us in so far as its proposals clash with the foundational commitments of contemporary Western society, such as democracy and pluralism regarding the best way to live. Thakkar's strategy is to modify Plato's theory whenever it clashes with these foundational commitments of liberal democracy, thereby making Platonism compatible with liberalism.

In chapter 6, Thakkar explains how Plato's insight that philosophers should rule can be applied in a liberal democratic context. In short, the rulers in a liberal democracy, namely, the citizens, should be philosophers. Specifically, they should work out for themselves a vision of the human good and of how the liberal democratic society should be organized to achieve this, and they should act and express themselves accordingly. So, lawmakers should have a vision for the role of the environment, the arts, and the economy in the good society, and their legislative proposals should openly reflect this vision. Leaders of institutions such as hospitals, universities, and churches should have a vision for the role their institution plays in achieving the aims of a good society and structure their institution around this role. And citizens themselves should have a vision of the proper aims and organization of society, and they should act so as to move society closer to this goal. According to Thakkar, Platonism enriches contemporary political thinking by presenting an ideal of citizenship that is suitable for a liberal democracy.

In chapter 7, Thakkar shows that Plato's ideal theory can illuminate Marx's critique of capitalism and so shed light on the actual world. According to Plato, the purpose of society is to fulfill human needs, and this is best achieved when people perform the crafts for which they are best suited. Drawing on Socrates' argument against Thrasymachus in book I of the *Republic*, Thakkar argues that each craft only aims at producing a social good, not at making money. Moreover, achieving the aim of a craft is often in tension with the aim of moneymaking (think of a doctor who recommends an unnecessary surgery). Thus, capitalism, which encourages citizens to pursue money, causes society to malfunction relative to the ideal of fulfilling human needs. Plato's ideal theory, then, provides a critical category—malfunction relative to an ideal—from which to criticize contemporary society.

There is much to admire in *Plato as Critical Theorist*. Each part takes a wholly original approach to its subject matter. The interpretation of the *Republic* brings to the fore the importance of ideal thinking in Plato's political thought: Plato is not only interested in presenting a political ideal, but thinks that rulers should be idealists themselves, and their interest in knowing the forms—in

knowing how it is best for things to be—is part of this idealism. Thakkar’s application of Plato’s thought to contemporary political life is ingenious. As Thakkar notes, most philosophers who use Platonic insights to inform contemporary political philosophy defend some form of either perfectionism or epistocracy. Instead, Thakkar appeals to the notion of the philosopher-ruler to develop an ideal of democratic citizenship, and so offers a distinct and unexplored alternative that opens up new lines of inquiry. In what follows, I raise several questions about Thakkar’s notion of the philosopher-ruler, in both the interpretation of Plato and the contemporary context, with the aim of highlighting some of these new lines of inquiry.

According to Thakkar, Plato has an idiosyncratic conception of ruling: holding office is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a true ruler; instead, a true ruler is simply one who shapes and maintains souls in a good condition. Kallipolis is the ideal society, since philosophers hold office and so are able to control institutions and shape all of the citizens’ souls. But philosophers outside of Kallipolis can still exercise some form of rule if they engage in ideal thinking and communicate the results so as to shape some citizens’ souls. If Thakkar is correct about this, then one might expect a constitution that encourages philosophical thought and expression to be second-best, since it allows some form of philosophical rule. And one might also think that this constitution is democracy. After all, it is in a democracy that Plato writes his *Republic* and so shapes souls; it is democracy that values freedom of speech and thought and so encourages the flow of philosophical ideas and influence; and it is in a democracy that Plato explicitly describes some citizens as engaging in philosophy. Instead, however, it is the notably anti-intellectual timocracy that is a second best, while democracy ranks next to last. What has gone wrong?

I suggest that the problem lies in Thakkar’s conception of rule. Perhaps a true ruler is not someone who shapes souls individually, but someone who shapes souls collectively and with a view to harmonizing the whole. Moreover, perhaps the true ruler in this sense does require political power, since the primary means of shaping souls collectively is through creating and maintaining laws that regulate the institutions (e.g., education, property, family) that structure *all* of the citizens’ lives. If this is correct, then we can see why Plato has an unfavorable attitude toward democracy: while a democracy may allow philosophers to communicate their ideas, it is doubtful that Plato thinks it allows a form of philosophical rule.

As further evidence that the true ruler’s skill involves shaping the collective, note that in the *Republic*, Plato likens the ruler to a ship’s captain, someone who steers the entire ship (analogous to the city) with a view to the good of all the sailors. And in the *Statesman*, a dialogue devoted to defining the true ruler, Plato likens the ruler to a herdsman, since both possess the knowledge of how to care for the collective, and he stresses that the statesman rules by means of laws that govern the citizens’ common life. In short, Plato’s conception of the true

ruler might be less idiosyncratic and more political than Thakkar allows: the true ruler shapes citizens' souls collectively through structuring institutions by means of law.

Let's turn to contemporary politics. Thakkar's Platonic ideal of citizenship is demanding in at least two ways. First, it requires citizens to engage in serious philosophical reflection on the human good, the role of the liberal state in bringing about this good, and the proper division of labor, including the proper role of both institutions and individuals. Second, it requires citizens to act in the light of their vision of the ideal. Since Thakkar assumes that the purpose of society is to fulfill human needs, citizens must act with a view to the common good; and since he rejects Adam Smith's view of the invisible hand, citizens must pursue more than their narrow self-interest. In the light of this, one might wonder if it is reasonable to think that citizens in a society such as ours, who are, as Thakkar stresses, living in a culture that is dominated by a materialistic and individualistic capitalist ideology, would adopt anything like his ideal of citizenship.

One way to encourage citizens to adopt the Platonic ideal of citizenship would be to inculcate the relevant virtues and values—for example, idealism, the interest in and capacity to engage in philosophical reflection, and an overriding concern for the common good—through state-controlled education. But while Thakkar does argue that the liberal state can and should inculcate through education the virtues relevant to a liberal democracy — for example, tolerance, respect, civility, and fairness (254–55)—he does *not* argue that the liberal state should inculcate the virtues and values relevant to the Platonic aspects of his ideal of citizenship. Instead, the responsibility for adopting these aspects of his ideal lies with individuals. Yet, without an educational system that inculcates the virtues and values relevant to the Platonic ideal (or some other form of institutional help), it is doubtful that many citizens will break free of the dominant materialistic and individualist capitalist ideology and become philosopher-citizens. In short, Thakkar's ideal of a society comprised of philosopher-citizens envisioning and working toward the common good faces a familiar problem: it is unclear how we get from here to there.

A final question: Thakkar's philosopher-citizen is committed to two ideals that are in some tension. On the one hand, she is committed to the liberal democratic ideal, which holds that the state should respect pluralism about the good on the grounds that individuals who are free and equal should be able to determine for themselves how to live. On the other hand, she is committed to the Platonic ideal, which holds that she should reflect deeply on the human good and, in her voluntary associations, try to shape the souls of her fellow citizens in accordance with this vision, often by creating a cultural environment that indiscernibly affects citizens' conception of the good. But if a commitment to pluralism about the good is justified at the state level because it respects autonomy, it is unclear why the commitment should not also hold at the level

of voluntary associations, and so, at the least, limit what one can do in the service of soul-shaping. Should a religious leader, for example, only allow images and writings that celebrate faith into her church, and actively censor items that raise doubts, in order to shape the souls of her parishioners? Or does this run afoul of her commitment to pluralism about the good? Of course, many of us face the tension between influencing others in the light of our own vision of the good and respecting autonomy, but by making his ideal citizen reflectively committed to both ideals, Thakkar brings this tension to the fore in a way that demands an account of how the commitment to liberalism limits soul shaping and vice versa.

Rachel Singpurwalla

University of Maryland

Philosophical Review, Vol. 130, No. 1, 2021

DOI 10.1215/00318108-8699539

Rachel Zuckert, *Herder's Naturalist Aesthetics*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xii + 266 pp.

This is not just an important work on Herder, on the history of aesthetics in the eighteenth-century, or on the “hinge” between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics, as Rachel Zuckert puts it. Its sophisticated discussion of Herder’s naturalistic method in aesthetics should be of interest to students of contemporary aesthetics and to philosophers interested in naturalism more generally.

Part 1, “Herder’s Aesthetics,” lays out Zuckert’s interpretation of Herder’s naturalism in general and in aesthetics in particular, and addresses the main issues that it raises, above all the tension between relativist and universalist tendencies in Herder’s conception of aesthetic value and taste. Part 2, “Explorations,” explores several more specific topics in Herder’s aesthetics, namely, his account of the sublime, his innovative account of our experience of sculpture, and his reception of the (in)famous “Ossian” poems of James Macpherson. Here I will focus on the first part of the book. This consists of an introduction and four chapters, “Herder’s Naturalism,” “Synthesis and Critique of Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics,” “Aesthetics of the Senses,” and “Aesthetics of Expression.”

By Herder’s naturalism in aesthetics, Zuckert means “most basically that Herder’s accounts of beauty and sublimity, of art, and so forth are grounded in a conception of human beings—those who recognize aesthetic value and engage