

Legacy: A Review of James Kastely's *The Rhetoric of Plato's Republic*
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Shortly after I finished reading The Rhetoric of Plato's Republic, I received a surprising but welcome visitor. Socrates himself came to my apartment, the most famous person I've ever hosted. Though I was at first embarrassed because I never had a chance to clean the place up, the old Athenian's easygoing manner and open mind soon put me at ease. So we settled into my home office, and began to talk in the comfort of its dust and clutter.

Adam: Again, I'm so honoured that you've come, Socrates. But what should I call you?

Socrates: My name is good enough, young man. But we are not here to discuss me and my nature. This book you read is about the work of my most accomplished student.

Adam: Yes, indeed. I hope you don't take offence to this, Socrates, but I was expecting your student himself to come if anyone did from ancient times.

I was glad that I could begin our conversation by making the noble Athenian laugh.

Socrates: My student put words in my mouth for his entire life. It's only natural that I speak for him.

Adam: But is it really so natural to say that his words are in your mouth? Kastely discusses you in his book as if you were a character in a philosophical epic, not a mere mouthpiece for Plato's own views. His reading made perfect sense to me, even though I was really hearing it for the first time. I've encountered scholars who make a problem of how often you express Plato's own philosophical conclusions, or even your own ideas. But these texts are usually buried deep in the shelves of university libraries, or in short articles that are published behind highly restricted paywalls. And they aren't written in a style like Plato's. Our scholars of philosophy are encouraged to write in a precise and technical language. They have to speak with a thick layer of references, both explicitly cited and implied. Philosophy scholarship is a discipline with thick boundaries of expertise. It's rarely written for a popular audience. And when it is, it's dumbed-down, and the gatekeepers of scholarship sneer at those publications as mere "popular" works. Yet most people become students of philosophy in formal classes where they're taught simple readings of all the works. They memorize technical definitions that have none of the nuance that the full works give them. They're given short excerpts of long, beautiful books to read, which makes too many students consider great thinkers to be simpletons.

Socrates: It saddens me to hear this, my boy. The arts are always complicated. You know this. You are a poet of literature, the stage, and cinema as well as a philosopher. Even a poet of commerce!

Adam: That's the nicest way anyone has ever described corporate communications since I started working in this field.

Socrates: You're welcome, young man. But surely this Kastely cannot be the first to read my student's epics in such a complex way. The gods and men of epic poetry are no simple ciphers. The best poems carry many themes and ideas, woven into the words and recitations. The poems that do not, that are so simple and straightforward as to give a listener orders of what to say and do and think, why these poems are barely heard and forgotten. There is no pleasure in poems that do nothing but preach.

Adam: Well, the first commentator with an interpretation something like this that comes to my mind is Jacques Derrida, but his writing style creates problems of its own. And he wrote only 40 years ago. But I'm no scholar of ancient Greek culture, arts, and philosophy. When I was studying philosophy, I concentrated on contemporary problems, works, and ideas.

Socrates: As did I. Knowledge is the pursuit of truth, either by investigating the world or contemplation of the eternal. Both these muses are divine. All of this is done in your own life, your own time, your own world. I and my student, in our own ways for better and worse, confronted the problems of the Athenian world. Each in our own ways, we tried to improve the morals of our people, bring them into accord with the peace of the divine. We tried to guard the freedom of our Athens from collapsing into tyranny. You and many others do the same, but now with these further problems. You fight the injustice of great wealth and great poverty living side by side. You would make your cities a welcoming refuge for victims of war. You try to rebuild cities so that they will not leave fields fallow, oceans barren, the air toxic, and the land wasted. Yet your education in philosophy confronted these challenges despite your teachers' rules and your academy's priorities. Do not mistake me, Adam, in what I am about to say. I can hear the passion in your voice because it is a passion I have shared. I am grateful that my student's works are still read all over the world, that our names are more famous than those of the tyrants we opposed. But why do the people who call themselves philosophers spend their lives reading and arguing over our ancient words when, if they were to follow us, they should do what we did? When they should use their talents as best they can to realize justice?

Adam: That you have to ask this question is one of the reasons why I left the academy.

Socrates: Is it really true that Kastely is the only one you know of to situate myself and my student as we were? As living citizens of Athens desperate to see justice triumph.

Adam: I'm no authority, but he's the first I've seen to say so explicitly.

Socrates: So sad. Why do you think so few grasp this notion? It is clear enough from how I and my student lived.

Adam: I think the confusion's source is what you actually say in Plato's *Republic*. Kastely's interpretation of Plato as a democrat is novel because the default mode of Plato scholarship is to take the Kallipolis literally as Plato's own political ideal of how a just society should run. Kastely depends on many tools of literary criticism that were only developed over the last 200 years. He relies on a meta-textual understanding of Plato's composition, and the different possible implied readers that such a meta-textual analysis

suggests. For example, Kastely builds a lot of his conception of the *Republic's* implied audience because Cephalus leaves the discussion, but Thrasymachus, despite his rage, stays behind to listen to the rest of the characters' exchange. So Cephalus, a wealthy old man who's led a life of comfort, has never had to ask tough questions or think critically about his society or his actions. As pleasant as he is, he signifies impenetrable ignorance. Thrasymachus is typically seen as your enemy, Socrates, because he yells and screams at you. Yet his passion drives the curiosity that motivates him to stay, as you explore what justice is and figure out how best to persuade people of its goodness.

Socrates: You and Kastely make perfect sense. It should be clear to anyone who reads my student's book carefully. That's what books allow you to do: read and think before you speak and act.

Adam: That's a strange notion coming from you, Socrates.

Socrates: Why do you say that?

Adam: Well, one of the most famous arguments you make in Plato's works is a complex point about how opposed writing is to proper thinking. In the *Phaedrus*, you call writing a great danger for thought. Writing things down makes memory atrophy. If you've written down the words of a poem or speech to remember them, your memory falters more than if you'd memorized the text orally.

Socrates: Why does it matter what I said in one of my students' epics? They were not my words, but his! Have you not just been discussing how well my student plays with the implications of his words? Kastely should have taught you that no statement in any of my student's works ought to be taken as it is on first glance. It is written not to be absorbed and memorized as unquestioned dogma, but to puzzle and unsettle, so encouraging contemplation. Awareness of our written texts as complex and artfully assembled implications and performances may have a complex technical vocabulary and theory in your culture. But you should not presume that my fellow Athenians did not think this way about our poems and our writings as well, though the words we used for this purpose may have been different.

Adam: Maybe the lesson is taking some time to sink in fully. Maybe I'm only writing myself saying this as a performance, to call attention to the instability of your legacy, and the meaning of your own words as they've come down to us.

Socrates: But my own words are lost. I only ever spoke. I spoke thousands of years before I could have had a machine that recorded me speaking.

Adam: But it's true that you never wrote during your life. So you did believe that speaking in the heat of the moment was superior to writing.

Socrates: I may have believed such a thing during my life as a citizen of Athens, but life did prove me wrong with death! I believed in speaking clearly. When I confronted my fellow citizens of my home city in the public square and marketplace with their

hypocrisies, I did not aid Athens. I did not guard our Athens against the tyranny that was to come. I achieved more of that task as a mute soldier! My simple, forthright words made enemies of all Athenians! I spread discord instead of wisdom. If anything, I weakened the cause of justice in Athens because I confronted my fellow citizens without subtlety. They felt assaulted with my harsh words, and so turned even farther away from truth and justice, associating as they did the call to see it with a fat man yelling at them on their shopping trips.

Adam: But so many students of philosophy today take this image of you as the most admirable philosopher. You're the model they follow.

Socrates: How do they follow me?

Adam: They follow the model of argument as exactly what philosophy is meant to be and do. One person speaks their belief, and the philosopher pokes holes in it, finds inconsistencies, invalid inferences, shows how inadequate it is to the real world. Just as you do to Polemarchus in the *Republic*.

Socrates: But the very next chapter describes how inadequate such argument is to discovering truth. My student writes me, at that point, of having only made someone feel uncertain, unsettled. But no one is any closer to truth.

Adam: A debaters' club. I've met professors who are no better. They read or hear an argument and their first reaction is to probe it for flaws.

Socrates: Students of philosophy today think they are meant to be these aggressive, cynical arguers? Attacking people to demolish their beliefs. Such attitudes reveal no truths. Why it's empty sophistry! Puffing out your chest with pride that you've made everyone around you look a fool.

Adam: I count myself lucky that I never got sucked into this attitude. So many students and professors think a philosopher is supposed to be a gadfly because you were a gadfly to Athens.

Socrates: People swat flies! That's what was done to me! Swatted with hemlock in a public square. I made everyone in my community feel like a fool and the last sounds I heard were the mocking laughter of my fellow citizens. My student wrote me a dignified death because my own was without dignity. If this competitive argument is philosophy today, then philosophy can achieve no good in the world. It has learned nothing from my mistakes and no longer deserves the name.

Adam: Don't say that, Socrates.

Socrates: These are my tragedies. That I was such a great and witty speaker, with a voice unique in all of Greece, but my influence survives only through having become a character in the works of others. And those works have given me a heritage that make my fatal mistakes something to emulate. No wonder philosophy has fallen.

Adam: If anything has fallen, it's the academy. Philosophy has always been creative and strong, despite the academy.

Socrates: My student and I wanted philosophy to change the world! Kately understands that. At long last, there's someone who does! And you, my boy!

Adam: Me?

Socrates: You've been volunteering your time, talent, and voice to mobilize help for victims of the war in Antioch and Latakia.

Adam: To be fair, I personally know more people from Damascus and Dera'a. The old Greek cities of Syria aren't really major cities anymore.

Socrates: It matters not! We worked for a world that would be more just, for a culture that would make an ideal of justice, not tyranny, violence, or empty charisma.

Adam: You shouldn't look at my news feeds, then.

Socrates: I have seen it all. Your demagogues, tyrants, and murderers are more evil than the worst nightmares of the Thirty could conjure. Philosophers, or rather those who falsely call themselves philosophers, do not fight them. They argue pedantic points over technical obscurities or trivial differences in interpreting texts thousands of years old. As irrelevant to the injustices of the current time as this *Plato's Republic!*

I had to snatch my softcover edition out of his hand. He looked as though he'd rip it to pieces. His beard was growing wet with tears.

Socrates: The arrogance and self-absorption of these cackling professors sickens me! They call themselves my heirs. Such a thing is so wretched that it robs me of my beloved reason. Where is my whispering spirit? Where are its words? Will it not comfort me? No! Because these words are not mine, but yours. My mouth is dust. I speak only in the clicks of your keys.

Adam: I am a philosopher, Socrates! As you wished philosophers to be. And I have many friends and colleagues working around the world, inside and outside the academy, who build justice and wisdom. We think, and that thinking progresses our knowledge. It adapts our power to the modern world, whatever catastrophes we face. We return to Plato's texts, the commentaries about them, and the voices he gave you because they inspire us, because they touch the wisdom that's continuous from your time to mine.

My words calmed the old man, though he was now a shadow of himself. Maybe he heard some suggestion of the eternal in my words. He stood before me so different than the image of brazen confidence I'd known since I first read the Republic at age 19. Yet his head slumped with the terrible weight of two thousand years. He couldn't even measure

up to the cartoonish figure of Socrates I first encountered, when I was 13 years old and watching Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure for the first time.

Socrates: You work for justice, yes. Helping others around the world, even just everyday kindness. But answer me this. After more than two thousand years, have you learned better than I or my student could teach you, how to remake the world in the image of justice? Have you?

At my silence, he bid me goodbye. I walked him to the door of my apartment building, and we said nothing. We embraced each other, and he walked into the foggy shadows of the park across the street from my home. He disappeared, and I returned to my work.