

2-2015

# Roslyn Weiss, Philosophers in the Republic: Plato's Two Paradigms

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## Recommended Citation

Zoller, Coleen P., "Roslyn Weiss, Philosophers in the Republic: Plato's Two Paradigms" (2015). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. Paper 1.  
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# Philosophy in Review

## BOOK REVIEW

**Roslyn Weiss.** *Philosophers in Plato's "Republic": Plato's Two Paradigms.* Cornell University Press 2012.

**PHILOSOPHY IN REVIEW**

Vol. 35, No. 1 | FEBRUARY 2015

URL: <http://www.uvic.ca/pir>

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UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

**Roslyn Weiss.** *Philosophers in Plato's "Republic": Plato's Two Paradigms.* Cornell University Press 2012. 248 pp. \$49.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780801449741).

Roslyn Weiss declares that her aims in this book are modest, but in fact her accomplishments are tremendous. Weiss's goal is to demonstrate that in the *Republic* Plato presents us with not just one rendering of the philosopher (1). Even though readers expect all the *Republic's* philosophers to be the same, Weiss successfully demonstrates that the *Republic* covers at least four types of philosophers (five, she says, if we count the type of philosopher Socrates is). The first type is the natural philosopher who ultimately stays true to philosophy; the second is the natural philosopher who gets corrupted and consequently fails to be a philosopher; the third is the imitation philosopher whose inferior nature interrupts the desire to be a philosopher; the fourth is the imitation philosopher who is designed to philosophize. Weiss's book focuses on the two types who persist with philosophy: the natural philosopher (first type) and the philosopher by design (fourth type).

Weiss's thesis contends that the first portrait emerges in *Republic* 5 and continues through Book 6 502c-e. She writes: 'The paradigm of the philosopher advanced in Book 5 is thus intended to be definitive and to set the philosopher decisively apart from those who resemble him merely superficially' (14). In Book 5 Plato has Socrates describe this natural lover of learning who is eager to promote in cities and souls goodness that is inspired by the Form of the Good. These philosophers engage readily in civic leadership. Weiss calls them 'natural philosophers'. From 502e through Book 7's allegory of the cave a different sort of philosopher appears who is trained to love the Forms. Weiss calls them 'philosophers by design'. Philosophers by design lack an inherent love of truth and justice as well as an intrinsic motivation to be leaders.

The crucial distinctions Weiss observes between the natural philosophers and the philosophers by design provide relief from the serious difficulties stemming from the standard assumption that all the *Republic's* philosophers are the same. Scholars have spilled much ink over the unanticipated need to compel philosophers to rule in Book 7. Weiss detects a simple but elegant solution to this problem. On her reading, the natural philosophers are good and decent, willing and able to be useful to cities and souls, where the philosophers by design are the ones who are too cold or too occupied intellectually to benefit others. Weiss's analysis of these two competing philosophical paradigms is the brilliant sort that leaves even careful readers wondering how we failed to see for ourselves what she has now carefully demonstrated.

Some readers may have reservations about the certainty with which Weiss finds a break in the *Republic* between the paradigm of the natural philosopher and that of the philosopher by design. I agree that the portrayal of the natural philosopher is definitively concluded at 502c-d. Plato has Socrates announce: 'Then we can now conclude that this legislation is best, if only it is possible, and that, while it is hard for it to come about, it is not impossible' (502c). Weiss herself notes that, even though Socrates clearly considers the issues surrounding the natural philosophical paradigm 'disposed of' (502c), the shift would be more evident if Book 7 began straightaway after 502c (8, n. 20). But the metaphysical investigations at the end of Book 6 serve as an interlude between Plato's treatments of the two philosophical paradigms.

The main two disagreements I have with Weiss are as follows.

First, I am inclined to disagree with Weiss about how to classify Socrates using the framework of four philosophical types. She finds it impossible to classify Socrates with the natural philosophers of Book 6 (9-10, 132) because his piety makes him actively fight for justice and try to improve human souls, while the natural philosophers never get corrupted but never get to be useful as leaders either because ‘they’ve seen the madness of the majority and realized, in a word, that hardly anyone acts sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might go to the aid of justice and survive’ (496c). The passage where natural philosophers are said to ‘lead a quiet life and do their own work’ like taking ‘refuge under a little wall from a storm’ is one where Plato has Socrates imply he is one of these philosophers who never gets to be useful in leading the community, which suggests he should be classified as a natural philosopher. However, even though Socrates’ daemonic sign keeps him out of conventional politics, he does not lead a quiet, apolitical life. As a result, Weiss suggests Socrates is a fifth type of philosopher who exists implicitly in the *Republic*. I wonder why Weiss does not consider Socrates a natural philosopher who is just less scared off from the active life than the other natural philosophers who lack allies with whom to fight for justice. For me, it is as though we now have a bifurcation of the first type—the natural philosophers who never get corrupted, who always want to promote goodness—with one sub-set who sits out of civic leadership because of living in exile among those who will not fight for justice (like the philosophers at 496b-d) and another sub-set who also lives exiled among those who will not assist in the fight for justice but who cannot resist the desire to try to improve cities and souls even if that will jeopardize one’s survival (like Socrates).

Second, I find myself at odds with Weiss’s contention that where appetitive ties are not severed, then one’s nature is appetitive and thus not philosophical (69; see also 78 n. 61). At *Republic* 485d Socrates uses a hydraulic metaphor, claiming that ‘when someone’s desires incline strongly for one thing, they are thereby weakened for others, just like a stream that has been partly diverted into another channel’. The logic of the hydraulic model leads to the conclusion that true philosophers will be concerned with the pleasures of the soul ‘itself by itself’ and merely counterfeit philosophers will continue with the pleasures of the body. This passage flies in the face not only of the example of Socrates but also of an important aspect of the *Republic*, namely, the theme of rare impossible natures. There are multiple instances where Plato emphasizes the significance of distinct and even opposing traits being combined in one person’s nature. In Book 2, the best guardian is peculiarly both gentle with his own and savagely fierce to the enemy (375c), and in Book 6, philosophers manage to be quick-witted while also stable (503b-d). Weiss herself sees 485a as another instance of distinct qualities coming together in one soul (18). There the philosopher possesses both superior intellectual qualities and superior moral qualities. Why should all these distinct or opposing qualities be combinable when it is impossible to desire the pleasures of both the body and soul? In my view the hydraulic model speaks to the philosopher’s *indifference toward* the pleasures of the body rather than abandonment of the pleasures of the body. Plato’s Socrates exemplifies the philosophical nature, which is indifferent to physical pleasures while still experiencing them, but a fuller treatment of this issue must be offered elsewhere.

While I cannot attend to all the interesting aspects of Weiss’s project here, one of its other valuable features is the first-rate treatment of Glaucon and Adeimantus. Weiss’s interpretation of the brothers (especially Glaucon) and their perspective helps readers understand why, as they engage

Socrates on the question of the worth of justice, Socrates engages them on the philosopher's value in political life. She reminds us that Glaucon is more genteel than the coarse hedonist he is often made out to be (4). Weiss explains that while Glaucon is no philosopher, he is an important driver of the conversation in the *Republic*, and Glaucon is proud to participate in Socrates' effort to purify Glaucon's second city, the so-called 'feverish' city, into the Kallipolis (5). The rival cities, rulers, and philosophers of the *Republic* are presented by and for Glaucon. For instance, Weiss calls our attention to the way in which the nuanced paradigm of the natural philosopher is developed in response to Glaucon's clouded, negative picture of the philosopher Socrates thinks should rule. Furthermore, Weiss emphasizes that the second philosophical paradigm is created precisely because that modified philosopher 'is one Glaucon can respect. By supplementing intellectual qualities with those of the typical soldier, Socrates keeps Glaucon from dismissing the value of philosophy and encourages him to admire the smart and manly philosopher-warrior' (50). And most importantly, Weiss draws our attention to Glaucon's failure to see the shortcomings of the second philosophical paradigm (128).

I commend Roslyn Weiss for writing an exciting, original book that revolutionizes scholarly interpretation of the *Republic*. Uncovering Plato's distinction between two radically different and irreconcilable philosophical paradigms is one of Weiss's finest achievements.

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