The Dialogues as Dramatic Rehearsal: Plato's Republic and the Moral Accounting Metaphor

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IN JOHN DEWEY & MORAL IMAGINATION, Steven Fesmire blames “Plato's low estimation of imagination in the Republic and Ion” for the denigration of imagination's role in moral deliberation (61). He argues that John Dewey's dramatic rehearsal better integrates imagination into the process of moral deliberation. His treatment of Plato represents a habit among pragmatists to reduce Dewey's reading of Plato to the polemics present in major works, such as The Quest for Certainty. In fact, Plato was Dewey's favorite philosopher, and he claimed that “[n]othing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a ‘Back to Plato’ movement” (LW 5:154). Following the scholarship of John Herman Randall and Henry Wolz reveals Plato as a moral artist engaged in a project of social reconstruction who wrote the dialogues as dramatic rehearsals of particular historical and cultural problems, specifically Athenian hegemony and Sophistic education. From this perspective, Republic Book I dramatizes the inadequacy of the moral accounting metaphor critiqued by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson and experiments with metaphors sympathetic to Fesmire's construal of moral imagination.

According to Fesmire, Dewey contends all inquiry requires imagination and that moral deliberation demands attention to the aesthetic dimension of imagination because of the affective nature of moral value. This places Dewey in company with Adam Smith and David Hume who accepted the role of imagination and sentiment, and at odds with Immanuel Kant and Plato who suspected emotions and imagination as barriers to rational inquiry:

Imagination, on this view, is usually a trusty crafter of images but is given to mischief. Thus Kant's suspicion. Imagination as reflective free play is essential to aesthetic judgment, for Kant, but in morals it is too self-indulgent. It may sap moral strength, usurping Reason and yielding
victory to Feeling. If a person “surrenders authority over himself, his imagination has free play,” Kant claims. “He cannot discipline himself, but his imagination carries him away by the laws of association; he yields willingly to his senses, and, unable to curb them, he becomes their toy.” Doing one's duty, on Kant's view, requires little imagination; therefore “its cultivation is at best a luxury, at worst a danger.”

Despite eulogizing of imagination by Adam Smith and David Hume, Enlightenment faculty psychology, following the lead of Plato's low estimation of imagination in the Republic and Ion, is responsible for imagination's being ignored even by those who urge that moral theories must be psychologically plausible. As a limited capacity prone to frivolous fancy and opposed to reason, imagination has little relevance to practical issues. So it can be dismissed altogether as a prescientific relic or, transfigured by Romanticism, admired on a pedestal as a “godlike power that enters into the world on the wings of intuition, free of the taint of contingency and history.” (Fesmire 61–62)

Instead, Fesmire prefers Dewey's concept of dramatic rehearsal because it properly values imagination and better coheres with our experience of moral deliberation. Rather than committing to a specific normative theory and always acting in accordance with it, Dewey argues that deliberation works best when we actively use our imagination to rehearse and evaluate a variety of responses and possible outcomes (70). Fesmire also references the four most common modes of dramatic rehearsal that Dewey mentions in his 1900–1901 lectures on ethics, specifically dialogue, visualization of results, visualization of their performance, and imagination of possible criticism (74). By consciously recognizing the role of imagination in the process of deliberation and flexing among the various phases and modes of rehearsal, Fesmire and Dewey believe that we can reconstruct “frustrated habits” that perpetuate moral problems and scenarios that seem intractable (78).

Fesmire suggests that the moral artist provides opportunities to practice dramatic rehearsal through the creation of works of art that engage our imagination. He lists the characteristics of the successful moral artist as follows. First, she must perceive “relations that otherwise go unnoticed.” Second, she must create works that “transform cultural perceptions” through “an ongoing experiment with novel possibilities.” Third, she must coherently express moral experience in a manner that presents “overall character rather than blindly giving way to either custom or fleeting impulse,” thus “such acts become role models.” Fourth, she possesses “delicately refined skills [emphasis added]” judged not by the “quantity of possibilities available to imagination,
but their fittedness to the situation for wise deliberation." Finally, the moral artist communicates with an audience by anticipating their reception of a work in a way that "enables a dialectical interaction that gives point and focus to art" (115–18).

At first blush, the dialogues and Plato meet the criteria of both Dewey's four modes of dramatic rehearsal and Fesmire's characteristics of the moral artist. The dialogues use conversation as a means of exploring moral problems, and Plato uses dramatic irony to highlight the consequences of specific moral opinions as represented by the fate of recognizable interlocutors. His ability to create works of art that continue to challenge cultural perceptions should qualify Plato as a moral artist. Fesmire does highlight two points of continuity between Plato and Dewey. He suggests that the Statesman reveals Plato's awareness that rigid moral laws cannot keep up with the pace of constant social change. This awareness parallels Dewey's arguments in Human Nature and Conduct that moral habits, like laws, emerge from human interaction with our social environment and must adapt to changing social conditions (17). Fesmire also concedes that Dewey and Plato agree on the intrinsic value of justice, but distinguishes Dewey as conceiving "right action as cooperative social interaction and inclusive of growth, not in terms of a harmonious soul in which reason rules appetites" (99).

By contrast, the majority of Fesmire references to Plato are usually critical. He acknowledges that Plato was the first to address the "moral power of art" to "directly and literally contribute to the moral imagination and character," but he criticizes Plato's understanding of this relationship as "psychologically simplistic" and as the source of Socrates's infamous arguments supporting censorship in Books II and III of the Republic. Furthermore, Plato fails to use art as a metaphor for moral experience. Fesmire cites George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's criticism of the "dominant moral accounting metaphor, in which moral interactions are understood as business transactions" and he agrees with their claim that Dewey provides a "wealth of alternative metaphors," specifically "organic growth, evolutionary adaptation, scientific experimentation, technological innovation, and art (110)."

Lakoff and Johnson correctly condemn Western philosophy's overdependence on the moral accounting metaphor. Furthermore, Fesmire provides a much needed alternative to contemporary ethics by re-introducing Dewey's concept of dramatic rehearsal, but must Plato be a foil to contemporary pragmatism or can we imagine a different relationship with the first author of philosophy? Fesmire correctly diagnoses the denigration of imagination as originating with Platonism, but this denigration originates from a literal
analysis of the arguments presented by Socrates in the dialogues. It stems from an inability to imagine Plato as an artist, rather than a theorist, and Dewey struggled to overcome this lack of imagination throughout his entire career.

One of the first essays to examine Dewey's complex reading of Plato is John P. Anton's "John Dewey and Ancient Philosophies." Anton focuses on three aspects of Dewey's relation to Greek philosophy: the "polemic," the "historico-contextual," and the "cumulative aspect" (477). According to Anton, the "sustained historical analyses he presented in his Quest for Certainty and Reconstruction in Philosophy are so dominated by a central philosophical and ethical concern of his social pragmatism as to mislead the reader into concluding that this is all he had to offer by way of understanding and appreciating the classical heritage." Because Dewey's most explicit commentary on Greek philosophy attempts to overcome barriers to philosophical inquiry, specifically the misapplication of ancient theories to contemporary problems, one is tempted to reduce Dewey's criticism only to its polemic aspect. Anton argues that a more accurate treatment of Dewey's approach accepts his admonishment of dualism and leisure class theory, without ignoring his "avowed sympathy with Plato" as a fellow social reformer (477—79).

On one hand, Dewey was impressed by the degree of social awareness expressed in the dialogues and Plato's commitment to and aptitude for social reform. On the other hand, Dewey was cautious and skeptical of "the static features he read into Plato's ideals," what one might refer to as the Plato of Platonism. Anton points out other areas of kinship between Dewey and Plato, specifically seeing "art as imitation," seeing "intelligence as a method rather than a collection of finished outcomes," and seeing "philosophy in a wider meaning of a critique of institutions and a fundamental way of life." Thus, while key differences exist, specifically "on issues of metaphysics, ethics, logic, or aesthetics," the two philosophers are united by their desire for social reform and similar temperament (487—91).

Ultimately, Anton's assessment of Dewey's approach to Greek philosophy is unsympathetic. He claims that while Dewey had the potential to offer a fruitful pragmatic analysis of ancient thought, his obsession with contemporary problems prevented him from developing an accurate picture of classical philosophy. Essentially, the polemic aspect of Dewey's approach hinders his attempts to produce a valid historico-cultural account of ancient thought and obscures the continuity between Plato and Dewey (Anton 498—99). Frederick M. Anderson offers a more charitable assessment when he suggests that Dewey uses polemics so that ancient philosophy might disclose itself in its
original richness free of received, modern interpretations. He argues that Dewey sees the problems of Greek philosophy as emerging from specific historicocultural influences and that modern philosophers misinterpreted as necessary and intractable. Dewey believed the topics discussed by the ancients are not perennial; they are reflections of specific human concerns embodied within the fabric of Athenian intellectual culture (Anderson 87–88). In summation, both Anton and Anderson agree that Dewey sees the authentic Plato as an expression of the cultural need for reform.

A more useful middle view can be distilled from Anton’s and Anderson’s commentaries. The polemics against the Greeks in Dewey’s major works border on the hyperbolic because he wanted to dislodge interpretations of Plato that overemphasized metaphysical dualisms and leisure class values as necessary to present inquiry. Using Dewey’s own words, a convenient label for this interpretation would be Plato as the “original university professor,” however, he preferred the “dramatic, restless, cooperatively inquiring Plato of the Dialogues, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield . . . the Plato whose highest flights of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn” (LW 5:155). Thus, the dramatic Plato uses the drama of the dialogues to experiment with different lines of inquiry in relation to specific practical problems, whereas Professor Plato invents abstract theories relevant to perennial, yet imagined philosophical problems.

Sadly, Dewey never fully articulated his interpretation of the dramatic Plato. He wrote only two essays that provided extended commentaries on the dialogues. “The Ethics of Democracy” (1888) rebuts Sir Henry Maine’s Platoesque critique of democracy as a “numerical aggregate” and “The Socratic Dialogues of Plato” (1925) presents an interesting, but quirky treatment of the Socratic problem. Both essays demonstrate Dewey’s affinity for Plato, but neither presents a developed hermeneutical approach to the dialogues for which Dewey longs. He delivers his final word on the matter in “Experience, Knowledge, and Value: A Rejoinder” (1939) when he states in response to John Herman Randall’s “Dewey’s Interpretation of the History of Philosophy” that “I believe the factors of the existing cultural situation . . . are such that philosophical theories which in effect, . . . are products of pre-scientific and pre-technological, dominantly leisure class conditions, are now as obstructive as they are unnecessary” (LW 14:11) Given the phase of his career, Dewey probably decided to focus on more pressing concerns rather than fully articulate his affinity for Plato, and instead delivered a final warning against the spectator theory of knowledge, but Dewey does not directly dispute Randall’s claim that the history of philosophy can be
used instrumentally “as an arsenal, or as a warning” (Randall, *Philosophy of John Dewey* 79).

In *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason*, Randall develops the three characteristics of the dramatic Plato (drama, experiment, and practice) that Dewey outlines. Randall contends that Plato is not a historical philosopher, but “a poet and a dramatist,” which he explains as follows: “Plato is a philosopher because he is a poet. True philosophy is poetry—poetic insight and vision, the imaginative enhancement of life.” In the dialogues, Plato dramatically depicts the “qualities of man’s thinking, the play and conflict of his ideas, the spectacle of his mind” as embodied in the “discourse of men” or “the drama of the Life of Reason.” The dialogues do not defend or analyze philosophical theories. They convert individuals to the philosophical life (Randall, *Plato: Dramatist* 3–4).

The dialogues are not meant to be an accurate historical snapshot of ancient Greece, but a presentation of “Greece in Plato’s own perspective, Greece as he understood it, how Greece and Greek culture looked to him” (Randall, *Plato: Dramatist* 36–40). Randall prefers to speak in terms of “The Greek Heritage of Plato,” that is, the patterns of thoughts and values that he inherited from Greek culture, early Greek philosophers, the Sophists, Socrates, and Plato’s audience. Randall believes that Plato’s use of drama captures this combination of curiosity and humanism to recruit *nous* as a means of orienting human nature toward the Good Life. Drama allows Plato to express how these themes shape the life of reason. Thus, “the dialogues emerge, not as programs of action, but as dramatic portrayals of the life of the mind—of the follies, contradictions, enthusiasms, and greatness of human thinking, as beheld by a detached and ironic intelligence—by *nous*, Dramatic Reason” (Randall, *Plato: Dramatist* 54). Plato hopes to impart the value of the philosophical life and to inspire his audience to participate in it so that they might improve themselves in the hope of finding fulfillment. The dialogues are not presentations of philosophical theories; they are invitations to engage in the betterment of humanity through inquiry and conversation.

Randall continues by explaining how Plato uses drama to respond to the social and cultural challenges of the Periclean Age (Randall, *Plato: Dramatist* 58–65). During the century preceding Plato’s career, Athens experienced optimism in the form of imperial expansion and hegemony. This expansion enabled social mobility, and the Sophists met the aristocracy’s desire to maintain power and the need of the new rich to access greater political privileges by teaching *aretē* or success. While some of the original Sophists advocated “high ideals” like “professional standards” or the improvement of “social con-
directions,” they quickly became “commercialized” and began to teach methods of gaining political advantage. Randall argues that Plato and Socrates saw the cynicism underneath this veneer of careerism and start teaching and writing as a response to the Sophists (Randall, Plato: Dramatist 82–84). Randall contrasts them with Socrates. He suggests that Socrates’s actual teachings were broader than a set of dogmas and that his purpose for engaging in philosophy was not to know the Good in a systematic way; Socrates teaches his students how to philosophize; he does not teach a philosophy. He postulates the Forms and the Good for the purpose of revealing to his students the bias and prejudices that prevent them from thinking better about the practical challenges they face. Students gain excellence, areté, not through skillful rhetoric or seeking personal advantage, but through a love of wisdom and the practice of critical reflection—through imitating the life that Socrates leads, loving wisdom for its own sake—rather than teaching it for profit.

Plato uses the character of Socrates dramatically to demonstrate how his readers can benefit from philosophical reflection and to initiate critical reflection within the reader. Henry Wolz elaborates on Randall’s conception of the dialogues as philosophical drama. Wolz sees two phases at work in the dialogues: the destructive phase in which the interlocutor becomes aware of his ignorance, which then initiates the constructive phase of inquiry that gives birth to new insights. In both phases, Socrates avoids presenting his own views because doing so would undermine his students’ attempts at philosophy. Thus, the goal of the Socratic Method is to empower the student to engage in philosophy, and by dramatizing philosophical inquiry, Plato’s dialogues empower his readers to engage in philosophy. Wolz cites Crito as an example of how the dialogues stimulate reflection rather than indoctrination. It presents the philosophical conflict between “radical freedom and unconditional submission” that “reside in the same mind [Socrates]” (Wolz 238–48).

Good citizenship requires the ability to negotiate these two demands and by depicting their conflict within the character of Socrates; rather than in separate characters, the reader witnesses a single character dramatically rehearse the problem. By extension, the drama of the situation inspires the reader to think critically about the place of citizenship between radical freedom and submission. Thus, dialogues allow Plato to dramatize moral deliberation within a practical context. He teaches readers how to perceive their situations and imagine multiple solutions in response to a particular problem. Socrates might recommend a specific solution, but Plato depicts a variety of strategies and allows the reader to evaluate all of them critically. He does not present them dogmatically.
In fact, *Republic* Book I dramatically critiques the dominance of the moral accounting metaphor. Plato sets the dialogue at the height of Athens’s imperial hegemony in the city of Piraeus, the base of the commercial and military navy. The subsequent conversation occurs at the home of Cephalus, a foreigner from Syracuse who became one of the wealthiest members of Athenian society through the manufacture of shields. Plato frames this discussion of justice with a setting symbolic of a society dominated by the moral accounting metaphor. Furthermore, Athens will soon overextend itself in the 2nd Peloponnesian War and be conquered by Sparta. As an artist, Plato chooses the temporal and spatial setting of the dialogue to reflect the failure of this metaphor to provide moral guidance for individuals and the city-state. The opening conversation between Cephalus and Socrates directly calls the moral accounting metaphor into question. The aged Cephalus has spent the day sponsoring sacrifices, which Adeimantus will later describe as an economic transaction with the gods for the purpose of atonement (Plato 364c). Ever the gadfly, Socrates asks Cephalus three probing questions: What is it like to be old? How did you become so wealthy? and What is the greatest benefit of wealth? (328e-330d). Cephalus takes Socrates’s philosophical bait when he answers that wealth removes some of the temptation to “cheat or deceive someone against our will” and allows us to die without the fear of owing a “sacrifice to a god or money to a person” (331b).

This reference to sacrifice as a means of easing one’s conscience before death foreshadows and alludes to the final words of Socrates in the *Phaedo* and a subtle contrast emerges between Cephalus and Socrates as potential role-models for different life paths. Cephalus models the metaphor of moral accounting whereas Socrates models the metaphor of the love of wisdom. Glaucon reinforces this contrast when he contrasts between the perfectly unjust man, Gyges, who uses a ring of invisibility to privately commit injustice while publicly maintaining a reputation for justice, and the perfectly just man who lives ethically, but is publicly reviled (Plato 360c–361d). Cephalus could be a candidate for the perfectly unjust man who commits injustice to achieve his ends but dies without moral debts through a life of shrewd moral transaction, and Socrates’s execution for impiety by the state certainly qualifies him as a candidate for the perfectly just man. When we consider Cephalus and Socrates at the end of their lives, Socrates dies content and peaceful, confident in a life well lived, whereas Cephalus has achieved everything he wanted, but approaches death desperately trying to ease a guilty conscience. This segue into the dialogue is thick with references to the moral accounting metaphor and links them to the discussion of justice and ethics. Socrates critiques the metaphor
directly when he refutes the claim that justice is "to give to each what is owed to him," a definition presented by Cephalus but quickly bequeathed to his heir Polemarchus (311dc). By implying this contrast without direct comment, Plato undermines the moral accounting metaphor, and the remainder of the dialogue is an exploration of other possible metaphors for moral deliberation.

The key metaphor of the Republic is the city-soul analogy, that is, that a link exists between public justice and personal morality (Plato 369a). Ultimately, Socrates supports this connection through an appeal to the metaphysical unity of the forms, but a more Deweyan interpretation would see Socrates as insisting that the "individual and society are organic to each other" (EW 1:237). Clearly, Dewey believes that the metaphors of democracy are superior to the metaphors of aristocracy, but Dewey always admired Plato's dialogues as works of moral imagination. He claimed that "if they had no value for philosophical reasons," and the harshest interpretation of Dewey's polemics might reach that conclusion, "the Republic would be immortal as the summary of all that was best and most permanent in Greek life, of its ways of thinking and feeling, and of its ideals" (EW 1:240). Dewey designed his polemics against Plato to demolish specific entrenched interpretations that buried the novelty of Plato's reconstruction of his historical context. Now those polemics should be set aside, lest they become barriers to future inquiry. By appropriating Plato as a moral artist, rather than a theorist, and reading the dialogues as dramatic rehearsals of moral problems, rather than philosophical arguments, we can connect with the Plato that inspired Dewey and use the dialogues to broaden our own imaginations.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that the publication of Dewey's lost manuscript, Unmodern and Modern Philosophy, occurred during the editing of this article. In this work, Dewey fleshes out his mature assessment of Greek philosophy, and it confirms that Dewey's reading of the Greeks, particularly Plato, is rich and nuanced. According to its editor, Phillip Deen, the manuscript would have been written between 1941–1943, which is immediately after Dewey's response to John Herman Randall's "Dewey's Interpretation of the History of Philosophy" in 1939. Thus, the manuscript stands as Dewey's final words on the subject. However, incorporating the manuscript into the debate between John Anton and Frederick Anderson or comparing the genealogy of Greek philosophy that Dewey presents to either Randall's genealogy of Plato's dialogues in Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason or Henry Wolz's reading of the dialogues as philosophical drama merit separate articles. With regard to the present inquiry, the manuscript supports this article's thesis that Dewey scholarship has underappreciated Dewey's affinity for the Platonic dialogues, and their influence on his work should be reassessed.
2. See also Plato, Republic 378cd, 380c, 401a, and 401de.
3. See also Lakoff and Johnson 141.
4. See also Betz.
5. See also Wallach.
6. Wolz also notes the Greek convention of using drama as moral education, for example, Sophocles's Antigone, and contends that Plato's dialogues are another example of this convention.
7. Consider Socrates's final words in the Phaedo: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget" (Plato 118a) in comparison to Cephalus's statement "that when someone thinks his end is near, he becomes frightened and concerned about things he didn't fear before" (330d). Socrates greets death peacefully and asks his students to offer a single and meager final sacrifice to the god of healing, whereas Cephalus hints that he has troubled dreams and quickly exits the dialogue to continue the sacrifices he has already been performing throughout the day. Given these last words and behaviors, it appears that Socrates goes to his grave with a clearer conscience than Cephalus. Also, Phaedo and Republic are conventionally considered to be from the same phase of Plato's career and address similar philosophical themes. See Ruprecht.

REFERENCES

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