

Plato's Republic: A Biography. Simon Blackburn. Allen & Unwin 2006. 181pp.

Richard Posner, Law Professor at the University of Chicago and Circuit Court judge has recently complained at length about the poor quality of "Public Intellectuals": academics like himself whose specialist expertise gives them a media pulpit from which to pronounce on the big issues of the day. Since Posner's main specialist contribution is to argue that the Supreme Court should make decisions primarily on the basis of economic utility, perhaps we should be sceptical, not only of his legal opinions, but his views on other matters. The situation gets even worse in Paris where a hairy chest, big vocabulary and sexy wife qualify Bernard Henri Levy to examine the Conscience of the West in relation to Iraq or Darfur.

Fortunately there are public intellectuals whose expertise shows through in genuinely illuminating discussion of complex topics of wide public interest such as the relationship between ethics and government. Simon Blackburn, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge is the outstanding contemporary exponent. Perhaps the reason why he is far and away the most entertaining and valuable of the philosophers who write for the public is that he does not skip the philosophy, the area in which he has genuine expertise. He expects the reader to think hard but he makes the process entertaining and rewarding.

This is especially so in his most recent book, a "biography" of Plato's *Republic* in the series "Books that Shook the World". As well as being a philosophical *tour de force* the book is consistently funny and relevant. Blackburn has no sympathy with Plato as a philosopher, pointing out that his arguments are mostly weak and confused, mainly because the psychological and social assumptions on which they rest are, respectively, bonkers and fascistic (the social structure of Plato's ideal Athens is unfortunately close to that of Franco's Spain circa 1946). Nonetheless he concludes on a surprisingly respectful note. The basis of this respect is Plato's overriding concern in *The Republic* with the connection between good government and good life for individuals. The connection between justice, truth and a life well lived was really Plato's only topic. The wacky metaphysics of souls and ethereal spheres and epistemology which depends on knowledge acquired in previous lives is secondary. Just as well, because Plato's concern with corruption in all its forms and its destructive effect on the lives of citizens is as fresh as ever.

One good thing about *The Republic* is its prescient hatred of spin. In a recent review of "On Bullshit" by the Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt, Blackburn noted that the difference between the bullshitter and the liar is that the liar wants you to believe something untrue, the bullshitter *doesn't even care about the truth or whether you believe him*. He just wants to cloud the issue long enough to get his way. A climate of constant bullshit defeats even liars, since the difference between truth and lies evaporates. It's all spin in press releases, the CIA's reports on weapons of mass destruction, university reports on quality assurance, and billionaire's funeral orations. In each case the only role of words is to advance the interests of an already powerful minority at the expense of the common good. Plato's nemeses, Oligarchy and Tyranny, whether ancient or modern therefore devote equal time to spinning, thieving from the state and coercing honest opposition.

As Blackburn points out, Plato's heyday as the cornerstone of university education was in Victorian England where wealth, leisure, privilege and an atmosphere of vaguely homoerotic tutelage could coexist with idealism inspired by Plato's lofty visions. It's easy to lampoon the hypocrisy involved, but Blackburn's amusing and, ultimately, poignant reflections on Plato remind us that, for all our anachronistic amusement at the Victorians expense, we have succeeded in expunging only the idealism. We have kept the hypocrisy and spun it into the stuff of public life.

It is worth quoting his conclusion in full:

At a time when the world's energy resources are disappearing, when many of our cultural resources as they were fashioned by the Enlightenment are similarly felt to be running out, when basing thought in reality is one lifestyle option among many, and is seen by our statesmen as such, when democracy is sold to plutocracy across the western world, when politicians openly deride the idea of a public service ethos in the civil service or the other professions, supplanting their higher ranks with placemen and spin doctors, then our future may well depend on how profoundly we manage to respond to *The Republic*.

Philip Gerrans

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