
Gene Fendt, *Comic Cure for Delusional Democracy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, 314 pp., \$100.00 (hardcover).

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Gene Fendt's book carries the well-waved flag of Plato's *Republic* (xx). Still, no book that attempts a new reading of the most famous book of political philosophy, and is, moreover, based on more than twenty-five years of teaching the *Republic* (xxiii–xxiv), should be dismissed on account of the apparent familiarity of its subject, even if “various parts or combination of parts” have been previously published.

The book follows the path, inaugurated or recovered in the modern era by Leo Strauss, of taking into account the dramatic setting and the characters of the dialogue, although in following this less-traveled road the author seems more indebted to the work of Ferrari, Griswold, Blondell, and even to Rosen and Roochnik¹ than to Strauss's naive readings. Whatever the inspiration, Fendt's main justification for his new venture into Plato's *Republic* is the idea that it is necessary to explore fully the “mimetic” (2–10) nature of the dialogue. Exploring mimesis requires the simultaneous reading of several aspects of the dialogue: what Socrates says, the conversion of Socrates's interlocutors—that is, the revelation of the “depth of political and individual delusion in the interlocutors”—and the consequent setting up of “an artistic mimetic therapy for readers through his work of art” (10). The reader must thus be prepared to sit on the psychotherapist's sofa and submit to therapy and pharmaceutical medication.

¹ The author appears to rely on David Roochnik's geometry of regimes, and even, in spite of stated reservations (78n2), on Derrida's pharmacy.

The reader that Fendt has in mind is not the ancient reader of the fourth century BC, nor a modern scholar willing to sit at Plato's feet to carefully listen to the great master, but present-day characters who, like us, stand "within the context of contemporary political theorizing" (xx), in spite of the author's attempts to invoke Plato in the Academy (264). The *Comic Cure* is divided into six chapters, with an interlude between chapters 4 and 5 on the analogy of the soul and the city and the tripartition of the soul, and a conclusion of sorts, about "liturgical catharsis," titled "Coda and Prelude." Each chapter has a dominant theme and considers a modern topic while following the arrangement of Plato's dialogue, which may be helpful as an instrument for teaching.

The first chapter, "Madman at the Door," deals with Cephalus's abandonment of his definition of justice and with Thrasymachus's insult in Book I (24–28), rushes through Book II as it deals with the medicinal role of the spoken lie (as opposed to the lie in the soul), and then returns to Cephalus (28–36). The chapter begins with a confrontation with Freud, but moves quickly and in the end dismisses postmodernism as a whole. "Psyche's Pharmacy" (chap. 2) takes its bearing from the doctor's *pharmakon* and explores Books II and III, especially the "mythos" of earth and blood (70–78). The core of the work appears to begin in chapter 3, "Enlarging Homer: An Aristophanic Sex Comedy," a chapter that explains the role of ridicule through Books V–VI, organized around the *Republic's* famous three waves (90–105). "Out of the Cave" (chap. 4) dwells on the therapeutic role of the three central metaphors of cave, line, and sun (111–30). Following that, the curing process is exhibited (131–46). After a brief interlude, Fendt attacks "number crunching" in the social sciences, appealing to "the six geometries of regime" of David Roochnik. The final chapter is indeed "polymorphous" and gathers the very different subjects of desire, delusions, and poetry present at the end of Plato's *Republic*.

Fendt's book is peculiar, first in style, which involves an odd mixture of modern poetry (e.g., Jack Gilbert), colloquial language, and semierudite references to Shakespeare and other classics, coupled with sheer language perfumery. To take one example of the style that almost pervades the book: "the true relation is one of natural and necessary complementarity in which an autarchic essentialism of somatic sexual difference is as mistaken as an ideal antimateriality" (86). Such prose only *almost* pervades it, however, because these sentences are intermingled with others of a very different sort. Speaking about the sexes, Fendt claims that the *Republic* is a "three-book *interruptus*" (84); speaking of the matchmaking of the warriors as in dog

breeding, Fendt asserts: “Perhaps if we forget the gods, this is what we come to: woof!” (99). This strange melange seems to be a deliberate move on the part of the author: “I hope my language throughout this chapter proves illustrative” of the base or ugly (105n9). The French say: *noblesse oblige*. Here the motto may be *mimesis oblige*.

Leo Strauss once commented, in his lectures on the problem of Socrates, that “in glancing at modern interpretations of the Aristophanean comedies, one is struck by the preoccupation of modern scholars with the political background and the political meaning of the comedies. It is as if these scholars were about to forget, or had already forgotten, that they are dealing with comedies. When about to enter a place at which we are meant to laugh and to enjoy ourselves, we must first cross a picket line of black coated ushers exuding deadly and deadening seriousness.”² Fendt is willing to correct this situation with these humorous remarks, but the effect is dubious.

It is dubious, not only because of its style but because the author seeks a (scientific) confirmation of some of his theses in very peculiar places, such as brain synapses. He asserts, for example, that “Platonic dialogues are not merely intellectual enterprises” (16) but mimetic ones, and that bodily responses are mimetic too and not representations. According to him confirmation can be found in Girard’s biological studies of the prefrontal cortex (6–8, with nn.). More important, Freud is summarily discarded and yet guides the author through chapters 1 and 2.

Let us behave as Jane Austen and veil the all too numerous faux pas. The author presents his doubts concerning the attitudes of both political theorists and Plato scholars. He is right in fearing both. We may be deeply sympathetic to most of Fendt’s misgivings: illiberal friends of democracy, postmodernism, a certain shallowness in much current work in the social sciences, large expenditures on football stadiums at American universities that are quasi-Dionysian temples (264; cf. *Rep.* 492b), among other phenomena that outrage the author. But I find it too daring to think that a single page in the *Republic*, powerful medicine as it is, can take care of all postmodern political theory (24ff.) or any of the other evils of the new century once and for all.

Concerning the centrality of comedy and the (correctly identified) parallels between Book V of the *Republic* and Aristophanes’s works, it is remarkable that some obvious references are missing. Little is said of the representation of the

² Leo Strauss, “The Origins of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates,” *Interpretation* 23, no. 2 (1996): 142.

Assembly of Women in Athens in 392, some ten or twenty years before the composition of the *Republic* (assuming it was composed between 380 and 369 BC).

A reader of Leo Strauss knows where to find the connections. But there are a couple of mandatory references missing entirely: Debra Nails's book, or Douglass Parker's introduction to the edition of Aristophanes and the alternative theory of Holger Thesleff, or even Aristotle.³ Debra Nails's prosopography is mentioned but seldom (never?) used, which looks odd considering the promised attention to Plato's characters. All these fundamental works, including Strauss's, are merely ignored.

Considering the amount and depth of scholarship about the parallels between the soul and the city, the situation is even more discouraging in the Interlude, which would not be such a serious matter if the author had not acknowledged that "the main points of these last two chapters sail straight into numerous intense debates in the scholarship" (xvii). We could say that Fendt's overwhelming concern with modern political theory no doubt contributes unwittingly to the comical cure that he seeks.

Stylistic peculiarities and bibliographical omissions could easily be overlooked if the author presented valuable insights. The language, however, appears to confuse the reader if not the author. The attempt to make the book more modern is understandable, since "we all have been in the cave of our bodies' desires and of cultural mimesis (if not in front of a tv screen or web browsing computer) since childhood, living what is customary" (131).

It's unclear how therapeutic it can be to a poorly educated young man to acknowledge that "if all desires are interests and all interests have rights, it is not in the interest of the majority interest to allow reason to work any further—unless reason has a right *and* an interest intending a good, and therefore a right that *exceeds every other interest or combination thereof*. Such is the elitism of truth. But that posits a telic perfection to human nature, a purpose for polity, and (truly) no merely democratically procedural rights and justice or postmodern denial of reason's capacity for achieving or deciding about truth claims can bear to listen to that" (133–34).

The emphasis on therapy, sickness, and recovery may indeed be seriously misguided. It does not appear that Plato's characters in the *Republic*

³ Debra Nails, *Agora, Academia and the Conduct of Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1995), 118–21; Aristophanes, *The Congresswomen*, ed. Douglass Parker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); Holger Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1982), 103–4.

“seem to be in the modern political theorist’s mythic state of nature” and that “Plato presents the imaginary origin of modern politics in the simplest of pictures: a small group, thrown together in one place, with limited common resources—each other and the festival night” (132). The small group is certainly *not* in the modern state of nature. Nor, to paraphrase Bruell (on Rawls), should we assume that everyone is a well-bred, academic gentleman whose only problem is too much TV or internet browsing. Plato seems concerned with genuine insights, removing false opinions, though health of soul comes from that. But the intention is not therapeutic. It is truth loving—whether it harms you or not.

True, what justice is and its defense in the *Republic* is not a mere theoretical question. The characters are concerned with what they should do with their lives, and how they should live in order to be happy, which is very different from aiming for a Kantian “kingdom of ends” (268). It is hard to see how Fendt’s book as a whole is therapeutic, except perhaps in the sense that if the reader is able to endure it until the end he achieves an important victory over himself. This is not to say that the book is not often readable and even full of interesting insights. Although most references to other dialogues such as the *Euthyphro* (13), *Meno* (32), and *Phaedrus* (15 etc.) are too summary and too well known to be of any interest, many pages of the book are impressive in showing the familiarity of many long-lasting conversations about the *Republic*. The baroque sentences, however, are enough to make one appreciate the therapeutic qualities of rereading Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language.”

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