Plato's Practical Theory of Ideal State

Masayuki AMANO

The purpose of this paper is to prove that while the ideal state Plato conceived in the Republic was an unrealizable one, he propounded a vision of a practical ideal state in the Laws.

In the Republic, Plato says that the ruler of the ideal state must have the episteme (knowledge in the strictest sense) of the Form (idea) of the Good. On the other hand, it is evident that he never thought any human being could have episteme (i.e. sophia) at all (cf. Apol.23a, Phdr.278d, Tht.145d-e). It follows then, that Plato thought in the Republic the ideal state he conceived was not to be realized.

The description of the ideal state in the Republic is part of the proof that the just are to lead a happy life and the unjust an unhappy one. The proof is interrupted by the digressive argument in the books V-VII. In this digression Plato introduces the Form of the Good and claims that it is the necessary condition of the perfect ruler of the ideal state to have the episteme of that Form. As is well known, Plato made a distinction of episteme and doxa, and thought that Forms were objects of episteme. From this fact and the fact that Forms are not introduced in the ‘main argument’ (Books II-IV and VIII-IX), we should understand that the ‘main argument’ belongs to the region of the doxa. If so, it follows that the ideal state in the ‘main argument’ also belongs to the same region, with the result that the ruler of that state doesn’t have the episteme of the Form of the Good, which means that the state is not really an ‘ideal’ one.

In Politicus Plato propounded the idea that the judgment of the perfect ruler was superior to any of the written laws. This suggests that he thought, not only in the Politicus but also in the earlier written Republic, that if an ideal state could be realized, it was to be realized not by laws but by the perfect ruler. In the Laws on the other hand Plato thinks, admitting that human beings cannot establish perfect laws, that what realizes an ideal state is laws and not a perfect ruler.

To prove that Plato had a vision of a practical ideal state in the Laws, I offered a part of the vision, especially concerning education. For reasons of space, however, I could not support this with more testimonies of the vision.