

THE PROBLEM OF HERMENEUTIC ORIENTATION IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

ABSTRACT

Plato's *Republic* is devoted to the question of human virtue. It is not easy to know what constitutes human virtue; nor, indeed, is it easy to know how to acquire this knowledge. Part of the difficulty stems from what I will call the problem of hermeneutic orientation. Schematically, this problem consists in the fact that our inherited conceptual frameworks, as well as the emotional and pragmatic attachments that shape the horizons from within which we begin questioning, orient our reason and delimit the operation of our understanding. As such, any inquiry into the nature of what it means to live a good life will be conditioned by our prior engagements with the world. In this dissertation I will examine the way in which the *Republic* develops and responds to this problem. The importance of developing a response to this problem is grounded in the importance of coming to know the nature of human virtue: since the problem of hermeneutic orientation constitutes a barrier to our knowledge of virtue, if we cannot adequately respond to the problem, then we will be unable to know how best to live. I will argue that Plato uses the problem to point toward the necessity of engaging in philosophy; philosophy itself is to be understood as the dialectical inquiry into the nature of being and virtue.

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