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Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues (review)

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Book Reviews

James C. Klagge and Nicholas D. Smith, eds., *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*. Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, Supplementary Volume 1992. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Pp. 280. Cloth, \$65.00.

The modern debate about how to interpret Plato and his dialogues has been going on at least since Schleiermacher argued for the interpretive importance of literary and dramatic characteristics, against the prevailing practice of reading Platonic doctrines directly out of the texts as if they were disguised treatises. Important contributions to the discussion earlier in the twentieth century were made by Schaerer and Goldschmidt, Friedländer, Stefanini, Woodbridge and Randall, Strauss, Krämer and Gaiser, and the disciples of these scholars, although you would hardly know it from the present volume.

For those who are new to the discussion, and especially for those who come from the analytical orientation, the "Editor's Prologue" by James C. Klagge clarifies some of the issues and distinguishes the question of Plato's vs. Socrates' doctrines from a second, more perplexing, question—"Does Plato expound his own views as opposed to not expounding *views* at all?" (4)—which is one of the themes of this volume and certainly one of the most important points in recent discussions.

Gail Fine's "Aristotle's Criticisms of Plato" provides a nuanced set of opinions for getting through the horns of the dilemma posed by Aristotle's criticism, recognizing correctly that Aristotle's aims are not historical, but rather philosophic reconstructions, which can provide us with useful philosophic insight.

Julia Annas, in "Plato the Sceptic," seeks to explain the "surprising" (43) fact that the Academy under Arcesilaus was sceptical. She argues that the interpretation of Socrates as sceptical makes sense from the Hellenistic point of view, though it doesn't from ours. Then she examines five ancient arguments for a skeptical interpretation of Plato and finds that they don't really work either.

L. A. Kosman's "Silence and Imitation in the Platonic Dialogues" focuses on Platonic anonymity. Like Annas, he writes about his subject with little reference to previous scholarship. Beginning from the narration-imitation distinction of *Republic* 3, he argues that the dialogues are *mimeseis* (83) and concludes that Plato's philosophical task is not to propound dogmas, but to show us how to discover the truth for ourselves.

Similarly, David M. Halperin, in "Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity," sees Plato as nondogmatic and nonsceptical. His account of the formal narrative structure of the *Symposium* leads him to argue that, like the *Phaedrus*, the dialogue undermines the very position it seems to put forward, so that it too is aporetic. Thus he sees Plato "not as a metaphysical dogmatist but as a kind of deconstructionist *avant le lettre*" (118).

The finest chapter is Mary Whitlock Blundell's "Character and Meaning in Plato's *Hippias Minor*," which shows how Plato uses both his own characters and an examination of Homer's characters to create a more unified dialogue than examination of arguments alone would suggest. Unlike some other contributors, Blundell looks at the dialogue holistically, and is sensitive to context, setting, language, literary and historical allusions. Unlike any other contributor, she makes fine use of the scholarly literature, past and current, English and non-English, philosophical, philological, and historical.

"Analyzing Plato's Arguments: Plato and Platonism," by S. Marc Cohen and David Keyt, is the most unreconstructed contribution. The authors *assume* much of what is called into question by other contributors: that Plato has philosophic doctrines, that he presents them in the dialogues, that we know which character speaks for him at any given moment, etc. Their questions are (1) how should we supply the missing premisses? and (2) is this activity justified (i.e., expounding Plato vs. Platonizing)?

Michael Frede's "Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form" begins from the view that "Plato's dialogues are works of art" (201) and tries to understand what this entails for our understanding of the arguments in them. He concludes that in at least some dialogues the arguments can be attributed neither to Socrates nor to Plato (212); hence "Plato even in the least aporetic and most dogmatic dialogues remains at a radical distance from the views and arguments of the fictional character of the dialogue" (214). "[T]he dialogues are not philosophical treatises in disguise" and their philosophic meaning "does not consist in what gets said or argued, but in what they show" (219).

In "A Maieutic View of Five Late Dialogues" Kenneth Sayre confronts the puzzle that in these dialogues a correct method of philosophic inquiry is described and then applied; in each case conversation seems essential to the application of the method but is not mentioned. Following the Seventh Letter, Sayre argues that the philosophic understanding aimed at in the late dialogues really isn't and can't be written because "the goal of philosophy is not argument, but mental discernment" (242). Hence, the dialogues do not somehow contain the final fruits of philosophy; rather, they are meant to function maieutically for each of us.

Overall, the volume is welcome as a contribution to our continuing reassessment of the old dogmatic consensus about Plato's dialogues and to contemporary discussion of the relation between their literary and dramatic characteristics and the nature of the philosophy to be found in them. While the volume includes a number of perspectives that diverge from the traditional dogmatic one, it is regrettable that the history of philosophy is not included. It is also regrettable that most of the contributors do not seem aware of scholarship and critical approaches previous to the last few decades nor of recent developments in our contextual knowledge about Plato and the production of the dialogues that might have provided constraints on some of the views proposed.

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