



PROJECT MUSE®

Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues (review)

Gerald A. Press

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 50, Number 1, January 2012,
pp. 133-135 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/hph.2012.0012



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/464899>

perfect themselves, because the divine rationality is extended to humans. Chapters 3–6 also deal with the Maker, but from different angles: philosopher-kings and craftsman-gods (Allan Silverman); the place of cosmology in Plato's later dialogues (Charles H. Kahn); the interpretations of the Demiurge as "Maker or Father" in Platonism up to Plotinus (Matthias Vorwerk); and Thomas M. Robinson's brief look at the term '*mythos*' ("story," "account") in response to Myles Burnyeat's influential paper on *eikōs logos* (also discussed in the papers by Gábor Betegh and Alexander Mourelatos).

Space, place, and motion are dealt with in chapters 7–11. Verity Harte (chapter 8) tackles the thorny question of creation at the physical origin: if the Demiurge finds a chaotic "primordial" cosmic body, where do the building blocks of the universe come from? The four elements needed are being harnessed by geometrical regular forms and numbers, but what is being formed here? She makes a convincing case for how we should read the "traces" (53b2) of the elements as instantiations of the Forms of space (not *in* space), hence sustaining the claim that it is not a creation from nothing. Stephen Menn (chapter 9) looks at the way in which the *Timaeus* adopts Presocratic topics and themes, with criticism of their notion of vortex. He concludes that Plato does not just present a Presocratic cosmogony, but an Empedoclean one (147). Ian Mueller's essay (chapter 10) presents some late Platonists views on matter, with a focus on the harmonizing interpretation regarding matter and basic material "chemistry." Zina Giannopolou (chapter 11) proposes to reject Derrida's denial of nameability of the receptacle.

Further essays of a more philosophical bent are found in the next few chapters: Thomas Johansen (chapter 12) considers Aristotle's analysis of Plato and his "oversight" of the final cause (though not in the *Timaeus*, as Harold Cherniss claimed in his 1944 book, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and of the Academy*). Aristotle was keen to have the distinction made explicit between final and formal cause, even if this function was performed by the same thing (e.g. soul is final, formal, and efficient cause of living beings [*De an.* II.4]). Thus, Aristotle states that Plato acknowledged only two causes (formal and material), mainly because his formal causes do not work as final causes, even if he intended them to do so (186). Thomas Kjeller Johansen successfully improves our "reading of Aristotle" and "Aristotle's reading of Plato."

The final section of the book, on visual elements inspired by the *Timaeus*, offers a fascinating look into architectural and fashion patterns: how Atlantis symbolizes lost origins of architecture in film, and how Timaeian geometric structures influence the aesthetics of science and fashion.

The readability of these essays and their variety in casting new light on this work make it an original contribution to the understanding of the *Timaeus*.

HAN BALTUSSEN

University of Adelaide

Catherine H. Zuckert. *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pp. viii + 888. Cloth, \$45.00.

For most of the twentieth century, interpreters of Plato took little interest in the dramatic aspects of the dialogues, assumed Plato's teachings were directly expressed by their leading speakers, and sought to understand *prima facie* absences and inconsistencies among apparent teachings through a developmental picture of Plato's thought. Rarely did they explain why Plato occasionally used philosophical characters as different from each other and from Socrates as Parmenides, Timaeus, and the Eleatic Stranger, leaving Socrates present but largely silent. Nor did they address why, having returned Socrates to leadership in the "late" *Philebus*, Plato eliminated him altogether in favor of an Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, taken as his latest dialogue. Platonic developmentalism has been receding for twenty years, but few interpreters have considered these other characters apart from the unsubstantiated and vague assumption that they all somehow speak for Plato.

Catherine Zuckert offers here “a new framework in which to view the corpus as a whole” (47). She coordinates a quite different arrangement of dialogues with an interpretation of Plato’s philosophizing as unchangingly represented by an intellectually developing Socrates whose professional status and practices align with the contemporary history of Athens, and with Plato’s other philosophers and the evident differences among them in substance and style.

Zuckert’s arrangement of the dialogues in their dramatic order roughly follows that of Eduard Munk (*Die natürliche Ordnung der platonischen Schriften* [1857]) and far surpasses earlier sketches by Brumbaugh (1964) and Cropsey (1995). In terms of older divisions within Platonic scholarship, she is a unitarian, but non-dogmatic. Her Socrates remains Plato’s ideal philosopher, and he remains committed to a hierarchical view of purely intelligible realities, but he does not claim to possess or impart knowledge of it. Zuckert’s Socratic philosophy is neither dogmatic nor skeptical, but better than the alternatives on offer precisely in its more limited intellectual and political pretensions and more nuanced understanding of human desire.

The introduction defines her goal to interpret arguments in their literary forms and dramatic and historical contexts, offers an initial portrait of Plato’s other philosophers, and outlines the dramatic-historical framework for the remainder of the volume. Zuckert takes the *Laws* as Plato’s first dialogue dramatically and the Athenian Stranger as a Pre-Socratic philosophical figure (chapter 1), establishing the quest for an all-encompassing, intelligible order and the nature of human happiness as the twin problems on which Plato and his Socrates will remain focused. In the first stage of his philosophic development, Socrates proposes a speculative theory of ideas to solve these problems that is soundly criticized by Parmenides, whose own view, however, leads to self-contradiction (chapter 2).

Parts of *Apology*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedo* show retrospectively the steps by which the young Socrates of the *Parmenides* became the mature Socrates of dramatically later dialogues (chapter 3), his turning to the study of words and learning the nature and importance of human desire. In the *Protagoras*, *Alcibiades I*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Hippias Major* and *Minor*, set during the early Peloponnesian War, this younger Socrates shows his contemporaries the incoherence of their views and encourages them to pursue philosophy with him, but has no positive views to offer (chapter 4).

In the second stage, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Clitophon*, *Republic*, and *Philebus* (chapter 5), set during the later Peloponnesian War, Socrates presents “a kind of positive teaching . . . a vision” (14); but it depends heavily on images, in contrast with the counter-Socratic model represented by Timaeus’s lecture on cosmology (chapter 6). The *Theages*, *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*, set in the last decade of Socrates’s life, give us the philosophic and political practice of a Socrates who has become well known, dealing with followers and temporary associates, still without a coherent account of the whole, but still committed to the search for wisdom.

Stage four is constituted by the eight dialogues around Socrates’s trial and death. The *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, and *Cratylus* argue for the limits of human intelligence; neither mathematics nor religion nor language can answer Socrates’s questions about the nature of things and the attainment of happiness (chapter 8). The Eleatic Stranger, perhaps implicitly, criticizes Socrates’s inability to explain reason, his hierarchical division of ideas, and his misunderstanding of the true political art (chapter 9). But in *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates respond to these challenges, defending the limited but best possible explanations Socrates has given of the practice of philosophy and politics as private dialectical critiques aimed at motivating interlocutors’ improvement and affirming the limits of knowledge (chapter 10). Unlike Parmenides, Timaeus, and the Eleatic Stranger, Socrates does not think a complete explanation is possible or that knowledge once acquired will long remain.

Among the many surprises in the book are Zuckert’s interpretation of the *Laws* (*supra*), of the *Philebus* as expanding and developing arguments made in the *Republic* (385), and of the *Menexenus* as a posthumous “sequel” to the *Phaedo* presenting “a description of Athenian

history and politics on the basis of Socratic principles in contrast to the account his fellow citizens had acquired from Thucydides" (821).

This is a very long book—some may say excessively or unnecessarily—but the more powerful for the thoroughness and detail of her treatment of all the thirty-one dialogues she considers authentic. Some readers may be bothered by the inclusion of the improbably authentic *Clitophon* and *Theages*. Others may feel that repeated references to Leo Strauss and his students (e.g. Benardete, Bloom, Cropsey, Pangle, and Rosen) undermine the argument's call on mainstream attention (but her sharp disagreements with them are equally worth noting).

These and other cavils notwithstanding, *Plato's Philosophers* is an impressive book. The individual and collective coherence of its arguments pose a powerful challenge to prevailing interpretations of crucial issues in Platonic scholarship that should be considered by all.

GERALD A. PRESS

Hunter College, C.U.N.Y.

Christopher P. Long. *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiii + 275. Cloth, \$90.00.

The drive of this book, without ever quite saying so, is to recommend Aristotle's teaching on truth for contemporary thought. The book is more about concepts and arguments around truth than about truth per se. The explanation of the famous definition of truth, as saying of what is that it is, occupies a few pages. The rest of the book elucidates the vast subtext of this limpid passage. What must intellect be, what must speech be, what must beings be, for this saying of what is? The "correspondence theory of truth," which textbooks routinely attribute to Aristotle, is repudiated. Correctness and accuracy are not the fundamental values of truth. They are byproducts of a more fundamental responsiveness to the way things naturally express themselves.

The linchpin of Long's interpretation is that nature at large is expressive. This idea tends to be repeated rather than explained. "It is the nature of things to express themselves" (7). "By nature, things speak" (12). Not merely speak but almost shout. "The things themselves demand . . . to be put into words" (71). The claim is "not merely that language can lend voice to the nature of things," but more emphatically that "the being of things naturally expresses itself" (55). So if we want truth, we must allow things to speak for themselves. "The truth of things is discernable to those who live in intimate communion with the things of nature" (10), presumably because they "cultivat[e] habits of relation nourished by the attempt to say things as they are" (48). Truth is a question of responsibility, being true to things, and a question of justice, being true to everything else to which it and oneself are related, and which must momentarily be silenced to hear a thing say what it is.

What do things say when they speak? Mostly, it seems, their voluminous unicity, "an insistent unicity that enjoins response" (242). 'Unicity' is Long's word for the fullness, substance, or individual essence of things, at once their *being* and their otherness, *their being*, an identity they have in themselves and not by human mediation. This unicity is what we have to tap into to know the truth. Our response, our truthfulness, begins in perception, when we first take in what things say. Long corrects the impression that for Aristotle perception is passive reception. It is receptivity, yes, but receptivity as an active capacity. In being open to determination by the other, the soul becomes more fully itself. Perception is neither sheer passive reception nor transcendental aggression. It is simply "wakeful discernment" (129). Perception is awakened by expressiveness, and responds with a power of *phantasia* that translates the *logos* of things into the idiom of the soul.

Kant needs to understand how that happens. What is this power, and how do we know it conduces to knowledge? For Long, as for Aristotle, such problems do not arise. It is nature, and nature is sincere. He actually says that. "Nature is sincere; it expresses itself honestly and in ways that are naturally accessible to human beings" (158). We live in "an organic