

Book Reviews

The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues, edited by Thomas L. Pangle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), xii + 406 pp., cloth \$44.50, paper \$12.95.

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Perplexingly inconclusive, Plato's short Socratic dialogues appear to offer little promise to those who ask, How did the founder of political philosophy understand his own enterprise? The suspect genealogy of the dialogues makes scholarly neglect seem all the more reasonable. Is there really anything to learn here?

As it happens, there is, and this collection of careful translations makes the learning easier to begin and, better, harder to conclude. "To confront, to take seriously, to become captivated by, these shorter dialogues," Professor Pangle writes, "is to discover a Socrates who shakes the foundations of many of our conventional assumptions about what and how Socrates and Plato might have thought." It might be noted that some of the scholarly refusal to take these dialogues seriously as authentic Platonic works may stem from a reluctance to take seriously certain Socratic challenges to conventions. Whatever the historical evidence may be, a willingness to read these dialogues as authentic begins to separate thoughtful or potentially thoughtful students from 'pure' scholars. The contributors to this volume combine scholarship with thoughtfulness.

Allan Bloom finds in the *Hipparchus* a confrontation between a philosopher and a democrat—the latter no fanatic, but simply an ordinary man who loves money in a 'decent' or lawabiding way. The dialogue shows how such decency poses a serious threat to the philosopher's way of life. Both democrat and philosopher love gain. They differ radically in their conceptions of what is truly gainful.

The conventional decency of law, upon which money rests, concerns Socrates in the *Minos*. Leo Strauss shows that law, associated with opinion but also intended to guide opinion, is highly problematic with respect to knowledge. At the same time, "The *Minos* raises more questions than it answers," thereby offering readers not so much knowledge as doubt and wonder, neither of which conduce to lawmaking in any ordinary sense.

This leads one to the quest for knowledge, a quest that cannot be sustained without a love of knowledge. Christopher Bruell emphasizes the distinction, in

the *Lovers*, between the noble, which attracts well-born, honor-loving youths of Athens, and the good, associated more with the useful. *Political* philosophy requires study of the noble, although the study itself is more good than noble. When the noble know their own nobility, they transcend mere nobility; political philosophy constitutes “a needed preliminary to philosophizing.” In this sense, decent political life provides the necessary but not sufficient ground for philosophic life, which nonetheless is in tension with it.

Given this dispensable indispensability of decent political life, can a philosopher or anyone else promote that life by teaching virtue? The *Cleitophon*, in Clifford Orwin’s words, depicts one of “those surprisingly rare occurrences in Plato, an encounter with a practicing statesman.” The statesman charges Socrates with the inability to teach citizen virtue. Orwin finds in the dialogue tension “between doing what is good for oneself and doing what is good for others.” Socrates avoids answering Cleitophon’s charge; this is “one of the few” dialogues “that never mentions philosophy,” perhaps because Cleitophon’s certitude with respect to the unmitigated goodness of justice cannot be shaken. He requires clarity, answers, while Socrates would raise perplexities, questions.

Does wisdom consist of answers or of questions? Thomas L. Pangle considers the *Theages*, one of the two central dialogues in the collection. The *Theages* depicts a private conversation, held in the portico of Zeus the Liberator, between Socrates and a father who is also a democratic statesman, understandably worried that his son wants “to become wise.” As Pangle remarks, wisdom may tempt men “to try to escape from the constraints of conventional fair play.” Theages, the son, soon reveals himself as a wouldbe tyrant; traditional democratic statesmanship has ‘naturally’ brought forth a child who threatens the tradition and the democracy. Socrates tactfully shows that philosophy, the love of wisdom, cannot offer a science of politics to wouldbe rulers. It can nonetheless strengthen the necessary pieties of political life by showing “how the traditional virtues can be made more consistent, intelligible, and self-conscious” in the face of democracy’s tendency to undermine itself by unrefined eroticism and immoderate ambition. The *Theages* is a Platonic answer to Aristophanes’ charges in the *Clouds*.

The erotic and ambitious young democrat *par excellence* was Alcibiades. In the *Alcibiades I* Plato “depict[s] the profound transformation of an interlocutor in the course of a single conversation”—an event “almost unique among the dialogues,” in the words of Steven Forde. Socrates takes a thumotic soul and arouses its latent eroticism, particularly “to get [Alcibiades] to care earnestly for his self-perfection.” The private, though still social, “peering into the soul of another” yields self-knowledge, which includes moderation or good order of “soul and body and the parts of the soul within itself.” Statesmanship, by analogy but also by contrast, “is the proper ordering of the things belonging to many.” Forde regards this apparent resolution as problematic, given “the questionable proofs of the soul” that are its foundation, and given the political

career of Alcibiades, whose less-than-Socratic eroticism fascinated then repelled the Athenian *demos*.

Thumos again figures in the *Laches*, the dialogue on courage. James H. Nichols, Jr., observes that Laches' "commonsense, political conception of courage . . . rests on preserving the opinion that ridicule and disgrace, above all for not fighting bravely for the city, are more terrible than the risk of death." Political courage thus differs profoundly from philosophic courage, which risks the city's antagonism by unflinchingly challenging opinion. Nonetheless, because "we humans are complex beings, compounded of soul and body, faced with varying situations in life," we need to know how to apply intellectual virtue. True courage requires both natural bravery and prudence; political courage, substituting venerated opinions for prudence, will not always suffice. Neither philosophic nor political, divination—the product of "anxious forethought"—will not suffice for either the philosopher or the statesman.

A discussion of prudence leads naturally to the topic of lying, one way of attempting to be prudent. Lying also relates to poetic myths. In his discussion of the *Lesser Hippias*, James Leake notes that "To regard lying as morally defensible or necessary to bring about the good, one must recognize that the good is of limited efficacy"—a recognition resisted by earnest youth of all ages—"not simply triumphant in human affairs or the cosmos." This knowledge of limits, an instance of prudence and of moderation, forms "a necessary part of the art of politics or ruling insofar as it enables one to deal with those who are incapable of listening to reason"—enemies and friends alike. In this philosophy needs to be politic.

Is beauty a kind of lie, or deception, and truth (like Socrates) ugly? It would be Epicurean to say so. One might read David R. Sweet's commentary on the *Greater Hippias* as a suggestion that Plato anticipates Epicurus to some degree. In the dialogue, the unnamed stranger, who is Socratic, distinguishes precise speech and knowledge from conventional speech and "knowing beautifully." "Hippias knows precisely how to speak beautifully"—and that is all he knows. The charm of beautiful things "acts as a deterrent to knowledge and prevents a man such as Hippias from seeing beneath the surfaces of things to the intelligible structure beneath." The dialogue thus serves as "a chastening supplement to the *Symposium*," which shows how beautiful things can lead the soul 'upward.'

Allan Bloom writes the collection's last commentary, thus framing a book to which so many of his former students have contributed. One of the funniest dialogues, the *Ion* presents the spectacle of an utterly conventional cosmopolitan; panhellenic opinion of antiquity, like 'global thought' today, may well guide itself by a rather low common denominator. Bloom describes *Ion* as book-bound; by questioning him, Socrates tests the claims made for authoritative books, specifically Homer's books, as worthy educators of the Greeks. Socrates tests "the Greek understanding of things, particularly of the gods." His

“divine possession” argument amounts to “a tale designed to appeal to Ion’s needs and wishes”; small wonder Shelley took it seriously. In fact poetry is an art, an intelligible activity concerned with intelligible subjects. Ion’s self-misunderstanding somewhat resembles that of political men; “he senses the vox dei in himself, but it is only the vox populi.” Like so many political men, he half knows this, manipulating the passions of his audience for gain. The people voice their fears and desires, especially with respect to their own futures. “Overcoming this concern with oneself” is philosophy’s precondition. Philosophy requires a concept of nature, permitting meaningful *general* speech. Philosophy permits the mind to see a cosmos or harmony, a kind of peace. Poetry, a veil for chaos or war, ultimately stops at the political level, the highest particularism.

Plato’s Socrates carefully distinguishes the city from the philosopher. Gain-as-moneymaking versus gain-as-learning; decent laws versus knowledge, wonder, and doubt; love of honor, nobility versus love of wisdom and the things useful to the quest for wisdom; citizen virtue versus questioning; politics versus self-perfection; political courage versus philosophic courage; poetic lies versus prudent lies; apparent beauty versus intelligibility; divine possession versus reason: Socrates explores these antinomies, defending philosophy while never forgetting the need for the city.