

Interpretation

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Book Reviews

Joseph Cropsey, *Plato's World: Man's Place in the Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), x + 227 pp., \$ 29.95.

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Joseph Cropsey begins *Plato's World* by observing, "There are at least three principles on which the dialogues of Plato . . . can be arranged to form a general scheme." First, there are the ancient tetralogies; second and more common, there are the many attempts to order the dialogues according to their supposed date of composition. Since the basis for the dating remains speculative and inconclusive, Cropsey himself employs a third principle of arrangement, internal evidence of the sequential order of some of the conversations.

Because of things said within the dialogues themselves, it is incontrovertible that the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias* relate discourses that took place in that order and consecutively. Their order is not conjectural. . . . In the present book, the guiding but not determining fact is that there is an unbroken dramatic sequence. . . . that arranges *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Cratylus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* in that order, a sequence that makes of them an evident entity and thus a true hermeneutic object. (Pp. ix-x)

Cropsey departs from the dramatic order by adding a study of the *Protagoras* as an introduction to the octet, because the teachings of the ancient sophist figure so prominently in other of the dialogues, especially the *Theaetetus*, and by omitting detailed consideration of the *Cratylus*, because he thinks the gap between word and thing is adequately addressed in the other works.

By characterizing his difference with other commentators as one of "principle" of arrangement or method, Cropsey radically understates the challenge his study poses to previous scholarship. For the last two centuries, students of Plato have tended to divide the dialogues, generally speaking, into three types or periods: the early elenctic or "Socratic" moral writings, "middle" dialogues like the *Republic* in which Plato puts forward his own "theory of ideas" in the mouth of Socrates, and "late" works including *Sophist* and *Statesman* in which Plato has non-Socratic philosophical spokesmen put forward critiques of the theory of ideas and offer instead what Plato had come to see was a superior understanding.¹ According to Cropsey, on the other hand, the dramatic links Plato explicitly drew between the "early" depictions of Socrates' trial, thought

by some to be more historical,² and the “late” non-Socratic *Sophist* and *Statesman* are not merely accidental or fortuitous. On the contrary, they signify Plato’s desire to have his readers view the different kinds of intellectual endeavor represented in these dialogues—Socratic philosophy, Protagorean sophistry, Parmenidean ontology—in conjunction. More specifically, Cropsey argues that the studies of incommensurability and/or irrationality in mathematics by Theaetetus and of the character of being and becoming by the Heraclitean Protagoras and the Parmenidean Eleatic Stranger provide the context, the grounds and reasons why Socratic philosophy constitutes the best response human beings can possibly make to a fundamentally unintelligible and indifferent, if not hostile world. According to Cropsey,

It is Socrates’ purpose . . . to teach the *ethos* of philosophy rather than its doctrines: unfailing perseverance that is capable of being strengthened by the goodness of the pursuit rather than defeated by the impossibility of consummating it in a world in which light is spread over darkness. The definition of the morality of philosophy will prove to have an importance that cannot be exaggerated, for it will disclose the moral order for man in a whole in which the gods and nature are indifferent and humanity seems abandoned to lawlessness. (P. 35)

The Plato Cropsey presents is thus rather modern:

The insight, thought to be original with Machiavelli, that man has everything to do for himself in a world where courage and caution are the true salvation, is available in any age and was indeed accessible to the time and mind of Plato. . . . (P. 35)

Cropsey’s reading of Plato differs in important ways from those published not only by other students of Leo Strauss but also by Strauss himself. For example, both Seth Benardete and Stanley Rosen have pointed out the dramatic connections among seven of the eight dialogues: *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*.³ But neither analyzes the connection between the “late” trilogy and the depiction of the trial and death of Socrates in any detail. In contrast to Cropsey both Benardete and Rosen tend to stress the difference between the “mathematical” approach represented by the Eleatic Stranger and the “moral” understanding of the “noble” exemplified by Socrates. Both tend to see the introduction of the Eleatic Stranger with his modified Parmenidean doctrine in the *Sophist* as a criticism of the emphatically non-doctrinaire Socrates, which criticism is later modified by the indications in the *Statesman* that the knowledge the Eleatic Stranger claims to possess is no more apt to be realized in practice than the rule of the philosopher-king Socrates calls for in the *Republic*.⁴

Cropsey’s overall reading of the eight-dialogue “Socratic valedictory” stands in even greater contrast to the interpretation of *Plato’s Trilogy* by Strauss’s friend and colleague, Jacob Klein. Cropsey maintains that the discovery of

incommensurability at the heart of mathematics and the myth of the *Statesman* express Plato's belief that the world is not fundamentally intelligible and so the reason that only philosophy, love of wisdom, and not the possession of knowledge itself, is possible for human beings. Klein, on the other hand, argues that the Eleatic Stranger's analysis of the coexistence of the five basic *eide* in the *Sophist* presents Plato's understanding of the character of the comprehensive intelligibility of the whole.⁵ In light of that fundamental disagreement, it seems ironic that, in apparent disagreement with Strauss, both Cropsey and Klein argue that the Eleatic Stranger's understanding of differentiated Being and the need for a study of the Precise Itself is compatible with the Socratic doctrine of the Idea of the Good.⁶

Cropsey's readings of the individual dialogues are as controversial as his overall thesis. The eight dialogues, as he relates them, develop the recognition on the part of Plato that human beings have been abandoned by the gods to their own devices, which prove in all cases to be inadequate.

Although he admits that Protagoras is bested by Socrates in debate, Cropsey presents the sophist and his teaching much more positively than Patrick Coby does in *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment* (who in this respect follows the transcript of the seminar given on the *Protagoras* at the University of Chicago by Strauss).⁷ In his myth Protagoras suggests, as will the Eleatic Stranger when he tells a similar myth in the *Statesman*, that human beings have to organize themselves into political communities, because they are not well provided for by nature. Also like the Eleatic Stranger, Protagoras thinks virtue has different aspects or parts. Socrates' argument that courage, like all the other virtues, consists ultimately in knowledge "depends heavily if not absolutely on the power of the noble . . . to outweigh death." But, Cropsey asks,

What if "noble" translates into civic reputation and the arguments that make death perhaps not an evil have an origin in the good of the city? . . . The art or science of comparative quantities [of pleasure and pain that Socrates seems to advocate] saves us only when the quantities to be compared can be known. (P. 24)

Human beings do not know the future, which is "the moral equivalent of *pi*, the symbol of the irrational in the universe" (p. 25). That is as much as to say that human beings will never have the knowledge requisite to make virtue entirely or completely rational. Cropsey thus concludes his consideration of the *Protagoras* by observing that "Socrates departs on the wings of a small myth" (p. 26).

Having argued that virtue consists in knowledge, Cropsey observes, Socrates turns in the *Theaetetus* to ask, What is knowledge? As all readers of the dialogue know, Socrates and the young geometer prove unable to formulate an adequate definition. But, Cropsey suggests, the aporetic dialogue is by no means without effect. "Theaetetus . . . will before our eyes drop his Pro-

tagorean definition of knowledge as perception and will spend his life elaborating the mystery of the irrational, a somehow Socratic” (p. 50). Where Benardete argues that the too docile young geometer hardly needs to be humbled, and Klein emphasizes his forgetfulness, Cropsey suggests that Theaetetus has been fundamentally improved.

Socrates explicitly concludes his conversation with Theaetetus to go to the porch of the king archon to respond to his indictment by Meletus. The conclusion of the *Theaetetus*, that we should learn, at least, to know that we do not know, might be taken to be a ground for piety. But, Cropsey suggests, the conversation Socrates has with Euthyphro indicates “the impoverishment and disorder of human life” which would result from a regime of literal-minded belief. The *Euthyphro* thus serves to link the trial of Socrates to the theme of the *Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman* trilogy. For, if the gods do not clearly communicate their will or wisdom to us, the question necessarily arises: To whom should human beings turn for guidance? To “the sages called sophists who make their own claims to a comprehensive and pragmatic human wisdom and to the skill of imparting it to who would learn”? To “the statesman . . . [who might] possess the art of tending us as we could have hoped the gods themselves would do”? Or to “the philosophers, whose rule can be seen in the ether of the *Republic* but has never been observed in any other element” (p. 68)?

The effort on the part of the Eleatic Stranger to lead Theaetetus to discern the difference between the sophist and the philosopher is instructive, Cropsey argues, about the character of Socrates, who listens silently. First, the Stranger makes clear, the choice between exposition and interrogation is merely a matter of form. He leads Theaetetus “through a series of diremptions, often fanciful, arbitrary, or tortured, toward a definition of sophist that has all the appearance of having been present to the Stranger’s mind as a conclusion from the beginning.” The contrast between his procedure and Socrates’ usual form of questioning a specific individual about his beliefs shows “if demonstration is necessary, that the ‘Socratic method’ is not simply inquiry by interrogation but belongs to a profound conception of the human being as intelligent wonderer whose intelligence as well as its cosmic object will always withhold something of itself from his understanding” (p. 72). We readers may be surprised to see the extent to which the Stranger’s definition of the sophist describes behavior usually associated with Socrates. Although the sophist is first characterized as a hunter of young men who sells speeches, and so looks very different from the Athenian who will claim in his *Apology* that he has never taught anyone, anything, and thus takes no money, the sophist is subsequently described as a refuter, who shows his interlocutors that they do not know what they think they do and also recognizes his own ignorance. “Since the premise of the entire discussion is the possibility or even the likelihood that the philosopher and sophist may be confused with one another,” Cropsey admonishes us, “we should not be surprised that the Stranger’s hunt for the sophist is not an exer-

cise in unrelieved vilipending” (p. 76). The difference between the sophist and the philosopher proves, as Hans Georg Gadamer, following Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1004b24, also argues, to be *prohairesis tou biou*, that is to say, moral rather than intellectual.⁸

The sophist’s traits reveal, in their negation, the nature of the philosopher. The latter is insatiable in his passion for *logos* and at the same time imperturbably serene in his *skepsis* for the whole. He is profoundly selfless and unassuming, passionate not for prevailing but for clarity, yet caring very much for the condition of his own soul. He cares for his city and for its youth, but he cares nothing for the wealth, power, and renown that are the city’s gifts. (P. 110)

In the ensuing conversation, the Eleatic Stranger defines the statesman as the human being possessing the knowledge requisite to care for the human herd. In order to specify the character of the requisite knowledge, he finds it necessary to disabuse the Young Socrates (and us readers) of the pride he (and we) tend to take in our rational faculties, whether they be understood to be a product of natural or divine dispensation. Describing the “herd” in terms of its externally visible characteristics relevant to preservation as “featherless bipeds,” the Stranger proceeds to indicate in his “myth” that human beings develop their rational and political capacities not so much by inclination or choice as from harsh necessity. They have no alternative but to develop the means of caring for themselves, because they are not provided for by nature or divinity. The kind of knowledge the statesman needs to preserve his people proves to be analogous to that the Stranger attributed to the philosopher in the *Sophist*; just as the dialectician must first separate and so purify the things into their various kinds and then recombine or weave them together into a whole, so the statesman must first separate out the different kinds of arts and inclinations or virtues necessary to preserve the city and then recombine them in the proper proportions. Where Rosen emphasizes the difference between this kind of prudential judgment and all other forms of knowledge, Cropsey sees the point of the dialogue to be the gap between this extraordinary wisdom and the “second-best” we have any reason to expect to be realized in practice, the rule of law on the basis of popular consent.

In a remark that reflects the somber perspective of the discourse as a whole, the Stranger admits that their search for the least burdensome form of government is marginal (*parergon*) (302B) to the project for defining the best polity, but that . . . it is probably the search for the least bad form that really drives their entire enterprise. The *Statesman* and the *Republic* are reciprocal complements. (P. 135)

Cropsey reads the *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* very much in terms of the Eleatic Stranger’s contention in the *Statesman* that, fearing the abusive rule of a law-less tyrant, most people will suspect anyone who raises

questions about prevailing practices and opinions in search of knowledge. They will, indeed, accuse him of undermining the rule of law and corrupting the young. Lacking knowledge themselves, the people cannot recognize such knowledge, were it to exist, in others; they have no alternative but to adhere to the opinions and practices that have proved to work best in practice, that is, to the traditions that become articulated as law, and to prosecute those who depart from them. Silently taking issue with Allan Bloom's reading of the *Republic*,⁹ Cropsey urges, "The *Apology* is not the key to the confrontation between philosophy and the city or between the citizen and the human being, because Athens is not simply 'the city,' it is a democracy. . . . The *Apology* can, however, be understood as illustrating that incommensurability between the philosopher and the many human beings that has already been pointed out in the *Statesman*." As Cropsey reminded his readers in his gloss on the *Protagoras*, the limitations of human knowledge (of the future) are very much associated with our mortality. Thus he also observes, "the *Apology* is increasingly a homily on death, indeed the proemium to the extended discourse on death that continues in *Crito* and *Phaedo*" (p. 145).

"The *Apology* of Socrates might well have been titled the indictment of the People," Cropsey observes. The philosopher's defense of his own activities consists in large part of an accusation of the people: they do not understand what and why he does what he does (i. e., they pretend to know what they do not know, that death is the greatest evil); like his accuser Meletus (the root of whose name means care) they do not truly concern themselves about the good of the souls of their fellow citizens; as judges, they do not live up to their own notions of right.

Reading Plato's *Apology* in light of Xenophon's, Strauss suggested that Socrates provoked the jury into condemning him with his *hubris*. According to Strauss, Socrates' claim that he deserves to be fed at public expense is particularly outrageous; if the Athenians are as corrupt as he claims, Socrates had surely not succeeded any better than the statesmen he regularly criticized—Perikles, Kimon, Miltiades, and Themistokles—in improving their character.¹⁰ Had Socrates been younger, he might have chosen exile and/or escaped to Crete in order to continue philosophizing.¹¹

Cropsey also observes that "Socrates considers most men to be his inferiors in some decisive respect." Nevertheless, Cropsey emphasizes, Socrates "has ever toiled for their good at the risk of his life." Why did he persist in what some might take to be an irrational endeavor? "If he is to be believed, it was philosophy and 'the god' that drove him." Strauss suggests that Socrates' concern for Athens was rooted primarily in a desire to maintain the conditions of his own philosophizing. At the center of his defense Socrates admits that he told the story of the Delphic oracle, even though he suspected his audience would think he was speaking ironically; if he told them the truth, that philoso-

phy is the only life worth living, Socrates thinks, they would have believed him even less (*SPPP*, p. 50).

Cropsey emphasizes Socrates' statesmanly care for his fellow citizens. Socrates' "'god' was a god known to no one but him," he admits; it was "a private deity whose only miracle was to inspire Socrates to appoint himself the meliorator of the people's souls, to assume the mantle of the true caretaking statesman" (p. 156). There is no way "to account for the extraordinary doings of so wise and healthy a man except on the premise that he was governed by an innate inclination toward right and good. . . . It is of utmost importance to recognize in this disposition what deserves to be called his nature, so that we may be reminded that nature sends the better angels of caring and nobility as well as the afflictions of cruelty and baseness" (pp. 156–57). As Cropsey sees it, Socrates' piety expresses

a respect for civil authority that he expects soon to extinguish his life. As the *Statesman* has foretold and *Crito* will confirm, Socrates is under the influence of an unfeigned if subdued patriotism that is born of the understanding silently subscribed by him in company with the Eleatic Stranger, that the human authority erected in political society is our nearest guarantee of prosperity in an uncaring milieu. It is our enduring misfortune that both the subjects and the agents of civil life are inferior in wisdom and goodness to the beings they would have to be if they were to replace the gods. (P. 160)

In the *Crito* Socrates thus presents arguments to convince an ordinary man, who cannot overcome the fear of death natural to most of us, that he and others should obey the law. Both in his *Apology* and in his final conversation, as recorded by Phaedo, Socrates also attempts to persuade those who have befriended him not to fear death by demonstrating his own fortitude in deed and telling them reassuring stories—"noble lies"—about the advantages of the life hereafter.

Some readers of *Plato's World* may be surprised by the evocation of Heideggerian themes—the temporal limitations of human knowledge, the centrality of the confrontation with death in the definition of human existence, and the importance of care—even though Heidegger himself is never mentioned by name. In his discussion of the *Sophist*, Cropsey points out, again like Heidegger, that "the difficulties . . . [of] solving the riddle of being will prove to be intractable because or so long as the impulse to speak as if being were itself an entity goes unsuppressed. . . . [W]e know Being through the things that are but cannot know it in itself; . . . yet we 'know' . . . that it must forever be present everywhere, always as a mystery" (pp. 90–91). Unlike Heidegger, Cropsey does not think either the question of Being or basic character of human existence was forgotten, beginning even in Plato's writings, to be recovered only in the twentieth century. As we have already seen, Cropsey thinks that there is

something quite “modern” about Plato, precisely because he gave expression to such enduring truths.

Cropsey’s reading of Plato raises questions not only about the distinction often drawn between the ancients and the moderns but also about the extent and character of the difference between reason and revelation. As Cropsey reads Plato, the ancient philosopher acknowledges the desire most, perhaps all, human beings have for the rule of an omniscient, caring deity. Finding no evidence of such in the cosmos we inhabit, Plato presents Socratic philosophy as the best possible, although decidedly less satisfactory way of life. Strauss draws a different, harder line between the Bible and Plato. “It has often been said that the philosopher who comes closest to the Bible is Plato,” he observes in “Jerusalem and Athens.” “Yet the differences between the Platonic and the biblical teaching are no less striking than the agreements” (*SPPP*, p. 166). According to Plato, there is a visible order in the heavens (and thus an intelligible order to be found in nature); according to the Bible, everything depends ultimately on the unfathomable Will of God. Cropsey takes the repeated references in the dialogues to the square root of two and the “myth” told by the Eleatic Stranger to indicate an admission on Plato’s part that the cosmos is neither wholly intelligible nor hospitable to human beings.¹² Strauss admits that the whole is not fully intelligible to us, but he gives a different reason for his conclusion—the incommensurability between mathematical and purposive intelligibility. This reader is not convinced that the discovery of incommensurable lines (or “irrational” numbers) will bear the weight Cropsey puts on it. Although neither the square root of two nor π can be expressed as whole numbers, i. e., reduced to multiples of a single common unit, they both indicate regularly occurring relations—between the side and hypotenuse of a square and/or the radius and circumference of a circle—which are intelligible. As the Eleatic Stranger suggests, the intelligibility of the whole consists in an understanding of the relation of its *heterogeneous* parts. Nor is this reader convinced that Cropsey is warranted in taking what is explicitly called a “myth” told by the Eleatic Stranger (and by Protagoras) to express Plato’s own view.

Nevertheless, if Cropsey leads Strauss’s many other students to reconsider the differences they tend to assume between the ancients and the moderns or reason and revelation, he will have performed a most valuable service. He has shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no single “Straussian” reading—of Plato or of almost anything else.

NOTES

1. E. g., David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). For a more complex account of the speculative dating, see Paul Friedlaender, *Plato*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), vol. 3, pp. 447–56.

2. Gregory Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, New York, 1971); "The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy," *Political Theory* 2 (1983): 495–516.

3. Cf. Seth Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xvi; Stanley Rosen, "Plato's Myth of the Reversed Cosmos," reprinted in *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 56. Why Benardete, Rosen, and Cropsey all choose to neglect the *Cratylus* remains a mystery to this reader. Martin Heidegger would suggest that this neglect might signal a failure to take sufficient account of the significance of Plato's discovery of the simultaneously revealing and concealing function of *logos*. Cf. *Platos Sophistes, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992).

4. Cf. Benardete, *Being*, pp. xvi–xx, III.149; Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Sophist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 8, 324; *Plato's Statesman: The Web of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 2–8.

5. "Aristotle states explicitly that Plato assumed *two* supreme sources of everything that is, the 'one' and the 'indeterminate dyad.' Just as the indeterminate pair has different names in Platonic dialogues—the 'Other,' the 'limitless,' the 'more as well as the less'—what is called the 'Same' in the *Sophist* is called the 'limit' in the *Philebus*, the 'One' in the *Parmenides*, the 'good' in the *Republic*, and, as we shall see, 'the precise itself' in the *Statesman*. It could probably also be called the 'Whole.' It is, we understand, of the utmost importance that in the *Sophist* the Stranger puts the 'Same' and 'the Other'—among the most comprehensive intelligibles, in addition to 'Being' as the eidetic *Two*. Nothing could be what it is if it were not the *same*; and on the other hand, there could not be any multiplicity of beings without 'the Other.' The 'Same' and 'the Other' are *both* indispensable for the understanding of what is. Like the vowels, they are both *bonds (desmoi)* which hold everything else together." Jacob Klein, *Plato's Trilogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 63. Klein indicates the Heideggerian roots of his reading when he goes on to observe, "It is the Stranger who, with the help of Theaetetus, is able to grasp Being and *both* ultimate sources that make Being cognizable. We have seen, however, that Theaetetus succumbs to forgetfulness, to *lethe*. The Stranger does not. What guides him is *a-letheia*, the unforgotten 'Truth.' It is the interplay of *lethe* and *a-letheia* that constitutes, playfully and seriously, the *drama* of the dialogue" (pp. 63–64).

6. Cf. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 39–40.

7. Patrick Coby, *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1987).

8. Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 99. If so, this reader would observe, the difference cannot be made manifest by the Eleatic Stranger, whose method explicitly abstracts, both in the *Sophist* 227b and *Statesman* 266d, from the difference between noble and base simply to point out similarities and differences.

9. "Interpretive Essay," *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 307.

10. "Plato's *Apology of Socrates and Crito*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 49.

11. *SPPP*, pp. 51, 55, 65; *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 2.

12. "Every intimation of the irrational and incommensurable that invades the constitution of the world looks back toward the geometry of Theaetetus and forward to the Age of Zeus" (*PW*, p. 105).