



Book Reviews

Holger Thesleff. *Platonic Patterns*. Las Vegas/Zurich/Athens: Parmenides Publishing, 2009. 626 pp.

This book brings together Holger Thesleff's major works on Plato, written over a period of several decades, and makes them more widely available. It consists of reprints of three books and four articles, together with a new introduction by the author and a comprehensive bibliography and index. Minor revisions have been made to ensure consistency and take note of the results of more recent scholarship.

Studies in the Styles of Plato (first published in 1967) discusses the use Plato makes of the various literary styles found in Greek prose of his time (colloquial style, rhetorical style, historical style and so on), together with one style which is distinctive of Plato (and was recognised as such in antiquity), the *onkos* style typical of his later works. Linguistic markers for each style are identified, and with their help Thesleff seeks to determine which styles Plato uses in each dialogue; these are related to the themes of the dialogues and the character of the speakers. Plato's use of various forms of presentation (question and reply, discussion, monologue, and mixtures of these) is also discussed.

Studies in Platonic Chronology (1982), perhaps Thesleff's best known work, challenges the consensus about Plato's development and the order of his works which was widespread at the time of writing (though as Thesleff points out, there was never as much consensus on points of detail as many scholars supposed). A new account of the order of composition of Plato's works is proposed, based primarily neither on linguistic details of the kind studied by stylometrists, nor on a theory about Plato's philosophical development, but on larger stylistic considerations, together with questions regarding the structure of the dialogues, and the likely audience to whom they are addressed.

Thesleff's proposed account is not in fact quite as radical as it might first appear, for he accepts that the widely recognised 'late' group of dialogues is indeed late. However, he rejects the distinction between early and middle dialogues (thus to some degree anticipating more recent developments); he holds, for instance, that the *Charmides* and *Lysis* are later than the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*. He also draws attention to the possibility that Plato made major revisions to some of his works, so that a single definite date cannot be assigned to them.

One of his most radical suggestions is that Plato worked on the *Republic* throughout his career, starting in the 390's with book I and the central political proposals (at first not presented in dialogue form), but not completing the work until late in his life.

Another striking proposal which Thesleff makes is that some of the works ascribed to Plato may be 'semi-authentic', collaborations between Plato and others in the Academy. Because of this he regards as uncertainly Platonic some works very generally accepted, such as the *Laches* and *Euthyphro*, as well as more widely disputed ones like the *Hippias Major* and *First Alcibiades* (though in the later *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model* he moderates this conclusion).

In *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model* (1999) Thesleff focuses more closely on Plato's thought rather than his manner of writing, and proposes that a certain pattern of thought—not a doctrine or theory—can be found running through all Plato's works; in this pattern of thought he contrasts two kinds of entity, attribute or activity which may be seen as occupying upper and lower levels; examples of these contrasts are body/soul, knowledge/opinion and divine/human. The contrasted entities are not to be seen as opposed to one another, as for instance good/evil or light/dark might be; rather, the lower level is dependent on the upper one and in some sense oriented towards it. This kind of contrast is to be found, not only in the positions advanced in the dialogues, but in the dialogue form itself, with leading/being led—the activities of the chief speaker and the respondent—being among the contrasted terms. Thesleff sees this contrast at work in Plato's discussions of Forms or Ideas, in the account of categories or basic concepts (e.g. same/different) found in some of the later works, and in the theory of first principles—the one and the unlimited dyad—asccribed to Plato by Aristotle.

The books are supplemented by four articles which develop some relevant points at greater length. 'Theaitetos and Theodoros' argues that Theaitetus' death may have taken place quite early in Plato's career, so that some of the arguments for a late date of the *Theaitetus* are undermined. 'The Early Version of Plato's *Republic*' puts forward the claim that the political proposals of the *Republic* were first presented early in Plato's career. 'Plato and his Public' discusses how the dialogues were presented, arguing that many more of the dialogues than is commonly recognised are of an 'esoteric' nature, intended for use within the Academy. Finally 'A Symptomatic Text Corruption' proposes that a speech in the *Gorgias* has been wrongly assigned, and considers the implications of this for the way in which the dialogues were first presented.

In what follows I will discuss first some points relating to Thesleff's views on the order of Plato's dialogues, and then some aspects of the 'two-level model'.

Thesleff is well-known as a critic of the widely accepted account of Plato's development, and now that the consensus in favour of that account has begun to break up, his ideas should receive a more favourable reception. His negative

arguments against the standard view are often effective; he rightly points out (pp. 165-6) that judgements about the order of the dialogues often come to be accepted without a clear grasp of the considerations on which they first rested, and so of the doubts that might be raised about them. He also notes that often an ordering is accepted, not because of any explicit argument, but because of the way the story is told, creating a kind of 'implicit chronology'. As he says (p. 166) 'Skepticism is on the whole justifiable, since almost any order of the dialogues can be "interpreted" to make some sort of sense.'

However, it is not clear that Thesleff's own account of the order of Plato's works manages to overcome this problem. He begins by proposing that dramatic dialogues are in general later than reported dialogues, as a dramatic dialogue requires a trained reader and audience and so could only be presented within the Academy. Among the reported dialogues he seeks to determine an order by telling a story of Plato's development, based not so much on considerations of philosophical doctrine as on Plato's interests and on the structure, characters and setting of the dialogues (pp. 265-73). He supplements this by a method of 'confrontation', making one-to-one comparisons between dialogues with similar themes in the hope of seeing which is earlier (often appealing to differing degrees of sophistication); but while the results of this do not contradict his overall story they are, as he admits, often inconclusive.

Considerations of this kind seem particularly problematic in trying to determine order of composition. Certainly, any method which can be used for this purpose is fallible. Stylometric criteria do not, as Leonard Brandwood has shown (*The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), give such a clear order as has often been supposed; and the stylometric differences which are present may sometimes be explained in terms of differences of subject matter and approach; the possibility of revision also makes it difficult to draw definite conclusions. Those who use philosophical content as a criterion often assume a linear development in Plato's thought, and some apparent philosophical differences between dialogues may in fact be explained in terms of differences of purpose. Yet it is not implausible that some features of Plato's style, of a kind that the writer does not consciously control, might develop in a systematic way, and that the views he wants to present might also change systematically over his career. Matters such as mode of presentation, structure, and selection of characters and settings, by contrast, are likely to depend very heavily on the author's purpose, and so there are special difficulties in using them to determine order.

Turning now to the 'two-level model', I agree with Thesleff that such a pattern of thought is indeed to be found in Plato's works; and the way in which he discerns it in various contexts is illuminating. However, I have two doubts about his approach. The first concerns how central this pattern is in Plato's thought, in comparison with other patterns. Certainly, as Thesleff accepts, Plato does sometimes

think in terms of polar opposites, rather than of the kind of asymmetric contrasts which characterise the two-level model. Sometimes, too, he thinks in terms of three levels, with one playing the part of an intermediate - love in the *Symposium*, for instance, or the soul in the *Timaeus*; again Thesleff recognises this. But these are treated as secondary: some uses of the three-level structure are 'rather tentative pushes into the realm of the physical world' (p. 412); polar opposites are 'not constitutive parts of Plato's philosophic views' (p. 428).

In particular it is notable that Thesleff claims that there are no polar opposites in the realm of Ideas (i.e. the most important evaluative Forms): yet of course there are apparent references to such Ideas, notably, in a crucial context, at *Republic* 475e-6a, where beautiful and ugly, just and unjust, etc. seem to be treated as on a footing. Thesleff regards this (p. 449) as an aberration from Plato's normal view, which sees polar opposites as relating primarily to the physical world. But given that both patterns of thought seem to recur, it is hard to know which, if either, should be seen as Plato's settled view and which as an aberration; it is very much a matter of emphasis, making it difficult to decide by argument.

Secondly, Thesleff emphasises that the 'two-level model' is a pattern of thinking rather than a doctrine or theory. This is certainly right; but it does not rule out there being doctrines or theories about specific pairs of entities which are conceived through the model; about the relation of Forms and things, for instance, or of soul and body. Thesleff seems sometimes to write as if the two-level model counted against the view that Plato had definite theories about the subjects covered by it; but he may have had a number of such theories, all of which manifested a common pattern that was not itself a theory. While such patterns are important, to emphasise them at the expense of theories may be deceptive, leading us to underestimate the definite contributions to philosophy which Plato made.

At the end of the work (pp. 505-6) Thesleff says 'It is a very remarkable fact that Plato's entire philosophy, in spite of its depth, its wealth and its many dimensions, does not on closer impaction seem to offer a single definite solution to any problem. All questions are somehow left open... Too often, over the centuries, have Plato's thought experiments been understood as his convictions or as revelations of profound truths.' Certainly there are difficulties in finding definite teachings in Plato, given that he wrote in dialogue form, and so does not commit himself in person to the views his speakers put forward; but this does not mean that he did not have definite convictions or that the words of his speakers cannot reflect them. The picture which Thesleff paints of a rather uncommitted Plato, moved by a vision *rather* than by specific doctrines, may be the result of the nature of his study rather than of what is actually present in Plato's work.

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