REVIEW ARTICLE — WAS PLATO A PLATONIST?

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How are we to read Plato? Readers normally need not bring this question to other figures in the history of philosophy or political thought. While great philosophers challenge with complexities of expression and ideas, demanding energy and acumen to understand them, in the case of Plato the problem of how to read him is of a different order. We never hear Plato speak in his own voice as the dialogue form surrounds him with a cloak of anonymity. Deepening the effect of the dialogue is Plato’s formidable skill as a literary writer and his sophisticated dramatic sense. He introduces complexity, ambiguity, and conflict into the philosophical fabric of the dialogues by incorporating particularities of his (sometimes historical) characters which philosophers would ordinarily seek to bypass. Additionally there is his fondness for irony. Consequently a reader trying to draw out philosophical truths can not do so directly and is thrown back on his own resources of reasoning. ‘Go figure’, as a current cliché puts it, is just what Plato enjoins us to do. A loose analogy might be drawn to the modern revolution in European painting when the viewer lost the visual certitude that she was looking at a landscape or a portrait. The drive towards non-figurative art pulled her inside the very process of painting and imposed a hermeneutical task previously not required. So Plato pulls us into thinking through the philosophical drama of his characters, and the dialectical arguments of the dialogues build resistance and opposition into our deliberation. But what assumptions about the composition of his corpus should guide us in the process of figuring it out?

In *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* Julia Annas assays this question with respect to Plato’s ethical thought, and turns to the Middle Platonists, with a little help from the Stoics, to get her bearings. She reviews the complex issues regarding Plato’s manner of presentation by embracing Arius Didymus’ rubric ‘Plato *poluphônós*’, Plato who is many-voiced, but not a Plato of many doctrines. This ancient unitarian vision of Plato, combined with the fact that for centuries after Plato ancient writers remained committed to eudaimonism and thus viewed Plato’s ethical ideas from the perspective of a shared tradition, convinces Annas that we have much to learn from the later Platonic tradition. The examination she undertakes is not an exercise in antiquarianism but is presented as a way of disengaging us from the developmentalist orthodoxy which guides how many read

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Plato. She argues that once we have grasped the details of ancient approaches to Platonic ethics which have been closed off by modern scholarship we will be sensitized to the refinement of philosophical issues within the tradition of eudaimonism from the time of Plato to that of the Stoics and beyond.

The modern orthodoxy from which Annas wants to disengage us tracks differences in content between dialogues as markers of chronological development. There are in fact few reliable markers for the chronology of Plato’s works, such as the priority of the Republic to the late Laws and the priority of the Theaetetus to the Sophist. Even the virtually unanimous assumption that the Apology was Plato’s first work has been challenged. A hazard of the developmental orthodoxy is that it begs questions about distinctions between Socratic and Platonic content, and about the significance of Socrates’ role in the dialogues. The high water mark of the developmental approach was Gregory Vlastos’ contention, based on rigorously argued readings of the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues (commonly called ‘early’), that he could discern ideas that were uniquely Socratic and not Platonic. However, the inability to reach any scholarly consensus about the detailed sequence of the dialogues within the broad categories of early, middle and late has been unsettling and orthodox developmentalism has come under increasing attack.

Annas is confident that were we to think away the developmentalist paradigm we would better sympathize with the ancient tradition of interpreting Plato. The consequence of such a feat would be that we could ignore the irksome Socratic problem with its historicist origins and questions of representation. We can also forego the compulsion to arrange the dialogues in a set order. Indeed, drawing on Albinus’ claim that Plato’s philosophy was like a circle capable of being entered at any point, Annas notes that the ancient Platonists supported no single order of the dialogues but rather entertained many orders determined by pedagogical interests.

Chapter 2 is directed to the relation of virtue to happiness. Traditionally the contrast between Socrates in Plato’s short aporetic works and his more sustained exposition of doctrine in the Republic especially has been explained as a shift from Plato’s concern with memorializing his teacher to his awareness of the incapacity of the elenchus to reach new truths; the next step was a shift to the positive doctrine of the Forms. Additionally, some have argued that when the aporetic dialogues are abandoned so too is the Socratic ethical position that virtue is sufficient for happiness. The Republic is then credited with Plato’s thesis that while virtue is necessary for happiness, it is no longer sufficient.

At this point Annas adduces testimony from Alcinous, author of a Handbook of Platonism written sometime during or after the first century BC. Alcinous assumes that all of Plato’s works contain but a single ethical position, a view which Annas privileges on the grounds of the enduring

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