

Critical Notice



Diverse Voyages

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This book brings together twenty papers written to honour the ninetieth birthday of Holger Thesleff: the editors insist that it is not a festschrift, though just how it differs from one is not wholly clear. The title honours both Thesleff's earlier life as a sailor, and the way in which he has constantly challenged traditional readings and led us to look at Plato in new ways. (The frontispiece gives a splendid view of the *Passat*, one of the last great historic sailing ships, on which he served as a young man.) The two principal editors both incorporate nautical themes into the titles of their papers, though sadly the other contributors, with one exception, do not take this up.

The topics of the papers are very various, though many of them follow Thesleff in challenging traditional approaches: as in Thesleff's own work, the questions addressed include those of doctrine, style and context. The order in which they are presented is rather confusing; the editors explain that it follows the chronology of Thesleff's career, arranging the papers in the same order as the works of Thesleff which inspired them, but as he has often returned to the same themes more than once, this produces a result which can seem arbitrary, with, for instance, two papers on the *Symposium* coming far apart. I will not follow the same order in discussing the papers.

Not surprisingly, in the light of Thesleff's most famous work, the topic of chronology plays a major part in the collection, and I will focus here on a few papers which deal with this theme, each in a different way criticising the traditional developmentalist reading of Plato.

Francisco J. Gonzalez takes the most extreme line, arguing that the study of Platonic chronology is quite generally inappropriate. Central to his paper is

a reading of the *Phaedrus*, where he finds the claims that the organic unity of a discourse requires it to be read as self-contained, rather than calling on the author's views expressed elsewhere; that different discourses which seem to conflict should be read perspectively, approaching different aspects of a topic; that our knowledge, as mortals, is in any case incomplete; that a speaker should adapt their discourse to the needs of the audience; and that writing cannot fully convey the truth. From this he concludes that we should reject the view, which he sees as underlying chronological readings, that Plato intended each dialogue to express his final and comprehensive view of the subject at issue, so that differences between the dialogues can be explained only by a change of view. Rather, we can see the dialogues as taking different perspectives on a subject and adapting themselves to different audiences and situations.

I have a number of worries about this argument. First, it is paradoxical on the one hand to affirm the importance of perspective and context, and on the other to take the *Phaedrus* as definitive for the interpretation of all Plato's dialogues. Next, it is wrong to assume that the only justification for a chronological study is the assumption that each dialogue expresses Plato's firm and settled view at the time it was written (and indeed, as the editors point out, this does not describe Thesleff's own interest in chronology); we might well study the dating and order of Plato's works precisely in order to find out about the contexts and audiences for which he wrote them. (The contexts and audiences found *within* the dialogues were created by Plato, so cannot by themselves give a full explanation of why he wrote as he did.) Finally, it is simply likely that Plato would, in a career of fifty years, sometimes have changed his views, and we cannot rule out the possibility that the dialogues reflect these changes; the way in which a philosopher's views changed in pursuit of the truth is surely a valuable object of study.

Michael Erler also criticises some developmentalist readings of Plato, in a way which has some parallels to Gonzalez's approach; he, too, draws attention to the importance of context and perspective, and refers to the *Phaedrus* in support of this. However, he differs from Gonzalez in emphasising intertextuality; Plato's dialogues are not to be read in a wholly self-contained way, but include allusions to his own earlier works (as also, of course, to other sources), which invite readers to compare and contrast passages in different works which share a theme. He allows that sometimes this may be done to draw attention to an actual change in view; but at other times the aim is rather to explore a different aspect of a topic or present a different perspective on it. He works this out in detail by discussing two pairs of passages. First, the discussions of false pleasures in the *Republic* (583b-585a) and the *Philebus* (43d-44d), where the former seems to dismiss them as illusions, while the latter treats them as real entities.