

David Ambuel

Turtles All the Way Down: On Plato's Theaetetus, a Commentary and Translation.

Pp. 315. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2015. ISBN: 978-3-89665-640-7.

In the last thirty years Plato's *Theaetetus* has received much attention both in monographs and in specialized articles. Ambuel's book is the latest addition to the growing scholarship on the dialogue, one that most resembles in format Burnyeat's magisterial study: a 200-page commentary is followed by the author's translation. A heavily selective bibliography and two indices complete the book.¹ This is a philosophical reading of the *Theaetetus* with little attention to its rich and arguably under-discussed literary elements. The gap between philosophical and literary approaches to the dialogue remains, sadly, unbridged.

The commentary is a straightforward run-through of the text from its dramatic setting (142a-151e) to the concluding exchange between Socrates and Theaetetus (210b-d). Ambuel picks up old and current debates on Protagoras' measure doctrine, Heraclitean flux, being and not-being, appearance and reality, the wax tablet, knowledge and opinion, parts and wholes, treating every segment of the dialogue and giving previous philosophical studies their due, even if only perfunctorily. Other Platonic dialogues often come in to illuminate the discussion, especially the *Republic*, with little consideration for the early/middle/late taxonomy, a refreshing approach to the tired issue of Plato's development. However, Ambuel's intertextual comparisons are not always apt or especially illuminating. It is unclear, for example, how a discussion of Forms of "negative values" (97), such as the Form of the Bad, which Ambuel anchors primarily in *Republic* v 475e-476a and secondarily in *Crito* 44d and *Statesman* 309c, can advance our understanding of the digression in *Theaetetus* 172c-177e. As in the rest of the dialogue, so in the digression there is no overt reference to the Forms, so any importation of them is at best speculative. Moreover, since, as Sedley acknowledges and Ambuel concedes, *Republic* v 475e-476a is virtually unique in accepting bad Forms, while *Republic* v 500b8-d1 seems to discount them, there is little secure evidence on which to found the intertextual metaphysics for which Ambuel argues. The digression contrasts the life of the orator with that of the philosopher, but the evils of the orator's life are "spoken of in the language of action" (100), a language we have no good reason to see as metaphysically inflected.

1 Burnyeat, M.F. 1990. *The Theaetetus of Plato, with a translation of Plato's Theaetetus by M.J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

The book's major weakness is its lack of a distinctive argumentative thread, which makes it hard to tell it apart from the existing commentaries on the *Theaetetus*. It reads like an eclectic hybrid of Burnyeat (1990) and Polansky (1992) without their erudition or sensitivity to issues that are not strictly philosophical, with a touch of Chappell (2004), and a whiff of Stern (2008) who is curiously absent from the bibliography.² Admittedly, a commentary on a text should consult pre-existing scholarship, synthesize its findings, and reap the benefits of accumulated wisdom. Yet it should also bring something new to the table, an angle, approach or focal point that gives readers a new perspective and allows them to look at the material afresh. There is nothing of the sort here. There are, however, various idiosyncratic remarks, the odd and exotic comment that can make the book enjoyable, such as the reference to Nagasena in the Buddhist text *Milindapanha* who thought that perhaps there is no essence of the chariot since it cannot be ascertained by going through its constitutive parts (194), or the bit about the Indian Gargi Vachaknavi who realized that knowledge cannot be had by dissecting the phenomena, but requires "form, which is manifest in the patterns, order, and relations that make sense out of phenomena" (206).

The translation is vibrant. Ambuel is a nuanced reader of Greek, and has a good ear for rhythm and tone. Although Levett's translation, as revised by Burnyeat, remains to my mind the golden standard, Ambuel's rendition might appeal to those seeking a contemporary and more relaxed—both verbally and conceptually—idiom. An example will illustrate the point. Compare Levett/Burnyeat's literal, musical, and elegant "We appear to be behaving like a base-born fighting-cock, jumping away off the theory, and crowing before we have the victory over it" to Ambuel's energetic but simpler "We seem to me to be crowing victory before winning the match like a shabby gamecock, if we are about to turn away from the argument" (Φαινόμεθά μοι ἀλεκτρυόνος ἀγεννοῦς δίκην πρὶν νενικηχέναι ἀποπηδήσαντες ἀπὸ τοῦ λόγου ἄδειν, 164c5). "To me" is clunky, "shabby gamecock" is a wonderfully tight rendering of ἀλεκτρυόνος ἀγεννοῦς, but "turning away" is too anemic to convey the physical energy of ἀποπηδήσαντες. One gets the picture, and it is a good one, but it is not a particularly inspired or textured copy of the original.

Ambuel has written a conscientious commentary on one of the most fertile Platonic dialogues that introduces readers to its philosophical complexities

2 Polansky, R. 1992. *Philosophy and knowledge: a commentary on Plato's Theaetetus*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; Chappell, T. 2004. *Reading Plato's Theaetetus*. Akademia Verlag: Sankt Augustin; Stern, P. 2008. *Knowledge and Politics in Plato's Theaetetus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.