

Critical Notices



The Good, the Unity of Life, and the Unity of Plato's Philosophy

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That every theory requires its own application (*'praxis'*) and every praxis its own theory should no longer be controversial. This also applies to philosophy and to its history, despite the fact that not all philosophers are concerned with the practical application of their philosophical tenets. But this concern should be kept separate from the question whether a philosopher treats theoretical and practical philosophy as separate issues. If the author of this monograph speaks of the necessity of a 'rehabilitation of practical philosophy' in Plato, it is unclear what he means by that. He seems to think that Plato needs rehabilitation in that respect, because Aristotelian rather than Platonic ethics stand in the limelight of practical philosophy nowadays. But the preference for Aristotelian ethics is not due to the fact that Aristotle has turned ethics into an independent subject, with practical reason as its specific capacity and with principles of its own, while Plato's dialogues discuss theoretical, metaphysical, epistemological, logical and ethical questions side by side. The reason is, rather, that Plato's ethics is much harder to reconstruct as a unitary doctrine. This is not just due to the diversity of his dialogues' form and content. Plato never speaks in his own voice and it is hard to say in how far he agrees with any of his speakers, even if the speaker is Socrates. And the dialogues are not disquisitions that lead to clear results. This makes it hard to interpret the different metaphysical and epistemological explanations imported into some of his dialogues. Though Aristotle's explanations are often not as transparent and explicit as one could wish either, he throughout speaks in his own voice. To

quite some degree, this accounts for the fact that contemporary 'virtue ethicists' take Aristotle, rather than Plato, as their model.

There is no need, however, to 'rehabilitate' Plato by attributing to him a separation between theory and praxis that is similar to that in Aristotle. Already the *Gorgias* distinguishes between two forms of life, the life of the practitioner of rhetoric and politics and the life of philosophy (*Grg.* 500b-501d). These two forms of lives are famously portrayed in the *Theaetetus*. If Plato usually presupposes the unity of theory and practice, it is because he regards the metaphysical basis of the Forms as indispensable for decisions and actions. Thus, in the *Republic*, he assigns to *sophia/phronêsis*, not only the recognition of the Form of the Good and the method of dialectic, but also good council, *euboulia*. Theory and practice is not a topic that Plato neglects, even if he does not separate them.

The monograph's main aim is to show that the message of Plato's *Philebus* is the depiction of a life that has more unity than is commonly assumed, a life that is based on a certain order of the soul, with a 'uniform virtue'. This order presupposes self-perception and the knowledge of one's own needs and possibilities (p. 24). The author regards this as a point that has not received the attention it deserves in the secondary literature and so aims to make up for that omission.

Unfortunately, in the pursuit of this question the author seems to confuse two things that should better be kept separate. The unity of the order of life that is recommended in the *Philebus* is one thing; the unity of the dialogue's discussion is quite another. The open form of dialogical investigations allows Plato to let the discussion take sudden turns, to bring in unexpected questions and to reach conclusions that are not, or not fully, argued for. It is, therefore, the interpreter's task to point out these features rather than gloss over them and make them disappear. Perhaps, Plato wants us to be perplexed rather than 'unperplexed' by the way Socrates' dream or waking-dream (*Phlb.* 20b) lets him drop the request for a dialectical investigation of the kind that he has just explained as indispensable (19b). And perhaps we are to be perplexed by the way Socrates pulls out of his hat the fourfold classification of all there is, in order to determine the class of pleasure and knowledge, respectively (23b). And perhaps we are to be perplexed by the final ranking of the goods at the end of the dialogue that is hard to explain as it stands. Wonder, is after all, the beginning of philosophy. The *Philebus* is full of such wonders; it remains a nut that is hard to crack.

A concern for the problems contained in the dialogue shows neither disrespect nor ignorance; it rather enhances the search for solutions. Attempts in the secondary literature to put them in full relief should be taken up in a