

### Michael LaFargue

*Rational Spirituality and Divine Virtue in Plato: A Modern Interpretation and Philosophical Defense of Platonism.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, 273pp., ISBN 978-1-43846-025-3.

### Erik Nis Ostenfeld

*Human Wisdom: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy.* Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2016, 382 pp., ISBN 978-3-89665-694-0.

These two recent books are alike in addressing wisdom in the Platonic tradition, but do so in different ways. Michael LaFargue's *Rational Spirituality and Divine Virtue in Plato* presents a "critical reconstruction" of Platonic ethics that can be applied to character development today. He starts from the perspective that philosophy was a way of life for Plato and other ancient philosophers, and that one of its central concerns was the cultivation of character by inquiry into and pursuit of virtue ideals. Therefore, he discounts the metaphysical interpretation of the Forms and focuses on Virtue-Forms as ideal models on which to build character. The essence of Platonic ethics, he argues, is to refine understanding of the Virtue-Forms through critical reasoning. He states that a recurring reason for the metaphysical interpretation and other distortions is an ahistorical perspective common to many philosophers.

LaFargue presents his thesis repeatedly, but at progressively deeper levels that explore details and interconnections. An introductory chapter defines his goals and provides a chapter by chapter outline of this method; the following chapter (ch. 1) is a systematic overview of the rational foundations for Platonic "otherworldly" (i.e., ideal) spirituality. The topic of chapter 2 is the objectivity of the good, which is based on the ethical perception of uncontroversial and clear-cut examples, which nevertheless may differ among people, cultures, and times. He also explores parallels in the ethical writings of Moore, Husserl, Heidegger, and Rorty.

Chapter 3 addresses interpretive issues. First, LaFargue argues that Plato wrote dialogues because he wanted to engage the reader in a Socratic inquiry into the Value-Forms, and that he didn't intend to present a systematic doctrine. Second, progress in the natural and human sciences leads most contemporary philosophers to doubt the possibility of identifying a universal, culture-independent set of virtues. Therefore, LaFargue advocates a "critical reconstruction" of Plato's ideas. This entails developing a model of Socratic method and reducing ethical claims to just those supported by this method. He argues that this approach preserves the foundations for a robust virtue-centered Platonism, but it is a "critical pluralist" theory in that it steers a course

between universal ideal virtues and skeptical relativism. Therefore individuals are invited to engage in their own Socratic inquiries to arrive at ethical ideals based on their own clear and distinct ethical perceptions.

Chapter 4 expands several of these themes. First, LaFargue contrasts the virtue ethics of Plato and of his own critical reconstruction with more common contemporary ethical notions, which relate virtue to behavior and neglect character. Second, following Moore and Wittgenstein, he extends ethics to include ultimate questions, and in particular, that which is “admirable.” Finally he argues that Platonic philosophy is better treated as a worldview (à la Dilthey) than as a metaphysics, and that this leaves a robust Platonism capable of dealing with ethical issues in a contemporary context.

Chapter 5 explains the practicalities of this critical reconstruction of the Socratic method as illustrated by the *Laches* inquiry into courage. Fundamentally it is an inductive process organized around conjectures and refutations. It is based on clear and distinct ethical perceptions (which may, nevertheless differ among individuals, cultures, and times), which support both conjectures regarding the essences of virtues, but also potential counter-examples (refutations) of them. LaFargue supports his theses with a close reading of the *Republic's* middle books, which focus on Socratic analysis of the Virtue-Forms.

Chapter 6 focuses on the relation of abstract Virtue-Forms to concrete particulars and how we can know the Forms. He argues for a correspondence between *doxa* and *aisthêsis*, on the one hand, and *epistêmê* and *noêsis*, on the other. The former are characteristic of most people, who are concrete-minded, while the latter characterize the ideal Platonist philosopher. LaFargue draws a parallel between Plato's interest in concrete sensory perceptions (the finger that is both long and short) and contradictory concrete ethical perceptions (actions that are a mixture of good and bad). The chapter is capped with an excursus on the meaning of *doxa* in the context of the virtue discussions in Book 5.

Chapter 7 continues a defense of an ethical as opposed to metaphysical reading of the Virtue-Forms. The true Platonic philosopher ascends from the “seemingness” (*doxa*) of concrete ethical judgments to the “real being” (*ontos on*) of abstract Virtue-Forms. In this way the Platonic philosopher becomes spiritual and even divine. As examples he discusses ethical interpretations of the allegory of the cave and of Diotima's ascent in the *Symposium*.

In chapter 8 LaFargue presents several examples of his critically reconstructed Socratic inquiry. Since it does not depend on a particular set of virtues, but rather involves an internal critique and analysis of any chosen virtue (critical pluralism), it can be applied to contemporary issues. Therefore he