
This book contains 29 essays on Plato, edited by Hugh Benson. All essays have the same format: about fifteen pages in length, very few or no footnotes, and a selective bibliography. At the end there is a full index of names and subjects; there is no index of Platonic passages. Knowledge of Greek is not supposed: all Greek words are presented in transliteration and accompanied by an English translation. The orientation of the book is fully Anglosaxon: all contributors are (or were) employed at United States or Great Britain universities. This orientation extends to the bibliographies to the essays: apart from text editions of classical authors by non-English editors, I have counted about a dozen titles in French, German or Italian. This might create the wrong impression that the interpretation of Plato is a wholly Anglosaxon affair; it also makes one suspicious that the intended readership is not supposed to be familiar with other languages.

The title of the book is a trifle misleading, but this is remedied in the editor’s preface. Benson states (p. xiii) that “the focus has been philosophy—not history or philology”, as was only to be expected in a volume of the series *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*. Accordingly, there are no essays on Plato’s styles, on the chronology of the dialogues or on the transmission of the text.

Apart from the explicit focus on philosophy, Benson formulates three more editorial principles (pp. xii-xiii). The approach of the Platonic corpus is topic-oriented; each contributor was given the liberty to choose between focusing on one or two dialogues and including texts from a large number of dialogues. By the same token, the contributors were free to propagate their own positions in the debate on developmentalism and unitarism in Plato’s thinking. These are wise choices, both because it would have been flatly impossible to compose a team of competent scholars sharing the same view and because the character of Plato’s works resists a uniform approach.—Different opinions on other matters are found as well. For instance, Nails treats the Seventh Letter as an authentic document (ch. 1), whereas Sedley (p. 221) states that “[t]he authenticity of this letter has often been doubted, on good grounds”. In such cases, too, the variety of positions is both inevitable and salutary.

Finally, the editor has asked his contributors “to compose their essays in a way accessible to the beginner or non-scholar and yet in a way that also advances the scholarly discussion”. The contributors have complied with this request with various degrees of success. Given the enormous variety of opinions on any aspect of

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1) There are incidental slips, as at p. 56, where we find *dialegô* instead of *dialegomai*. 

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Plato's philosophy, it would obviously have been impossible to present a full state of the art within the space allotted to each contributor. Some essays discuss a selected number of opinions, adding a personal evaluation by the author himself: a good instance of this method is ch. 8, “Socratic Ignorance”, by Gareth Matthews. Others give a sketchy exposition of the matter at stake, and go on to develop a full theory of their own: see for instance ch. 2, “Interpreting Plato”, by Christopher Rowe. Others, again, present their own views right from the start, like Terry Penner in ch. 12, “The Forms and the Sciences in Socrates and Plato”. To the beginner, this variety of approaches may be bewildering. In all cases, however, the reader is offered suggestions for further reading.

In some essays the treatment of the subject is so complicated that I can hardly imagine that it will be understood by a beginner. For instance, I must confess that it took me considerable effort to fully understand ch. 6, “Platonic Definition and Forms”, by R. Dancy; and a beginner will have insurmountable problems with formalized schema’s as “(SR) w = df abc → (… w ↔ … abc—)” (p. 73). Elsewhere, one gets the impression that the author simply had too much to say to make the essay completely intelligible. This is the case in the final chapter by Sarah Ahbel-Rappe, “Plato’s Influence on Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Philosophy”, in which the author shows a supreme command of this fascinating subject, but presupposes too much fore-knowledge in the reader. On the other hand, there are also crystal-clear essays, such as ch. 19, “The Platonic Soul”, by Fred Miller, and ch. 28, “Plato and Hellenistic Philosophy”, by A.A. Long.

In order to enhance the unity of the work, there are many cross-references to other essays, probably added by the editor. These cross-references are not always equally relevant: for instance, at p. 442 the reference to the chapter on Platonic religion will contribute little to elucidate the question of “how different Augustine’s conception of grace is from the Neoplatonist reliance on the power of the gods to elevate the soul beyond its own boundaries”.

Here follows a brief analysis of the essays. In ch. 1, “The Life of Plato of Athens”, Debra Nails treats the extant documents, including the disputed Seventh Letter (see above), as trustworthy sources for Plato’s life. I was surprised to see the year 424/3 mentioned as the year of Plato’s birth (p. 1 and elsewhere): Nails does not adduce her source for this unconventional date.—In ch. 2, “Interpreting Plato”, Christopher Rowe deals with the developmental and unitarian interpretations of Plato; he argues that Plato, while remaining a Socratic throughout his career, gradually acknowledged the irrational element in the human soul.—In ch. 3, “The Socratic Problem”, William Prior sketches the irreconcilable conflict between Socrates-the-midwife, who knows nothing, and Socrates-the-Silenus, who hides his treasures behind a mask of irony: from Plato’s works we simply cannot say what doctrines the historical Socrates actually held.