Book Notes

Socrates and Plato

Alex Long
School of Classics, University of St Andrews, Swallowgate, Butts Wynd,
St Andrews, Fife KY16 9AL. UK
aglio@st-andrews.ac.uk

1 Individual Works

The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter announces one part of its conclusion in the title: the Seventh Letter is not genuine. Some will find the other part more unsettling: the Letter is not even a reliable guide to Plato’s life and philosophy. If so, we cannot dodge the question of authenticity by saying that the Letter was written, if not by Plato himself, then at least by someone who knew about his life and understood his thought. The authors, Myles Burnyeat and the late Michael Frede, explicitly target this ‘evasive manoeuvre’, as Frede calls it. On the contrary, they argue, the Letter is incompatible with Platonic theology and the political theory of the Laws. Frede’s notes have been edited by Dominic Scott, with the assistance of Carol Atack and several scholars present at the Oxford seminars of 2001 where Frede and Burnyeat first presented their arguments. The part of the volume based on Frede’s notes is, at times, difficult reading. Some of the editorial endnotes provide not merely references but an essential explanation of Frede’s meaning or argument. Frede provides a survey of epistolary writing in order to show how surprising it would be for this letter to be genuine; as Scott points out in his introduction, this does not prove inauthenticity, but it succeeds in shifting the burden of proof to defenders of authenticity. Frede then argues that the Letter’s insistence on the need for

philosopher-rulers cannot have been written by someone who wrote, or understood and endorsed, the political programme of the Laws, which works out in detail a substitute for rule by philosophers. Burnyeat finds the author guilty of impiety, by Platonic standards, in speaking of a malign deity. (I found no discussion of Laws 896e, where the Athenian visitor at least raises the possibility of a cosmic soul responsible for evil.) Burnyeat's second charge is of philosophical incompetence. According to Burnyeat, the Letter contains a one-premise argument, whose conclusion is that definitions cannot show the essence of things, and whose premise is that names are given by convention and can be replaced or even swapped. Burnyeat objects that the conventionality of names has no bearing on the ability of definitions to display essences. On this understanding, the argument seems impossible to defend, but it is debatable whether the conclusion of the argument is this specific point about definition and essence. The author makes the vaguer point that definitions are not ‘sufficiently stable’, and this could be interpreted in various ways. The final part of the book is Burnyeat's irreverent account of the function and literary genre of the Letter: a tragedy in prose. The point of calling the Letter a tragedy is, I think, to distinguish it from history, and thus to put further distance between it and the historical Plato. Perhaps this discussion of genre should have said more about the range and diversity of ancient historiography. For one thing, we find suggestions of divine intervention in Herodotus, as in the Letter, and so there are at least the beginnings of a case for calling the Letter not a tragedy but a piece of Herodotean, or if you like un-Thucydidean, historiography. All the same, the book poses a powerful challenge to the ‘evasive manoeuvre’, and it should encourage new research into the relationship between the Letter and the Laws.

A new study of the Philebus explores what the dialogue suggests about the relationship between theory and practice. Giménez Salinas argues that Plato’s ‘late’ ethics takes a distinctive view of the theory-practice relationship. One of the many contrasts he draws is between the practical application of dialectic in the Philebus and the political application of philosophy in the central books of the Republic. The book explores the practical orientation of reason, as Plato’s Socrates conceives of it, and argues that the Philebus distinguishes between two kinds of dialectic—one aimed at philosophical understanding of Forms, the other applied or (in a different formulation) engaging in dialogue with opinions and hypotheses. The conclusion compares the dialogue’s view

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