Recovering Plato in (and against) the Continental Tradition


In the introduction to his latest book, Drew Hyland makes a decisive advance in overturning what has been a sad irony in studies of Platonic philosophy over the past century, namely, that the dialogues, which unfold within and through the production of rich and suggestive images, are customarily read with a striking lack of imagination. That is, the dialogues are approached as if they were treatises bearing this or that Platonic doctrine, which must be shorn of their literary attachments for serious analysis of argumentative content. Questioning Platonism emerges as a remedy for this interpretive condition by challenging scholars to acknowledge and think through the philosophical implications of Plato’s choice of dialogical format. Where Plato could have easily written treatises like others before him, Hyland reminds us, he chose instead to portray philosophical conversations in more or less specific times and places, beginning often from everyday circumstances, involving individuals of various ages, moral character, and intellectual power. Hyland argues that treating these dramatic aspects of the dialogues as incidental to what is explicitly said by the interlocutors therein amounts to reading them precisely as a form of philosophical expression that Plato rejects, and rejects for reasons necessitated by his own conception of what philosophy is. Moreover, the age-old practice of identifying the dominant philosophical view within each dialogue as reflecting Plato’s own theory is only a further consequence of this fundamentally misguided interpretive strategy. If we add to this fact the observation that the dialogues frequently conclude in aporia, what we predominantly find in the secondary literature is a way of reading these texts that manages to ignore their literary form and their conclusion in favor of what Plato, who never properly says anything himself therein, supposedly says.

It is by directing us to these considerations, among others, with skill and remarkable facility that Hyland makes his case for a tenable conception of the dialogues as both imitations of and invitations to philosophy. In essence, Plato’s texts are not to be seen as aspiring to a theoretical
position of abstract universality, but are aimed more at provoking us to philosophical comportment through mimetic depictions of philosophical inquiry. Thus, the “teachings” of Plato are for Hyland less philosophical assertions than “a presentation of what the fundamental questions are... [and furthermore] of a stance of questioning by which one might live one’s life” (6). Conceiving of the dialogues in this manner, and with sensitivity to their status as dramas, opens up avenues for new and more rigorous interpretations of Plato’s work, avenues that are only recently being cleared by Plato scholars emerging primarily from Continental schools of thought.

The introduction of Questioning Platonism comprises, on its own, an invaluable resource for beginning and advanced students of Platonic philosophy. However, this book is not, in the end, a book about Plato. Rather, Hyland raises this set of sober interpretive considerations at the outset in order to speak to a problem within Continental philosophy itself. And here, we must confront another sad irony. For it is in large part thanks to the groundbreaking work of thinkers whom we would classify as “Continental”—especially those within the lineage of phenomenology—that we are now in a position to approach Plato with new eyes and with an attentiveness to aspects of his writings that have long been overlooked or taken for granted. Yet when it comes to interpreting Plato’s works themselves, Continentalists have tended to settle for the canonical view of the dialogues as merely containers for Platonic doctrine. As Hyland puts it: “The very thinkers who should exhibit the most sensitivity to the literary dimensions of Plato’s work have too often fallen back on the analytic principles that in other venues they would strongly reject and thus have found in the dialogues only or primarily that pile of doctrines that we now know as ‘Platonism’” (166). Hyland’s book reveals the extent to which Continental philosophers have failed to bring their strategies of reading Plato into line with their assumptions about the nature of philosophy. In this task, there is at the same time a challenge to current Continentalists to rethink their stance toward Plato, and to achieve that interpretive consistency that their philosophical progenitors did not, for one reason or another, live up to.

The philosophers chosen by Hyland to this end are Heidegger, Derrida, Irigaray, Cavarero, and Gadamer, and the more or less self-contained chapters of Questioning Platonism correspond to each of these figures. Overall, Hyland’s analyses display a depth of understanding, as well as sympathy and respect, for the important philosophical projects