
This short introductory survey is by the author previously of translations of Aristotle’s De Anima and Rhetoric. The booklet is remarkable, given its nature and scope, for boldly advancing an unorthodox, challenging, and quite plausible set of theses about the Platonic dialogues. Works discussed are Ap., Cri., La., Ly., Chrm., Hp.Ma., Euthphr., Ion, Prt., Men., Grg., Euthd., Phd., R., Smp. and Phdr.; the chapters on these are preceded by others on the sophists, Socrates, and the life of Plato.

Lawson-Tancred proposes that Plato cannot properly be distinguished from the sophists, to whose rhetorical innovations in prose writing he is one of the foremost contributors (viii, 19, 93, cf. 79-80). Moreover the dialogues are not written to present or defend any particular philosophical positions; rather Plato’s aim is just the rhetorical promotion of philosophising as such. In defence of this interpretive posture it is argued that the theory of forms in the middle period dialogues is a ‘dummy theory’, an intellectualised version of elements common to many contemporary mystery religions, presented to satisfy the philosophical non-initiate’s desire for some doctrinal content to latch onto, but not essential to Plato’s philosophical aims in those works (67-68, cf. 33).

The historical contextualisation is commendable here, and in the intelligent argument regarding the Apology that there could be no expectation in Athenian culture and readership that Plato would there portray Socrates in a slavishly literal manner (31, cf. 38-40). Nevertheless, the author chooses to characterise that philosophising which really concerns Plato with the anachronistic question ‘What makes decisions and actions of individuals and communities right rather than wrong?’ (22, cf. 26). There is nothing about how to live well, or the care of the soul. Tancred-Lawson’s question, like modern philosophy generally, lacks a genuinely practical intention.

All the same the book should be praised for the care taken to state for novice readers the orthodox alternative to its own positions. The author writes well in covering so much ground, and providing as much
argumentative justification of his interpretive case as he does in ninety odd pages. Yet the more than occasional recondite vocabulary and foreign clichés may go over the head of the intended readership, and there is just too little space in such a volume to deal with potential objections from defenders of the consensus view, which cannot help the inexperienced to see how to make a reasoned judgment on the issue, once it has been raised.

Doubts could be expressed about several specific, and inevitably under-justified interpretive claims, and a few reports of particular contents of dialogues are just plain wrong. But such imperfections count for little in comparison with the breath of fresh air (from such a quarter) in sentences like 'It seems extraordinary that this model (the “ideal” city of Republic IV) has ever been taken seriously as a contribution to political philosophy and that its author has been construed as so intending it’ (75). This and the account of the tripartite soul are parodic criticisms of the presumptions of political science and psychology to encroach on philosophical matters.

A more serious interpretive defect concerns Lawson-Tancred’s treatment of the first two ‘waves’ of criticism Socrates thereupon faces in Book V. ‘Since the issues of family and property are not integral to the account of morality, Plato feels free to make serious proposals of permanent importance’ (76). This suggestion is quite arbitrary, importantly wrong, and in any case contradictory, when, on the author’s account, there is no serious conception of the ideal city here to which such proposals can apply. Again, it is precisely these proposals which remind one of Aristophanes’ Ekklesiazousai, to the resemblance to which the author appeals in arguing that in the Republic the political science is not meant seriously (75).

Possibly unknown to Lawson-Tancred, his main interpretive theses have long been promoted by students of Leo Strauss as central to the intelligent reading of Plato. Strauss, though, is an anathema to the English-speaking scholarly establishment in ancient philosophy. It is primarily his contention that philosophers like Plato write as much to conceal, as to reveal their thought, along with the principled impenetrability of Strauss’s own writing, which has generated antagonism and intolerance. But without the distinction between concealed philosophy and surface rhetoric, the aim of Plato’s texts, read under Lawson-Tancred’s interpretive principles, quite naturally reduces to the
promotion of whatever the reader already happens to think philosophy is (cf. his anachronistic question above), or even further, to the promotion of mere rhetoric itself. Thus Lawson-Tancred eventually slips into asserting that according to the *Phaedrus* ‘rhetoric is indispensible to philosophy’ (90), rather than the other way around.

To make sense, then, of the book’s interpretive principles would require some small emendations. It would not be philosophising that the dialogues promote rhetorically, but the life of philosophy and the value of philosophers; the dialogues would communicate philosophical content, at least indirectly about things a philosopher needs to be aware of (these things have to do with one’s own and others’ souls). At all events the ‘theory of forms’ is not a dummy theory because it is not a theory, but just a representation of the glimmerings of philosophical intelligence, that there are inherently intelligible realities, which it would be extraordinarily useful to know, although it is practically impossible for any human being to do so.

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