
Most readers of Plato have probably gone through a period of bewilderment, if not exasperation, when faced with such arguments as are found in the *Charmides* or *Republic* I, which appear to prove that the subject under discussion is impossible to define, or useless, or both. Particularly puzzling is the apparently unargued assumption that the various virtues are forms of art or knowledge, an assumption which then seems to fall to the ground when parallels are drawn with the mundane 'arts' of everyday life — what is to be made of this? Professor Sprague's new book draws together a number of such passages, which abound in the early dialogues, and puts them in their context as steps on the way to the mature doctrine of the 'philosopher-king'. The book's subtitle ('a study of the theoretical background') indicates what is made clear in the preface, that this is not an ordinary work of political theory, but a consideration of Plato's ruler as the possessor of an art or science.

To help clarify the problems involved, Professor Sprague has evolved a handful of more or less technical terms. Most important is the distinction that she draws between 'first-order' arts (those favourites of Socrates such as cobbling, farming or medicine), which have an identifiable product, and 'second-order' arts (including most of the interesting ones), which appear not to have one. These expressions are more of a shorthand than a rigidly imposed terminology, and they certainly help to show where Plato's difficulties arise. Other terms (including some familiar from the author's earlier books) are explained as they occur. With these aids she attacks the *Ion* and then important sections of the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*. The important thing about the *Ion* is that the rhapsode's art turns out to be no art at all in the ordinary sense, mainly because it has no demonstrable product or special field of activity (yet significantly *Ion* is trying to put his art above ordinary arts in the position of a second-order art). Similar situations arise in the *Protagoras*, where the sophist's art appears at first to have no content (though Protagoras later claims to produce good citizens), and in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates has great difficulty bringing Gorgias to say what the subject matter of his art is. In both these dialogues there are hints that might be pursued; Protagoras might be asked 'good at what?' while Gorgias' rhetorical art, in claiming justice as its subject matter, seems to be usurping the field of another art. The next two chapters deal with cases where virtues or arts that Plato clearly approves of seem to come under a similar general condemnation of second-order arts. In the *Charmides* temperance, defined as a science of sciences, becomes something of a paradigm for a
second-order art; it occupies a position 'above' other arts and it appears to fail for lack of a useful product (i.e. because it is treated as a first-order art). Predictably, the 'kingly art' of the Euthydemus suffers a similar fate. ('Plato has ... contrived the failure of this argument with great care.' p.51) But by now there are hints of a movement towards a single supreme science, the science of good and evil in the Laches and Charmides, paralleled by the search for the 'first friend' in the Lysis (Professor Sprague lays less stress on the teleological aspect of the latter than I would). In both Lysis and Euthydemus there comes a regress which can ultimately be terminated only by the Form of the Good, the knowledge of which will enable its possessor to direct other arts which he does not himself possess (so he, rather than the doctor, will know whether it is better for the patient to live or to die).

And so to the Republic. The arguments of Book I are skilfully tabulated to show Plato pointing out both the differences between justice and other arts and its similarities with them (though a second-order art it is still an art). Then Professor Sprague shows how in the following books the Philosopher-King emerges as the possessor of a second-order art of justice, to which wisdom is assimilated. This wisdom is of course knowledge of the Good, which is the latest version of the knowledge of good and evil that was of such importance in the Charmides.

But Plato's description of the ruler as 'technician' does not end with the Republic, and it is only proper that Professor Sprague's last chapter should be on the Statesman. She sees this dialogue as completing the pattern of Plato's earlier works and finally giving an answer to the question of what the statesman makes. The answer is good men, and with great appropriateness she concludes with a quotation from the end of the Meno, where Socrates describes the true statesman as one 'who can create another like himself'. This is a clear demonstration of the unity both of Plato's basic ideas on the subject of ruling and of Professor Sprague's treatment of it (for to produce good men was Plato's fundamental aim, throughout his life).

A compressed summary like this can give little idea of the excellences to be encountered along the way, particularly in the detailed and lucid discussions of a number of difficult passages. This is an illuminating book and deserves to be widely read. It is beautiful to look at and handle, and a model of production. Misprints are very few (conceivably 'kinship' for 'kingship' on p.102 might mislead), and the only thing to regret is the price; although publishers can no longer be expected to subsidise classical books it is a pity that a volume like this is likely to be found only rarely outside libraries.

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