and as a warning that Plato’s rejection of art in the Republic is not to be taken shallowly, or confined within the limits of that work; this is a book to be read.

Elizabeth Duke


In this account of Plato’s moral doctrines down to the Republic, Irwin aims not to reconstruct the totality of these doctrines, but to set aside the more colourful metaphysical, political and religious views and to examine selected moral views in an isolation as antiseptic as possible (so it seems), with the purpose of discovering the general principles behind them and considering whether they constitute a philosophically defensible ethical position. His hope is that ‘someone who reads the dialogues and is persuaded by my account of them will see what issues Plato raises, and what kind of arguments are needed to decide for or against him’ (p.4).

After an introductory survey we are offered a modified version of the standard account of the ethical background from Homer to the Sophists. Chapter 3 is devoted to Socrates’ method and moral theory. Socrates regards virtue as a craft the product of which is a determinate, non-moral end, happiness, and virtue’s only value is that it is instrumental in achieving this end. The sufficiency of virtue for this purpose is secured by desire, which always has one’s own good as its ultimate object. Socrates’ hitherto vague talk of the final good is said in the next chapter to be replaced by the hedonism of the Protagoras, which is to be taken as Socrates’ own view, pleasure providing an appropriate product for the craft of living.

Chapters 5 and 6, dealing with the Gorgias and the middle dialogues, discuss Plato’s new interests. Noteworthy here is the way in which Irwin re-interprets: Recollection is wonderfully reduced to ‘someone reasons from his present beliefs to an answer which seemed beyond him’, with no ante-natal source of present beliefs (p.139). The flux which Plato sees in sensible things is said to be change not in a thing’s self, but only in its aspect as compared with other things, and so no instability in the physical world is implied. The doctrine of separated Forms, although it is admitted Plato meant more by it, is reduced to the claim that forms of properties like justice are not referable to a set of sensible properties. If separation is kept to this minimal meaning, then ‘we will set aside some of Plato’s moral
beliefs, but we will retain the beliefs he can fairly claim to have supported by argument; and it is worthwhile to see what these are (p.155).

Chapter 7 gives an account of Plato’s new theory as presented in the Republic. The weakness of some of Socrates’ arguments against Thrasymachus is taken to be Plato’s exposure of the inadequacy of the craft analogy for virtue, which is now dropped. Henceforward Plato recognizes that the good cannot be reduced to agreed non-moral properties, and that virtue must be a component of it, not instrumental in producing it. Socrates’ denial of incontinence is rejected in Rep. 4, where Plato is taken to recognize that there are desires which are not good-dependent. A major problem of the Republic is to see why a man who has a well-organized, just soul in Plato’s sense of justice, should be interested in the welfare of others. Irwin spends some time on this problem, and, criticizing Plato’s own solution which fails through the emphasis which is put on the contemplative ideal, finds a better answer with reference to the creative aspect of desire in the Symposium (a notion which might reasonably be thought to belong to that area of Platonism which elsewhere he is so ready to prune). The treatment of the ascent in the Symposium, as a rational process whereby the agent alters his conception of the final good by reasonable steps without abandoning the stages already passed through, although again detached from Plato’s metaphysics, is attractive (p.253).

In a final chapter there is an illuminating critique of Plato’s eudaemonism from deontological standpoints, and the conclusion stated is that Plato’s position retains its interest for anyone who cares about moral theory. It is clear that, because of the items of standard Platonism like the immortality of the soul which are toned down or dismissed, this work falls at best only just within the limits of what could count as an exposition of Plato. Yet it would be a pity if more traditional Platonists undervalued it for that reason. Irwin’s concentration and pruning have the effect of making principles stand out sharply behind doctrines, and of forcing the reader to question the coherence of the theories. These are presented in a clear and challenging manner, as is the attempt to see Plato’s theory as a response to defects in that of Socrates.

It is regrettable that, while there is no shortage of references to the text, these support the argument less well than they might. Many are misprints, e.g. Rep. 577e 1-3 is indexed and discussed as 572e 1-3; or do not make the point claimed, e.g. La. 192d 7-9 is quoted on p.49 to support the conclusion that endurance is not courage, whereas it refers only to foolish endurance; or are drawn from contexts which are ignored, as when we are referred to Lys. 219c 1-d5 and 220a 6-b5 to support the principle ‘LG. If x and y are goods, and x contributes to y, x is not good in itself’ (p.85): but there is no sign that Plato wants such a principle (which in fact refers to what is philon, not to what is good) to have a role in his philosophy beyond the negative
one of the immediate context. Finally, many references exhibit a precision in line numbering which is almost comical, one of the nicest being Hipp. Min. 375d 7-e3, quoted on p.137, which stops half-way through an either-or account. In chapter 3 especially there are far too many of these unhelpful references, which give a misleading impression of absolute fidelity to a text which is in fact treated with considerable freedom.

Although no previous knowledge of Plato is assumed, this is not a beginner’s book. Themes which recur frequently are abbreviated e.g. CA stands for the analogy between virtue and craft knowledge. There are full notes and a thorough system of paragraph numbering.

M. Dyson


The subject of this monograph is, broadly speaking, archaeological. However the artefacts which it describes are especially close to the blood and sinews of Roman history. Like the Greeks and Etruscans before them, the Latin peoples evolved a complex civilisation whose social, bureaucratic and economic life was dependent on written communications in the form of letters and contracts. As T.F.T. Plucknett has stated with regard to the High Middle Ages, the particular authority of a deed lies in the personal seal attached to it: ‘The seal, in fact, is the essence of the deed and not mere corroborative detail’.1 Thus the rich and powerful citizen took great pains to ensure that his signet-device was both unique and easy to recognise. By the first century B.C. skilled Greek artists were designing masterpieces of glyptic art for Roman patrons. The hard stones used, cornelian, onyx, garnet, amethyst etc., had considerable decorative value and were generally cut to be set in finger-rings.

We are fortunate to possess a considerable number of intaglios cut for members of the late Republican aristocracy and the Augustan court, including several from the hand of the great Dioskourides who produced Augustus’s own signet, and these have been fully studied by Dr M.L. Vollenweider.2 Most Roman gems which survive, however, belonged to ordinary people and are far less well cut. Their interest lies in the range of 1. T.F.T. Plucknett, ‘Deeds and Seals’, Trans Royal Historical Society fourth series XXXII, 1950, pp.141-151 esp. p.150.