Reviews


Christopher Gill’s introduction to the English translation of Pradeau’s *Plato and the City* (French original 1997) argues for its value as a ‘point of access to the unified and systematic reading of Plato that is characteristic of much contemporary French scholarship’ (xi-xii). Pradeau himself explicitly identifies his allegiance, in terms of English language scholarship, with a Unitarian rather than a developmental approach to the dialogues (7 n.4 and cf. n.5), but this is slightly misleading. In fact he not only presupposes a fairly standard chronology, but more importantly, his account of Plato’s political thought only makes sense in terms of this chronology.

There is a movement from early dialogues in which ‘Socrates never asks his interlocutors what the city is, what the nature of the constitution is, or from what kind of activity or knowledge politics might derive’ (36-7; see ch.1 passim), to the *Republic* (ch.2), in which the city is conceived for the first time, as systematically thereafter, in terms of unity and the civic functions required for that; to the *Statesman* (ch.3), where the knowledge of the ruler is first depicted as a technical skill (‘technique’, passim) for effecting unity, to which law is assimilated (in Pradeau’s view, still informed in each instance by a particular area of expertise: see 104-5 on 300b-c); and thereafter the *Timaeus-Critias* (ch.4), wherein Plato’s conception of the sphere of law’s expertise is expanded to encompass the management of everything bodily subject to the city; and finally the *Laws* (ch.5), for which Pradeau, like Cornford before him, thinks Plato abandoned the *Critias*, and in which his vision of law as the comprehensive technique of government extending to every facet of life is worked out in exhaustive detail.

What makes this Unitarian, despite the developments, shifts and reconceptualisations, is just that Plato throughout pursues the principle
that all politics ought to be carried out systematically by means of thought about the nature and perfection of the city (2, 5-6). As a result he is a systematic thinker of a stripe not seen again until Hobbes and Spinoza, who also treat social life systematically as the determinative context and final object to which all inquiry ultimately tends (168).

Nothing in this account leads one to disagree with Aristotle that, in Pradeau’s own words (146 n.184), ‘the unity of the city is an irritating obsession of Plato’s doctrine’ (Politics II.2). Is that requirement supposed to follow inevitably from the very programme to subordinate all politics to the unifying systematicity of thought? Or is it meant to be explained by Plato’s experiences of civic disunity as a witness to contemporary Athenian history (see esp. 13 [1])? The extended interpretation of Menexenus as covert historical criticism, taking up most of ch.1 (14-35), argues for the latter (see 30-33). If so, we might be left with the kind of intellectual-biographical diagnosis of an unpalatable philosophical mistake familiar to an older generation of developmentalist scholars.

A different first chapter might have resulted in a different book. The Menexenus is an odd place to start, when for instance Gorgias, Crito, the Apology and Protagoras and other such works cry out for extended political analysis. And if the former is ripe ground for finding ironic political significance, why are not these latter, despite Pradeau’s assertion of ‘a “silence” about politics in the early dialogues’ (360), not to mention the repeatedly elaborated conception of a city ruled by knowledge in Charmides (171d-172a, 172d, 173a-d, 174b-175a; cf. 161e-162a, Alcibiades I 127b-d)? Again, the relevant passages from Euthydemus are only introduced briefly here (38-41), and their implications not applied until Pradeau turns to the Statesman in ch.3 (82-5). If the political conceptions of all these dialogues which Pradeau accepts as earlier than the Republic were considered together, a different story might well have to be told about the latter in ch.2. Callipolis might turn out to be not so much the first evidence of Plato’s irritating obsession than, as Ferrari conceives it in City and Soul in Plato’s Republic, a correction for those who disdain politics, and perhaps more profoundly a purge for the ambitions of those whose response to contemporary political disunity was less philosophical than Plato’s. In any case it would begin to look, for better or worse, a lot like (in part at
least) a systematic extrapolation of political ideas that Socrates is seen appealing to dialectically in a number of the aporetic dialogues mentioned.

But putting aside the difficult question of covert significance, another way of getting at the central weakness of this book is in terms of the relation between theory and praxis. For Pradeau, this is summed up in the conception of a philosophically informed political technique, which turns out in the end to be the art of lawmaking. But Plato did not make the laws of any real city: Magnesia is as imaginary as Callipolis. Every such dialogue, viewed as thought about the nature and perfection of the city, is just theory, even when it reflects on the past, on the difference between the ideal and the practicable, the bodily jurisdiction of law, or the regulation of the most particular details of life. So is Plato’s politics entirely theoretical? What then of the appeal to technique? Pradeau ultimately fails to indicate how the dialogues are meant to be related to the world.

I suspect this is connected with, and can be diagnosed in terms of, his tendency to ignore the critical distinction repeatedly made in various ways throughout the dialogues between opinion and knowledge. For Pradeau, after page 4 (see esp. [2] where just that distinction is well spelt out), it is regularly elided (not to say contradicted) by use of the terms like ‘thought’ (e.g. immediately at 4-5 [3]). Plato’s own political philosophy is referred in terms of ‘hypothesis’, ‘decision’, ‘conviction’ (loc. cit.). If this is not knowledge, but just opinion, then it is (merely) a hypothesis about ‘a political technique or science’ (p.5, [4]), and not itself the basis of action—there can hardly be here a recommendation to apply directly to the real world a technique which is merely the object of hypothesis, not knowledge. As Pradeau immediately then says (loc.cit., my emphasis),

But all that should really matter are the object and nature of that knowledge. The object of politics is the unity of the city; and the knowledge that is suited to that object is philosophy.

Yet in the very next paragraph this reduces to, ‘Plato wants to entrust the foundation and government of the city solely to thought.’ By page 8 this has modulated further into Plato’s ‘political doctrine’.
Either such thought by the reader is meant to lead to a knowledge Plato has to share, and he is right, or he thought he was and is mistaken, or by knowledge Plato means nothing other than an opinion that he wishes to persuade the reader to adopt (albeit reflectively) and ultimately act upon as if it were knowledge, or he does not claim knowledge, but contributes to, or stimulates a tradition of political ‘thought’ which is meant someday, in some terms, to reach some truth or other, only after which some practical action or other should begin in whatever way ultimately turns out to be appropriate. Pradeau neither seems willing to embrace any of these, nor to offer a clear alternative. He seems to be yet another reader who is trapped within the dramatic world(s) of the dialogues and so does not recognise the question as to how they are related to our world, in other words, what they mean (again: the preliminary question of the way the dialogues signify).

Ferrari, by contrast, in *City and Soul in Plato’s Republic*, is well aware of this problem. He understands, for instance, that the question how Glaucon and Adeimantus, Socrates’ main interlocutors, are characterised is important enough a determinant upon the meaning of that dialogue to devote the bulk of his first chapter to it. He argues, contrary for instance to the estimation of Leo Strauss and his successors, that the brothers are treated as political quietists, aristocrats whose private enjoyment of their own self-disciplined refinement consoles them, in Athenian political circumstances adverse to the view, most clearly articulated by Isocrates *To Nicocles*, that the best activity for a man who rules himself is to rule others (88-90). (This explicitly raises the question of the relation of the individual to the city, the most general form of the problem as to how theory relates to practice that Pradeau’s appeal to ‘technique’ fails to get to grips with.)

In brief, according to Ferrari, Socrates teaches the two brothers that as an activity self-rule is no more intrinsically enjoyable than political rule, given the transcendent blessedness of philosophising (33), and yet political rule is just as necessary, albeit self-rule is so by nature while political rule only so by law, at least in Callipolis. (This of course leads to the question as to what might be so by circumstance in other cities: see 108 with 520b; cf. 101.) Nevertheless the distasteful business of regulating and allowing for non-philosophical citizens (just as for ambitions and desires within oneself) is the opportunity for the ‘greatest
human achievement’ (107, my emphasis, cf. 497a). By contrast, Plato’s writing of the Republic, is, in Ferrari’s words, only the ‘most beautiful’ (loc. cit., cf. 108). Thus (again, with some use of and departure from Strauss: cf. 117-8) he even indicates a conception of Plato’s answer to this central political question in terms commensurable with the way it ought to have arisen for Pradeau.

This amounts to an explicit rejection of Isocrates’ answer to the underlying question referred to above, and by extension to both Bernard Williams’ and Jonathan Lear’s interpretations of the implications of the analogy between city and soul in the dialogue (see chs.2-3). With reference to the latter, Ferrari argues on textual grounds that only in the specific cases, respectively, of Callipolis and the philosophical soul, and the tyrannical city and soul, will the moral characteristics of the ruler of the city be those of the corresponding soul type (chs.3-4).

Moreover even the philosopher-king in Callipolis is not inspired primarily by his own condition of soul as a model for his rule, but by the Forms, contrary to Isocrates’ conception of rule as the ‘exteriorisation’ of the ruler’s soul (101-2). This latter only happens in the case of a tyrannical personality, seeking to subordinate everything both within and without himself to his dominant desire, the inverse of Isocrates’ ‘self-rule’ (94-100, cf. 88-9). On Ferrari’s argument (for better or worse), if there is no general principle that a type of government is the expression of the ruler’s type of soul, just rule is not an immediately desirable expression of a just soul. On the contrary, as a victim of his own lust, the tyrant too exemplifies Socrates’ law that the motivation for rule, where it occurs, is the response to a necessity, albeit, Ferrari argues, potentially productive of a good.

Ultimately, I suspect, it is obliviousness to the relevance of the dynamics of such motivation (whether Ferrari’s account of them is adequate or not), for an overall account of what Plato means by suggesting the desirability of certain political possibilities, that undermines the value of Pradeau’s book. The assumption that these are (for Plato, at least), simply desirable, as expressions of a common underlying ‘good idea’, stimulates the rush to elide the distinction between knowledge and opinion, superimposing the impression that the
aim of all such ‘thought’ is (vaguely, at some ultimate point) positive political action.

Ferrari’s book consists in revised lectures delivered at the University of Macerata in 1999, and in lieu of a comprehensive scholarly apparatus he presents at the end of each chapter a two or three page essay on ‘Sources and Scholarly Contexts’. The volume does include a bibliography of works referred to, and an index locorum, and is in other respects beautifully presented. The translation of Pradeau, which contains a bibliography and a combined index, treats scholarship in a more traditional style, but unfortunately the English version is in some places just a little stilted and suffers from quite a number of editing errors, a few prominent examples of which I was eventually moved to record: nomina (for nomima, 102, 108), a quotation attributed in the text to Bertrand (107), but in n.132 to Lisi, and at 134 n.159 a reference to ‘Netsche-Hentsche’ but in the bibliography (173, cf. 135n.162, 147 n.177) ‘Nesche’ and ‘Hentsche-Nesche’. On the front cover of the paperback there is an arresting reproduction of Robert Rauschenberg’s work ‘Mother of God’.

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