
This short book at first strikes the reader as motivated primarily historically, aiming to account for the evolution of interpretations of Plato’s philosophy over the past two centuries (with some reference to earlier views), often in terms of contemporary political and social attitudes and circumstances. It discusses no Platonic texts in detail, and is more concerned with influences in general modern intellectual culture than developments within expert scholarship. Contemporary philosophers (such as prominently Nietzsche) are discussed, but there is little in the way of detailed analysis or criticism.

One resulting significant silence concerns the twentieth-century ‘dismemberment’ of the Platonic corpus within analytically inspired scholarship, expressed in the predominant focus upon individual arguments and purported phases in Plato’s development. There is no mention, for instance, of Gilbert Ryle, who (despite his mistaken sympathies for Plato’s ‘philosophy of language’) was in effect, paradoxically, such a powerful motor of this mid-century tendency to reduce the perceptible relevance of Socrates and Plato for contemporary English-speaking academic philosophy. Still lacking today is an account of how the historicism introduced into philosophy by Hegel, and promulgated in the study of ancient thinkers by German scholars such as Zeller and Jaeger, once adopted by the Anglo-American mainstream, for so long reduced the philosophical challenge of studying Plato and Aristotle to the level of determining their intellectual biographies. It is against this unspoken background that Lane reveals that, nevertheless, among twentieth-century Germans themselves Plato was all along recognised as profoundly relevant to modern philosophy, whatever they in fact made of him. One marginalised English exception, whom Lane treats with the respect she deserves, is Iris Murdoch (79, 86-8).

Lane’s orientation has other points of reference. Miles Burnyeat gives her the lead (ix) for reviving an interest in nineteenth-century English Platonists, who were not so fussy about the details of Plato’s doctrines, but incorporated his ‘idealism’ in their defences of high culture and (classical)
education (e.g., 100-3; cf. with further refs. Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics Old and New*, Ithaca NY 1999, 78-9 with ns.19-20). Ultimately, Lane concludes with Burnyeat, the relevance of Plato is just that he teaches us to think for ourselves (138). The problem of the content of Plato's, and our own, thinking has (apparently) been resolved by the recognition that the *Republic*'s political proposals are no blueprint for action. In ethics, correspondingly, the problem of foundations (first principles) has (somehow) been overcome by the Murdochean recognition of the objectivity of the good (88, 94, 96). This signals Lane's other point of reference—the eventual assimilation into analytical philosophy, with Richard Rorty, of the Germanic, philosophically more challenging, version of what the English politely called the 'is-ought' distinction (that is, Nietzsche's and Heidegger's attacks on metaphysics). As it turns out, there is a philosophical intention beneath Lane's historiography.

*Plato's Progeny* is organised as three self-standing essays, on interpretations respectively of Socrates, Platonic metaphysically-based ethics, and Platonic political theory, sandwiched between a brief introduction and brief conclusion. Discussing Socrates, Lane distinguishes between simplistic modern appropriations of the meaning of his confrontation with the city of Athens and historicist interpretation which sees less immediate contemporary relevance. She concludes sensibly enough that his political significance cannot be segregated from the question of his ethical and religious standpoint (49-50), but remains agnostic concerning the 'historical' Socrates (51).

The chapter on ethics and metaphysics is constructed around a summary of the anti-foundationalist attack (57-70), and a defence of Platonism in terms of immanent forms and 'aspirational' ethics (71-96). Nietzsche's own theme of 'self-fashioning' moral 'creativity' is borrowed to hint at a sanitary conception of Platonic virtue ethics (88-92), but how this fits with the doctrine of recollection and value objectivity is at best a guess. Again, Lane's appeal to 'moral effort' (92-6) does not look promising without further elaboration. The tentative philosophical defence here is threaded through an animated presentation of many and various historical positions re-assembled to illustrate the question.
Chapter 4 on interpretations of Plato’s politics focuses on the variety of appropriations and rejections of Plato by both the political left and right during the period considered. Lane explains concisely Popper’s centrality in the English-speaking world: he criticised not merely Plato’s proposed means, but his ‘holistic’ aims (129). ‘Holistic’ is the key word in Lane’s own account of Platonic political philosophy. It is used, with approbation, of reflection on the first principles and final ends of communal human life (131-3, cf. 130 with n.56 for the term). She comes close to engaging in this task herself with her Burnyeatian appeal to the need to consider how Plato’s moral principles might be realised in a democratic context. But she doesn’t stop to consider whether the latter requirement is merely historically contingent for us today, or more generally obligatory—in other words she doesn’t confront Plato’s principled criticism of libertarianism, backing off with the assumption that here at least he must have been wrong, which is perhaps thought to follow from the fact that Plato’s views have been misappropriated by modern tyrants and would-be tyrants (132-4).

Other weaknesses, perhaps excusable in this volume, might include the very simplistic summaries of some modern philosophers’ positions, for instance Heidegger’s (61-64) and Leo Strauss’s (104-6, cf. 150 n.15). Other important twentieth-century interpreters of Plato, such as Gadamer, are all but ignored (cf. 152 n.42). This is connected with the question of the target audience: who is the ‘general reader’ (vii)?

The cover photograph of the Third Reich Wehrmacht, on which Plato’s bust has been superimposed, suggests the book is primarily directed to those Anglophone ‘intellectuals’ indirectly influenced by Popper’s spirited attack on Platonic politics as totalitarian, here answered by the retreat to theory. It is then ironic, of course, that the more penetrating challenge to Plato is from Nietzsche, himself much more prominently (and perhaps plausibly) appropriated by Nazi ideology, and from Heidegger, who was at the very least a passing Nazi sympathiser. The military motif thus also indicates that the book responds to the German attack on Plato (but for metaphysical theory, not his praxis). Yet, problematically, Lane’s ‘immanentist’ response is at best an obfuscation, at worst a capitulation, with regard to the status and nature of the forms; while, paradoxically, the liberal appropriation of Nietzsche as the source of ‘post-modernism’
provides Plato's modern anti-foundationalist enemies with the most popular and least complicated justification of democracy available (value subjectivism).

Lane is to be applauded, nevertheless, for her illuminating accounts of half-forgotten but historically influential debates and schools of Plato-interpretation, for instance in nineteenth century England (e.g. 100-8), and Weimar Germany (121-8), and her large range of references to relevant sources for a huge tradition. Her emphasis on the value of Platonic political reflection is also timely, despite her avoidance of the question of its relation to practice. Perhaps, as is asserted in Plato's Politicus (302e-303b), democracy is merely a half-way house between the best and worst forms of state, neither the alternative to, nor again the necessary precondition for, the best state in which to live. Democracy might then be a minimum practical condition for philosophy to thrive, given the contribution 'holistic' political reflection could make in certain cases to practical wisdom.

Dougal Blyth
University of Auckland