The *Cambridge Companion to Plato**
Review Article

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> There is no author to whom my father thought himself more indebted for his own mental culture than Plato, or whom he more frequently recommended to young students. I can bear similar testimony in regard to myself. The Socratic method, of which the Platonic dialogues are the chief example, is unsurpassed as a discipline for correcting the errors, and clearing up the confusions incident to the *intellectus sibi permissus*... I have felt ever since that the title of Platonist belongs by far better right to those who have been nourished in, and have endeavoured to practise, Plato's mode of investigation, than to those who are distinguished only by the adoption of certain dogmatical conclusions, drawn mostly from the least intelligible of his works, and which the character of his mind and writings makes it uncertain whether he himself regarded as anything more than poetic fancies, or philosophic conjectures.[1]

Of the many remarkable aspects of John Stuart Mill's recollection of studying Plato in his early teens, one point in particular might strike a late twentieth-century reader as symptomatic of a strangely distant intellectual world. Mill's words reflect a context in which a proto-utilitarian like his father could ascribe his mental culture to Plato, and in which the (self-)description of 'Platonist' still had both currency and significance. The nature of that significance, however, was something inherently disputable, as Mill's remarks also betray. This state of affairs had a long ancestry. The possibility of Platonism is as old, if not as Plato himself (for that might beg the question), at least as his earliest successors. It had been frequently redefined, in forms exhibiting the tension between method and dogma mentioned by Mill, from the early Academy to the nineteenth century. Yet, notwithstanding the flourishes of late Victorian Platonism that were still to occur when Mill was writing, this whole tradition now appears a thing of the past. Modernity, it seems, has finally put paid to Platonism (outside mathematics, at any rate). It is safe to say

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that most readers of the new *Cambridge Companion to Plato* are unlikely to fear – still less hope – that any of its contributors will claim 'the title of Platonist' for themselves.

But is the transformation actually so radical or complete? Has Platonism, however construed, really ceased to be an intellectual option, or has it acquired new varieties which simply lack the acknowledged name? After all, is not Mill's own brand of Socratic Platonism, focused as it is on a critical 'mode of investigation', still available and viable? In so far as these are questions about the modern study of Plato, the new *Companion* is a likely place to look for potential answers, since it aspires to the status of a standard handbook, and contains a set of essays broadly representative of some of the main trends in scholarly writing about Plato in the present century. The dominant forms now taken by the exegesis of Plato rest on interpretatively specialized foundations which were already being laid in Mill's time, and which have since been reinforced by the procedures of professional philosophy. Might it then be the case (a perhaps uncomfortable thought) that scholarship, with its commitment to explication rather than affiliation or advocacy, has itself contributed to the apparent demise of Platonism?

Since detailed chapter-by-chapter consideration is out of place here, let it be said at once that the overall standards of the *Companion* are commendable. All its essays contain interesting material, and the level of argumentative rigour and textual accuracy is high. Despite the inclusion of some introductory and background material, the volume's character is chiefly defined by chapters which tackle specific issues in particular contexts. The result is more a medley of readings than a survey or reference-work. This means that the coverage is selective: several major works, including *Protagoras*, *Theaetetus* and *Timaeus*, receive only slight attention; even the *Republic* has just one chapter entirely devoted to it, and its cardinal political and psychological problems remain largely untouched. On the other hand, some later dialogues do receive more generous attention than in many general guides to Plato: of the six works which have chapters to themselves, four are later than the *Republic*, and it is notable that these include impressively lucid accounts of dauntingly difficult issues in *Parmenides* (by Constance Meinwald) and the *Sophist* (by Michael Frede). It is a related consideration, however, that the choice of dialogues and topics for treatment shows a cumulative inclination towards questions which encourage fine conceptual and linguistic analysis. The style and method of most contributors will seem congenial to anyone familiar with the ethos of academic philosophical writing, though they may, in aggregate, tend

to disappoint those who think of Plato's central concerns as calling for a richer, more delicately modulated response than can readily be achieved by a preponderance of technical discussion. But it would be a mistake to criticize the analytical standpoint towards Platonic thought as though it were merely infelicitous: rather, it should be seen as expressing, however obliquely, an appraisal of what is most valuable, most worth modern philosophical attention, in Plato's work. And if that is so, such scholarship may indeed amount to an implicit redefinition of Platonism.

At the basis of the approach to Plato exemplified by this volume stand two closely interlocking ideas. The first is the interpretative principle that Plato's dialogues intimate and espouse philosophical positions which can be identified as his own at the time of writing. The second, which is partly the outcome of applying the first to the corpus as a whole, is the belief that Plato's career can be traced developmentally in his writings. A majority of specialists now accept, subject to some variations of detail, the division of this career into three main phases (early, middle, late), with most emphasis falling on the distinction between a period of intensely Socratic inspiration (investigative, aporetic, essentially ethical) and a subsequent stage of increasingly wide-ranging and aspiringly systematic theorizing in politics, psychology and metaphysics. Both these fundamental ideas are given prominence in Richard Kraut's informative introductory chapter, and can be traced, more or less explicitly, throughout the volume.[2] Both receive some support from Aristotle, who sometimes refers to the dialogues for determinate Platonic views, and who also testifies to important differences between the philosophical profiles of Socrates and Plato. In addition, modern scholarship has built up a body of stylometric evidence for a relative chronology which comports reasonably well with the three-phase model of Plato's writings: this evidence, still partly controversial but formidable in its degree of convergence, is here usefully summarized by Leonard Brandwood's chapter, 'Stylometry and chronology'.

Much modern discussion of Plato has derived constructive force from the interpretative principle and the developmental model just mentioned. But it is not necessary to support the wholesale rejection of either in order to fear the consequences of allowing these tenets to become too narrow or inflexible. Richard Kraut, aware of this danger and therefore speaking in terms only of a 'successful working hypothesis', nonetheless suggests very confidently that each Platonic dialogue contains a leading speaker who represents Plato's 'own views' and 'sincere convictions' (pp.25-30). The same line is endorsed by Terence Irwin, at the end of his chapter on 'The intellectual background' to Plato (pp.77-8), and also

(if paradoxically: see below) by Terry Penner, in 'Socrates and the early dialogues', who wishes to contend that in some dialogues 'Socrates speaks for the historical Socrates', while in others he 'speaks for Plato' (p.124). What is disappointing about all their formulations is that they create a polarized choice by opposing their approach to severe alternatives: that Plato's works non-committally dramatize contrasting beliefs; that they are meant to provide only mental exercise for readers; or – most radically – that they deliberately conceal Plato's philosophical allegiances.[3] One need not fly to such extreme views in order to have reservations about the 'mouthpiece' conception of Plato's writings, which does so little to recognize the varying scope and effect of dialogue-form and the dramatic mode.[4] Indeed, if Aristotle sometimes identifies Platonic beliefs on the basis of the dialogues, he also reveals a sense of their richly questing nature when he draws attention to their 'exceptional, subtle, novel and heuristic' traits. The ramifications of this point affect even materials which most scholars regard as central to Plato's mature ideals. In this connection it is interesting that Ian Mueller, in an illuminating chapter on 'Mathematical method and philosophical truth', suggests that the higher philosophical education of *Republic* 7 was probably not tightly linked to the teaching practices of the contemporary Academy (pp.170-5). If this could be so in such a key area, why should we expect a principle of uniform, unqualified correspondence to suit the wider relationship between the dialogues and the development of Plato's philosophy in a fuller sense?

As its context makes clear, Aristotle's remark in the *Politics* does not eliminate the possibility of discerning some of Plato's commitments in his writings. But it gives us a cue, if one were needed, never to underestimate the exploratory implications of their dramatic and imaginative qualities, or the complex ways in which these qualities impinge upon the very pursuit of philosophy. Most contributors to the *Companion*, sticking automatically to the assumption that Plato's 'own views' can be directly discovered and abstracted for analysis, do very little to address this fundamental and difficult task.[6] One consequence is that no appreciable space is given to the question of Platonic myths ('myth' merits no entry in the index), though G.R.F. Ferrari, in a chapter on 'Platonic love' which adopts a slightly freer style of reading than its neighbours, has a few things to say about the charioteer model of the soul in the *Phaedrus*. Plato's extensive and elaborate use of imagery, his embedding of ideas in the presentation of particular characters, and the persistent influence on his thinking of Socratic indirectness and irony (another topic absent from the index) – such considerations, though basic to the very texture

in which Plato turns philosophy into writing, receive only rare and marginal acknowledgement in this book. This is so even in Elizabeth Asmis' chapter, 'Plato on poetic creativity', where the exposition of attitudes to poetry expressed in the dialogues omits the intense yet equivocal feelings which run through Platonic treatments of the subject. Plato's own use of poetic materials and imagery is not included in the argument, and we are left without a sense of just how deep-rooted to his written philosophy is the 'rivalry' with poetry which Asmis mentions only in passing.

The failure to take account of the full fabric of Platonic writing (and therefore of Platonic thinking) shows itself in a tendency towards analytical austerity and one-sidedness. Nicholas White's account of the so-called theory of Forms, for example, in 'Plato's metaphysical epistemology', appeals to the light which introspection can allegedly throw on the crucial cases of predication discussed in *Phaedo* and *Republic* 5, but has nothing to say about the strikingly visionary elements with which those discussions are associated. Likewise, Gail Fine ('Inquiry in the *Meno*') takes the idea that the soul has 'seen' certain things to mean only that 'we saw their point, i.e. understood them' (p.225 n. 42). This is a reductive way of taking the religio-mystical language of *Meno* 81c, and is motivated not by the details of the immediate context but by a larger debate over the relevance to Plato of an 'acquaintance' model of knowledge. On the central subject of Forms some compensation is made by Kraut's 'The defense of justice in the *Republic*', where the status of Forms as sources of value and objects of love, rather than merely conceptual entities, is given thoughtful weight.[7] But it remains an appropriate observation on the volume as a whole that its concern with abstract analysis of specific issues is allowed to occlude dramatic, imaginative and even, to a fair extent, structural factors which there is good reason to take as integral to the design of Platonic works.

A related anxiety about the *Companion*'s priorities can be highlighted in relation to the separation between Plato's early and middle-period dialogues. This separation has received its most outstanding statement in the scrupulous yet passionate work of Gregory Vlastos, to whose memory the present collection is dedicated and whose influence is signalled by several contributors. In his pithy chapter on the early dialogues, Terry Penner makes a case which in broad sweep is close to Vlastos' *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991), though dissenting from it on important details. There is much that is stimulating in Penner's guiding contrast between what he sees as the confident, engaging

intellectualism of the early dialogues, and the brooding pessimism of what followed them. It is, nonetheless, an incomplete perspective which plays down the elements of continuity (at several levels) between early and middle Plato, and which induces Penner into presenting a psychologically extreme account of Plato's development. According to Penner, Plato's own personality in the earlier part of his life was virtually 'swamped' by Socratic influence, and 'not till he was around forty' did he start to express his own 'almost entirely opposite personality' (p.130). This is a breathtaking thesis. It not only gives us the peculiar paradox of a Plato who submerges his own personality while dramatizing a dialectic whose 'whole point...is to get people to see things for themselves' (p.131). It also, of course, makes it impossible to comprehend why Plato, having allegedly found himself, should have clung to a Socratic persona in many subsequent works. But above all it obliterates the fact that it was Plato's own mind and artistry which created and carefully shaped every word of those early dialogues which Penner thinks 'sunny, mischievous intellectual adventures'. Plato, author and dramatist, virtually disappears from a large part of Penner's reconstruction of Socrates' philosophical mentality.[8] It is, therefore, an apt if startling Freudian slip when Penner suggests in a footnote that it was Socrates who 'wrote' the *Hippias Minor* (p.158 n. 40)!

The criticisms I have made of Penner do not challenge the legitimacy of attempts to distinguish Socrates from Plato. But they do suggest that, when internalized in Plato's own work, this distinction becomes virtually self-confounding if pressed to the point where the early dialogues are regarded as so Socratic as to be no longer Platonic. To put the point more positively, Plato's response to Socrates has to be regarded as something intrinsically creative, something that cannot be properly separated or condensed from the imaginative embodiment of that response in philosophical drama. But to say that is to return to reservations about the fundamental principle of interpretation (which is also, it must be said, a *habit of reading*, in a very basic sense) which I earlier highlighted. For Penner shares with most other contributors to the *Companion* the conviction that Plato's dialogues, whether early middle or late, are essentially husks from which a kernel of doctrine can be cleanly and schematically removed.

Whether or not Aristotelian support is available for this approach (and the last word has not yet been said on the subject), there will always be validity in the objection that this way of discovering and engaging with Platonic philosophy is, at the very least, insufficient. The strength of this approach, as the *Companion* frequently shows, lies in its capacity to anatomize and draw out possible conceptual

implications of ideas and arguments voiced in the dialogues. But this is coupled with an inability to supply a wholly satisfying account of the status or motivation of those ideas and arguments, or, more precisely, to do full justice to the manner in which Platonic writing offers a self-reflective and implicitly provisional representation, and not simply the formulated results, of processes of philosophical enquiry.[9] It is perhaps unfortunate that the kind of criticism I have made of the *Companion* is often associated with a distinction between 'literary' and 'philosophical' readings of Plato. So long as we are obliged to formulate the issue in such terms, we will remain at the mercy of a bifurcation to which Platonic writing itself poses – for that is my claim – a permanent challenge. And if that challenge is not directly addressed within the interpretation of Plato's own modes of thought, then what will elude us may be the most valuable kind of Platonism to which we could still aspire.

NOTES

1 J.S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. J. Stillinger (Oxford 1971) 14-15: the final sentence belongs to Mill's 1861 revision, the others to his original draft of 1853-5.

2 Two marginal exceptions, which do not affect the writers' broader approach to the question: Constance Meinwald reserves judgement on the relation between the middle-period treatment of Forms and Plato's 'private views' at the time (p.373); and Dorothea Frede, in a fine chapter on pleasure and pain in *Philebus*, believes (as have others) that the 'hedonism' of *Protagoras* is not Plato's own position (p.434; cf. p.458 n. 11, 'merely the exploration of a hypothesis').

3 This last view is associated mainly with Leo Strauss and his disciples; it is the persisting presence of Straussians in the American university system which seems to have led Kraut to make their claims the main foil to his own. This is regrettable, since much Straussian work on Plato is quasi-cabbalistic, and some of it grotesquely perverse.

4 Kraut bizarrely impoverishes the force of the dramatic when he cites *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* as works in which 'the dialogue conveys no drama' (p.27).

5 *Politics* 2.6, 1265a10-12: 'Socratic dialogues' here covers not only the *Republic*, but apparently the *Laws* too, which has just been cited alongside *Republic* 5.

6 A stimulating range of responses to this challenge can be found in J.C. Klagge & N.D. Smith, edd., *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues* (Oxford 1992).

7 It is also good that the religious element in Platonic metaphysics is acknowledged by Michael Morgan's chapter, 'Plato and Greek religion'. But some of Morgan's arguments need cautious use: see my review of his book, *Platonic Piety*, in *Ancient Philosophy* (1994, forthcoming).

8 He is mentioned only in passing, two or three times, on pp. 131-47.

9 Even the *Laws*, Trevor Saunders tells us in 'Plato's later political thought', 'is not a work that suggests its author is confident about everything' (p.469).