Plato and the art of philosophical writing

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Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3016

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Pre-print version of an article published in Ancient Philosophy 31(1): 203-208.

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Review of *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* by Christopher Rowe (Cambridge University Press, 2007) by Marina McCoy, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Boston College.

*Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* is an engaging and well-argued book that focuses on both Socratic epistemology and the nature of Platonic argument. Rowe begins with candor: the issues surrounding dialogical interpretation are vast; as one of his students stated, the dialogues are “weird” (p. 2), because they require a different sort of interpretation than that given to treatises where the author’s meaning is transparent. Plato, in contrast, offers his interpreters challenges such as, wondering why Socrates makes a claim in one dialogue that is opposed in another; whether Socrates is the “voice” of Plato and, if so, how; how the dating of the dialogues (if possible at all) informs our interpretation of Plato’s thinking; the relationship between dialectic and dialogue; and how dramatic style and content are interrelated, to name only a few. Rowe does not purport to solve all of these issues, but does take on a good number of them; readers with interest in these questions will find his discussion of the issues indispensible, whether or not they agree with all of his conclusions.

Rowe’s main thesis is that Socrates is always speaking within a context and situation, and so his (and accordingly Plato’s) ideas cannot be understood apart from the situated nature of the dialogue’s characters (50-51). That is, drama provides more than a “frame” that contextualizes or enhances argument. Instead, the character, history, and drama of the dialogues present a way of arguing that is deeply grounded in the particulars of each dialogue. Such a claim has important consequences for interpretation: for example, while Rowe agrees with the traditional dating of the dialogues and divisions into early, middle, and later periods, he views the variety of arguments offered in the dialogues as differences of strategy in argument rather than as Plato’s development alone. If Socrates speaks differently across the dialogues, we ought to look first to Socrates’ audience and how Socrates creates an argument that is deliberately oriented toward making an argument in a particular time and place. On this reading, Socrates is not merely showing up his interlocutor’s inconsistencies (though this may be part of his plan). Rowe claims quite strongly, “Plato’s Socrates always has a positive, and substantive, agenda” (21). That is, Socrates is trying to make an argument, and is attentive to whom he is speaking to as well as to his own deficiencies and imperfections in the course of making that argument.

Rowe’s understanding of Platonic (and Socratic) language and argument is grounded on a certain understanding of Platonic epistemology, namely, that while some knowledge is possible, full knowledge of the most important topics—the good, the beautiful, the true—is not possible. To know more fully is an ideal, and a good ideal, but not an achieved reality either for Socrates or for Plato; writing in dialogue, then, explicitly shows the contextual nature of knowledge and the possibility of progress in its pursuit. Rowe’s chapters begin with the early ‘Socratic’ dialogues,
move to an extensive discussion of the Republic, and end with attention to the Theaetetus, Timaeus, and Phaedrus.

In chapter one, Rowe takes on the Apology and presents it not as an historical document of Socrates’ trial, but rather a manifesto of Plato’s own views. Indeed, there is no good prima facie reason to assume that Plato’s voice as author is any less present in the Apology than in his other dialogues, and there are numerous forensic and literary elements to the dialogue (90). Rowe’s chapter focuses on Socrates’ understanding of excellence and his understanding of the soul, and sets up Rowe’s readers for later chapters that argue for a mostly consistent Socrates across dialogues. Rowe reads the Apology as advocating a view of excellence as knowledge in way that the jurors, and Plato’s readers, can understand. While this understanding of excellence is less fully spelled out than in other dialogues, this is because the jurors themselves have open-ended understandings of what might constitute excellence, and Socrates’ goal is to show them that his devotion to excellence, as knowledge of good and bad, makes all other goods (such as money) good as well. Already in the Apology, Rowe, argues, Plato presents Socrates’ understanding of examination of others as an examination designed to see what expertise they have or lack, and to test Socrates’ own expertise.

Chapter two focuses on the Phaedo with the aim of showing a unified concept of the soul with the view of the Apology. Rather than taking the conventional view that Socrates’ (and so, Plato’s) views on the soul and death have changed over the course of Plato’s development, Rowe argues that Socrates holds a basically consistent position, but that his presentation of his views changes for the sake of audience and context. For example, he suggests that Socrates is not the ascetic that he is sometimes supposed to be, but rather that his argument is qualified, and that Socrates acknowledges that there are many points at which the arguments about soul are not fully secure (eg, 84c; Rowe, p. 120). Rowe also notes difficulties with the eschatology of the Phaedo. For example, its system of justice seems flawed: if a lack of philosophy has made souls unjust, why not repair such souls with philosophy after death instead of punishing them (104)? Rowe takes the myth to be not only an account of what happens to philosophical souls after death, but even more so as an allegory about how non-philosophical souls live, judge, and punish one another, in contrast to the manner of philosophers, whose philosophical practice grants them a certain freedom absent for those focused on justice as punishment. I found Rowe’s allegorical interpretation of the myth intriguing and fruitful as an alternative to a literal account of justice after death, and would have liked Rowe to consider how the presence of Socrates’ friends might inform his taking this line of argument: for example, might Socrates’ emphasis on freedom in life and death comfort and inspire his friends who have watched him be imprisoned and are about to witness his death? Further attention to the dramatic context might enhance an already interesting reading of the myth, and indeed provide good reason for Socrates’ emphasis on an ascetic, Pythagorean understanding of the soul.
Chapters three and four set out to provide a comprehensive account of “examination” in the “early” dialogues, looking especially at what Socrates might mean when in the *Apology* he declares that his activity of questioning is an examination of himself as well as of others (38a). Rejecting the standard view first set out by Vlastos that Socrates is testing others’ convictions, Rowe argues that there are too many instances in the dialogues in which Socrates or his interlocutors seem not to proceed from their own beliefs at all, such as when Charmides offers definitions of *sophrosune* to which neither Charmides nor Socrates is greatly attached. Rowe argues that examination is not designed to test beliefs or commitments of interlocutors, but rather to see whether others have knowledge or not; if excellence is knowledge, then belief in an argument is not significant. What matters, says Rowe, is knowledge of what is really good or really bad irrespective of who believes it.

These arguments seem to be problematic on at least two counts. First, even in the cases where Rowe claims that the interlocutors do not argue about beliefs that they hold dear, I would argue that there is a connection between the character of the interlocutor, i.e., his beliefs, emotions, motivations, or (broadly speaking) some aspect of self that he brings to the conversation. For example, in the *Charmides*, Charmides’ constant concern to be obedient to his uncle’s authority is ever present in his dramatic action and in the kinds of definitions he offers. Charmides argues that obeying one’s superiors is good, as Homer has said, and he offers a definition of moderation that he seemingly has heard from his uncle. Socrates’ examination of Charmides seems to focus on Charmides’ own personality, his intellectual and personal commitments, as they come through in how Charmides speaks, defines, argues, and finally runs away from argument.

Second, Socrates’ motivation seems at least in part to teach others about their own limits (even if Socrates is also hoping to grow in knowledge or to test himself along the way). Socrates’ stated mission in the *Apology*, of being like a “gadfly” to the city, serving a political purpose, is missed in any interpretation that makes all philosophical practice about knowledge alone. Indeed, one of the enduring insights we have about Plato’s Socrates from the *Apology* is that Socrates thinks there is a genuine value in knowing of one’s own limits and lack (apart from how this clears the way for future knowledge). Humility, even without knowledge, limits the harm caused by overly confident, even arrogant, politicians, poets, and even ordinary jurors, whom Plato presents as reactive and rash in many of their decisions. Even if Callicles or Charmides cannot see the need for humility in light of human limitations, Plato’s presentation of Callicles or Charmides to us, his readers, invites such reflection upon the connections between not only ignorance and vice, but also ignorance of one’s own ignorance, and subsequent harmful action. Widening the scope of inquiry from epistemological elements of argumentation to character based interpretations of Socratic argument might be helpful in order to further understand Socrates’ contextualized argumentation.
The next several chapters focus on the *Republic*, first independently and then in relation to the “early” dialogues, *Theaetetus*, and *Timaeus*. Rowe argues that dialectic need not be understood in a technical sense as a method absent from the *Republic*, practiced in the Academy or in other dialogues, but instead as the very kind of conversation that takes place in the *Republic* itself. Dialectic is the art of “talking together” (167). Chapter five argues that the *Republic’s* account of the soul is not a Platonic rejection of an earlier unified account of the soul in favor of a tripartite soul. Instead, Plato gives us a description of the souls of those in a feverish city (and perhaps Athens itself) who are divided precisely because their souls are not ruled by excellence, which is still wisdom even here.

Chapter six argues that *Republic* V’s account of knowledge and belief is not a simple account of epistemology, but instead a persuasive argument meant to persuade his interlocutors to change their minds about their own cognitive states. The lengthy argument about the lovers of sights and sounds is meant to influence Glaucon, who is just such a lover, to reconsider his whole cognitive orientation, on the grounds that it is only belief (204-5). The philosopher recognizes that there is a form of beauty itself, while the non-philosopher does not (209). It’s not that the philosopher has unrestricted knowledge of the forms. Instead, Rowe says, “Philosophers have the capacity to see things in themselves...but Socrates makes no commitment to their being knowers” (210). They search for knowledge, but do not possess it in its completion. Instead, the philosopher can “grasp the truth about things”; while such a description of knowledge is general, Socrates leaves it at the general level because his aim is to draw Glaucon away from belief and to knowledge, and not to offer a comprehensive account of epistemology. I found Rowe’s arguments well argued, but would have liked further attention to Glaucon’s character; if the argument is directed at a particular person, then further attention to Glaucon as an individual rather than as only a “type” (e.g., “lover of sights and sounds”) would further support Rowe’s claim that the argument is contextual. Plato gives us much information about the interlocutors of the *Republic*, and surely Socrates’ art includes attentiveness to the particulars of speaking differently to Glaucon than to Thrasymachus, or even Adeimantus.

Chapter seven attends to the notion of philosopher-kings in the *Republic*. If philosophers are not wholly wise, but instead seekers of wisdom, then how seriously can we take the *Republic’s* claim that philosophers should rule?, Rowe rightly asks. His answer is to suggest that Socrates carefully cautions that an ideal city is not necessarily realizable. Part of the difficulty of such realization is the difficulty of philosophical rule. While ideally a city would be ruled by those who are an approximate ideal of the good, who are “familiar” with beauty, justice, and the forms even if not full knowledge (225). This claim immediately raises questions about the relation between this seeker of wisdom’s cognitive state and political action. While he sets out the possibility that someone who knows partially and yet does not know fully is better as a ruler than
someone who does not love or seek knowledge at all, we as readers are left wondering exactly why this is true. One can imagine, for example, a political pragmatist along the lines of Isocrates to respond that, if full philosophical knowledge is impossible, then we had best follow common opinion. Clearly this is not Socrates’ position in the Republic, but why not? Is it the love of knowledge as an ideal, the humility of knowing that one does not know (fully), or a general “familiarity” with beauty and justice that helps? If the latter, then what does such familiarity look like, and how is it connected to action?

Chapter eight begins to answer just such questions, looking to the Theaetetus. The person who knows is the person who has repeatedly tested his logos to examination and has continually come away from the match successfully, like a wrestler who wins repeatedly. While the Republic focuses on “seeing” as the metaphor for knowing, the Theaetetus presents the “hard work” of getting to knowledge, namely, testing one’s logos over and over again. The alternative metaphor here is “grasping” the forms, a more visceral account of knowledge. Rowe argues that Plato’s philosopher does not have a “perfect, synoptic grasp of everything that would properly and strictly be called knowledge”; such knowledge is divine and not human (236). Here, Rowe has tremendous support throughout the dialogues for the importance of human wisdom (think of the Apology, Symposium, and Phaedrus all for their emphasis on incompleteness). Yet, this does preclude the possibility of knowledge as defined at the end of the Theaetetus, namely as true belief with an account, as a significant form of knowing. Rowe cautions us against extremes in how we regard the philosopher, as either knower of all, or merely ignorant of a form far beyond him. The lifetime process of testing accounts of beauty, justice, and the like, and of being capable of questioning our own hypotheses, has real value, both epistemologically and politically.

Chapter nine argues that the “good” as a form is not merely a metaphysical abstraction, but indeed that the form of the good will also be a form of the “best,” i.e. what is “best for things, a common something in all cases” and that insofar as human beings try to realize it, we participate in it the good (251). Rowe’s reading here is almost anti-metaphysical. Such a reading has its advantages, especially insofar as it connects the ordinary practice of Socrates and his followers to the grand claims about the good. Even if we cannot know the good perfectly, to the extent that we try to realize it and live it in our everyday existence, we are already participating in it. Such a down to earth reading helps to explain why the imperfect, but philosophically minded, kings of the Republic’s ideal city would be good to have as leaders. We all pursue the good, says Rowe; only, philosophers seem to be those who have done it better, or at least are those who care to do it and take practical and concrete steps to live out its pursuit and realization in this world. Rowe admits that his approach is to view the good as something closer to what Aristotle meant, as a universal, than as a metaphysical reality.

But why reject the idea of the importance of that metaphysical distance between the good and the seeker of the good in favor of a more Aristotelian Plato? Plato spends a
great deal of time on the forms and our relation to them in ways that suggest more problematic difficulties for lovers of wisdom than Rowe lets on. Rowe’s view of the philosopher is appropriately humbler and more realistic than that of those interpreters who imagine the philosopher as either all knowing or simply “other worldly”. However, there is a side to Plato that verges at moments on the mystical, or at least attention that that in the human being that longs for the mystical. When in the Symposium Socrates has Diotima, a priestess, describe the effect of encountering the form of beauty on the lover of beauty, the lover cannot, and does not wish to, tear himself away from what has been the object of his pursuit all along. While Socrates may never have reached such a state of completion, Plato’s descriptions of the inexhaustible “pull” of the forms on the philosopher who loves them (even more dearly than his friends) suggest that the forms are not only ideals or realities that are not fully known. They are also a powerful explanation of human motivation. Part of lived human experience is to experience the gap between what we are and what we long to be, i.e., Plato presents us as erotic creatures. Sometimes this eros is dangerous in the persons of individuals such as Alcibiades, who lacked an accompanying humility; sometimes in persons such as Socrates greater self-knowledge mitigates such extremes. But even Socrates was a man who walked barefoot in the snow, got lost in thought on the way to parties, and cast his wife out from his deathbed scene. Rowe’s book is an accomplished work that treats Socratic argument with nuance and a great deal of truth. However, the consequence is we are left with a much tamer vision of philosophers and of the good than we find in the intellectual and personal passions of Plato’s characters.