Plato's *Theaetetus* (P.) Stern *Knowledge and Politics in Plato's Theaetetus*. Pp. x + 315. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Cased, £58, US$97.99. ISBN: 978-0-521-88429-7.

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D. Sedley's piece, though focussed on Hesiod's influence on the *Timaeus*, could well have acted as a prelude to the entire volume. He sets elements of the *Theogony* against the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, looking in particular at the implications of apparent parallels between Hesiod's Chaos and Plato's receptacle. His broader methodological point is made clear in his conclusion: 'future discussions of the Hesiodic and Timaean cosmogonies are likely to be enriched if we address the same questions to both in parallel' (p. 258). The other articles demonstrate that such potential riches are by no means restricted to the realm of cosmogony.

M. Regali looks at another specific point of interaction between the *Timaeus* and Hesiod. R. reads the Demiurge's address to the lesser gods at *Timaeus* 41a7–d3 as inviting comparison with the proem to the *Works and Days* and, in particular, with the figure of Zeus. Again, the emphasis is on the fact that Plato is seeking both to incorporate and to challenge Hesiodic authority.

Two essays are illustrative of the fact that such intertextual readings are, in the end, likely to increase the complexity of interpreting Plato, rather than simplify it. This is, of course, no bad thing. Both D. El Murr and C. Rowe investigate Hesiodic influence on the notoriously difficult myth of the Age of Kronos in the *Statesman*. But whereas El M. finds that the Golden Age imagery of Hesiod and others (notably the Attic comedians) provides support for a traditional reading of Plato's myth as presenting two stages of cosmic development, R. finds that particular points of contact with Hesiod's version bolster the case for his preferred three-stage reading.

The essays in this volume are all original, interesting and, in most cases, provocative (in a good way), even though several essays frustratingly conclude that Plato had a complicated and subtle interest in Hesiod, and that he wanted to appeal to his authority and to challenge it. I should have liked to see more attempts along the lines of those made by Van Noorden, Pender and El Murr (among others) to push such readings to the next stage and to investigate the philosophical implications of such a relationship.

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PLATO'S *THEAETETUS*

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The purpose of S.'s monograph is 'to give full weight to the political substance' of the *Theaetetus*: Plato's treatment of knowledge (and of why knowledge is a problem) 'can only be properly understood through careful attention to the dialogue's political character' (p. 1). According to S. 'the dialogue's surface poses the connection between politics and the meaning of knowledge *as a question*', but commentators have been reluctant to engage with this question (p. 4). S. wants to remedy this state of affairs by offering a complex narrative which purports to identify the varied ways in which the themes of human individuality, the complexity of the soul and its passions, goodness and 'the political' are central concerns of the *Theaetetus*, indeed prior to, and foundational for an answer to, the ostensible

question 'what is knowledge?' S. pursues this agenda with some ingenuity, but also with a frustrating single-mindedness which is almost 'ideological', to borrow a term which S. himself uses repeatedly, and misleadingly, with reference to Socrates' interlocutors and adversaries. 'When the philosopher neglects the pretheoretical context', S. complains, 'what results is not philosophy but ideology' (p. 191); what S. seems to do, repeatedly, is to neglect or distort the primary context of Plato's own *text* in order to squeeze it into the framework of his pre-constituted theory.

The structure of the book mirrors the unfolding of the dialogue, from the prologue (Chapter 2) to the conclusion (Chapter 10), with more sustained discussion of the first part, including the self-portrait of Socrates as an intellectual midwife (Chapter 3), the 'delivery' and assessment of Theaetetus' first definition of knowledge (Chapters 4, 5 and 7), and the so-called 'digression' (Chapter 6). The analysis of Theaetetus' second and third definitions and of the falsehood puzzles (Chapters 7 and 8) is more restricted.

S.'s analysis of the prologue sets the tone of the book, and will serve as a useful illustration of some of its shortcomings. S. is right to notice that the importance of the prologue has too often been overlooked, and that a satisfactory philosophical understanding of the *Theaetetus* should take into serious account the elusive significance of the dialogue's dramatic details. But S.'s reconstruction of the key role of the prologue is an explosive mix of (1) groundless assertions, (2) imprecise readings of the text and (3) strained over-interpretations. To limit ourselves to some examples, (1) S. provides no evidence for his repeated censure of Euclides' 'mediocrity' and 'intellectual limitations' (p. 16). (2) S.'s narrative of Euclides' account of how he came to write down the dialogue goes well beyond anything written by Plato: there is no indication at all in the text that Socrates first related his conversation with Theodorus and Theaetetus *in successive stints while awaiting execution*, or that Euclides would later show Socrates his 'work in progress' during numerous visits to Socrates' cell (p. 15), with Socrates minutely 'overseeing the production of a written manuscript', thus effectively *writing* a valedictory conversation which he took 'steps to preserve and so make available to others' (p. 30). If we read the prologue at face value, Socrates could very well have not even known that Euclides had undertaken writing down the conversation. (3) S. interprets Euclides' editorial choice of direct dialogue, which eliminates the 'temporal context preserved by narrativity', as a poisonous consequence of Megarian metaphysics, which paradoxically denies the reality of change and particularity (pp. 17–23). But one could argue with equal force that direct dialogues are more vividly faithful to the actual practice of conversation than indirect ones, which 'freeze' the conversation in the narrator's time and perspective. And, anyway, how is the condemnation of this dialogical form as unphilosophical to be reconciled with Plato's adoption of it in so many of his works (and with Socrates' alleged editorial oversight)?

Similar shortcomings mar S.'s potentially fruitful emphasis on the significance of characterisation. As a result of what is often nothing more than wildly anachronistic psychologising, the familiar characters Theodorus and Theaetetus become unrecognisable in S.'s hands. For example, Theodorus' apparently innocuous choice of the image of 'a stream of oil flowing effortlessly' to describe his pupil's outstanding character manifests Theodorus' exaggerated (almost 'tyrannical', p. 55) 'desire for a wholly unimpeded life', and his lack of grasp on the complexity of the intelligible object (a human soul) he is trying to depict (p. 44). This is one aspect of Theodorus' damning 'self-forgetfulness', his wilful obliviousness to the limitations of his technical knowledge (p. 47) and his anti-Socratic and quasi-

sophistic leanings (p. 86) which S. reads between the lines of Plato's dialogue. According to S., Theaetetus shares some of the same defects: his perplexity about, and interest in, the Socratic question 'what is knowledge?', which is enthusiastically saluted by Socrates, actually reveals a fatherless 'adolescent boy in some degree of psychological conflict' (p. 98), and the 'struggle' which 'rages between the passions moving him sometimes nearer to, sometimes farther from, the Socratic life'; Theaetetus is animated by a certain 'counter-Socratic passion that prevented him from becoming Socrates' student' (p. 65) and attracted him, instead, towards Theodorus' rival model of certain technical knowledge (a 'yearning for certainty produced by his desire for honor' [p. 91] and power). S.'s tendentious portrait of these characters reflects, unsurprisingly, a number of disputable and unsubstantiated driving hypotheses which determine it. For example, S.'s description of Theaetetus as 'poised between mathematics and dialectic' (p. 78), that is between the illusory realm of self-sufficient certainty and the realm of continual philosophical inquiry which rejects certainty as a genuine criterion of knowledge (p. 161), flies in the face of the Platonic educational model in which mathematics is not a rival of, but is propaedeutic to, dialectic, and hints at a view of Plato's conception of knowledge which is as alien and problematic as any. Not surprisingly, S. is almost silent on the metaphysics and epistemology of the central books of the *Republic*; his quick reference to the distinction between *epistêmê* and *doxa* in those books, in order to support his own translation of *doxa* as 'opinion' on the grounds that *doxa* has the sense 'partial knowledge' (p. 216 n. 1), is quite telling about S.'s shaky epistemological grounds.

The analysis of the 'digression' in Chapter 6 is arguably the core of the book, in which S.'s take on the political theme emerges most clearly and contentiously. According to S., 'Socrates not only roundly demeans the orator-politicians', as we all know; 'also the Philosopher comes in for a share of criticism', since he is depicted 'as other-worldly and apolitical, ignorant, or neglectful of the transitory, particular, and so, trivial affairs of humans' (p. 163). The Socratic life, with its 'concern for what is good, beautiful, and just' is opposed to both kinds of life, thus being really political and (thereby) really philosophical. It is undeniable that there are striking differences between Socrates himself and the Philosopher of the digression, which Plato clearly asks us to reflect upon. But S.'s contention that Socrates 'makes emphatically clear that he regards the Philosopher's neglect of politics as a grave error' is poorly supported: the point that the Philosopher does not even know that he does not know the petty affairs of his fellow citizens is clearly meant to evoke Socratic self-knowledge as exercised on more important matters, but I cannot see any reason why *that* lack of self-knowledge should condemn the Philosopher to a damning 'lack of insight into his soul' (p. 165), or into the human soul and goodness more generally, *pace* S. Even more striking is S.'s assertion that what we learn in the digression is that 'that which is good … is so in relationship to some need. There is no good in itself. Rather, by "good" we should mean "good for" someone', which requires us to delve into the complexities of political life (p. 175). This complete reversal of what the 'digression' has taught intelligent Platonic readers for more than two thousand years is almost as surprising as S.'s claim that the *error* of 'those like Theaetetus' is to 'long for pure knowledge of the pure good', for 'wholes that are homogeneously what they are through and through', while actually 'knowledge relies on the fluctuating, less knowable, particulars' (pp. 205–7). S. must be confusing knowledge itself with the often (or always) partial grasp of it that human beings achieve (and the complex

process leading to that approximation): of course the reality of the latter by no means implies the intrinsically 'aspirational, and therefore partial, character of knowledge' itself (p. 210). S.'s idiosyncratic reading requires him to postulate that only at 176a8 the discussion turns finally to Socratic philosophy, as opposed to the objectionable Philosopher's approach previously criticised (p. 176); once again, this is devoid of any textual grounds, and the key theme of *homiôsis theôi* is seriously underplayed by S. The fact that the god-like existence to which philosophers aspire is not depicted in traditional terms does not mean that the initial idea of 'becoming like a god' is now *reinterpreted* as, and *replaced by*, the more political Socratic ideal of 'becoming just and holy with *phronesis*' (p. 177); it rather reflects Plato's well-known revision of the misguided traditional conception of the divine, which is re-identified with the other-worldly measure of virtue and goodness to which philosophers strive to conform (without any self-deceiving 'pretense that they are gods', p. 248, *pace* S.).

S. lets his exegesis of the *Theaetetus* be thoroughly dictated by his grand interpretative scheme even when dealing with the most technical and 'epistemological' sections. To mention only one example, in his discussion of the falsehood puzzles S. suggests that the irreducible and complex individuality, 'the otherness of the beings', for which 'any particular being is not only this but also other than this' is what 'provides a foundation for falsehood … insofar as any characterization of one of them will be partial' (pp. 232–3). This is not only well beyond anything written or suggested in the dialogue, but also blatantly false: granted, Plato is not only handsome, but also Greek and a philosopher; but if I judge that 'Plato is handsome', the fact that my judgement does not capture the whole truth and complexity about Plato does not imply that I am thereby judging falsely.

Original approaches to Plato's dialogues will always be welcome, and reconstruction of the political undercurrents of some key passages of the *Theaetetus* is not a project to be condemned *a priori* on the prejudice that the dialogue is 'about epistemology'. But S.'s execution of this project is unsatisfactory: S. vastly overemphasises the weight of politics in the economy of the dialogue, and too often over-interprets, misinterprets or simply ignores details of Plato's text to appease the demands of his hypotheses, a strategy typically backed by weak argument or no argument at all. Moreover, those hypotheses are not formulated with sufficient clarity: S. operates with a conception of 'politics' and 'the political' that is too vague to be serviceable, apparently encompassing whatever has to do with human beings, ethics, moral psychology, intellectual development and politics proper. The problematic status of S.'s *Theaetetus* within the broader context of Plato's corpus is left unexplored; one can only wonder what kind of epistemological and metaphysical reading S. would offer for some key Platonic texts if they had to be attuned to his approach to the *Theaetetus*. Despite the major flaws of this book, specialists will learn something useful from S.'s sometimes ingenious readings of specific passages, and perhaps even more from the methodological reflection and self-reflection that will inevitably be provoked as a reaction to S.'s controversial approach. But less advanced students of ancient philosophy or the history of political thought will find too much that is groundless, tendentious or simply incorrect in S.'s book for it to serve as an introductory reading worth recommending.

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