

readiness shown by many a parent to donate a kidney to save their child's life, P. and R. argue that the happiness of parents is often so 'wrapped up' in the well-being of the child as to make it a constituent part of their own well-being. Interesting though philosophical discussions of modern intuitions can be, they are less exegetically effective than a close study of the text. In this particular instance, a *mise au point* of Socrates' concept of parental love in the early stages of the dialogue might have been achieved though juxtaposition with his later claim that parental love is unconditional (213a2–3 and 219d sqq.). A comparison with the contemporary but very different Socratic views that Xenophon claims to record in the second book, *cap.* 2, of the *Memorabilia* would have usefully anchored the views of the Platonic Socrates in their historical context.

Despite these reservations, the book is much to be recommended. The meticulous philosophical analyses that it contains will be of interest not only to students of Plato but also to moral philosophers, especially those who concern themselves with virtue ethics and the theories of interpersonal relations.

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## READING PLATO

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Ancient readers were persuaded that it is almost impossible to account for Plato's philosophical complexity. The contributors to this volume succeed in providing a careful examination of the main issues, and thereby challenge the prejudices of their ancient colleagues. The volume is divided into six parts. The first introduces Plato in his historical context. Not surprisingly, Luc Brisson and Jean-François Pradeau argue for the importance of Presocratic thinkers in the development of Plato's philosophy by discussing the most pertinent references in the dialogues. More intriguing is the comparison with historians. Marie-Laurence Desclos claims that in Plato's time neither philosophy nor history was a recognised discipline, being subsumed in the common genre of prose writings as opposed to poems. Plato's dialogues are properly considered as a challenge against the inadequacy of the historians. For history, if reduced to the 'empirical' description of human vicissitudes without the explanatory support of transcendent principles (most noticeably the idea of Good), fails to capture the true relationship between cause and effect, and proves meaningless. Historians are not the only prose writers Plato confronted, as is clear from the appearance of many sophists in the dialogues. Anne Balansard detects in the concept of *technê* (meaning both the 'métier' of the sophists and the idea of human capability as opposed to nature) the main issue associating Plato with Protagoras and Gorgias, but she deals only with the two sophists without adequately examining the way Plato uses and abuses their doctrines – a substantial problem for a correct assessment of his philosophy. Louis-André Dorion contests our right to extrapolate the historical Socrates from the dialogues by arguing against the reliability of Plato's paradoxical portrait. This section is useful, though not exhaustive, in the absence of an account of

Plato's treatment of poets and rhetoricians. Plato's insistence on the educational mission of philosophy requires a confrontation with the teachers of the Greek world, from Homer to the poets of the Athenian 'theatrocracy' (*Laws* 701a). Equally important is Isocrates, who canvassed an alternative idea of philosophy in open opposition to Plato, and was in turn criticised by Plato himself and Aristotle, agreeing on this point at least.

The second section deals with the ambiguity of Plato's philosophical style, oscillating between the extremes of science (Brisson) and mythology (Pradeau). Pradeau further explores what Plato's idea of philosophy amounts to and insists on its 'practical' dimension. But the almost exclusive reliance on *Republic* 5–7 confines him in the ideal *sophia* of the *kallipolis* at the expense of the more human *philo-sophia* of the *Symposium*, a search for wisdom more than an ultimate grasp on it (perfect wisdom properly belonging only to gods). Christopher Gill argues for the philosophical importance of the dialogical form by recovering from antiquity a 'maieutic approach' and emphasising the close connection between dialogue and dialectic: since the aim of the dialogues is to promote independent philosophical reflection in the reader, the coherence of arguments is more important than the development of a unitary system. Epistemology and ontology, in the third section, provide a good example. Francesco Fronterotta and Franco Ferrari do not aim at articulating a systematic account of mutually incompatible ideas and principles, but rather investigate the reasons that prompted Plato to postulate and defend their existence. Clearly, what matters is not so much doctrinal coherence as the dialectical enquiry in the one-many relationship (both ideas and principles somehow featuring as the unitary causes of reality).

Soul is the key concept of the fourth section. While Brisson explores *psychê* as principle of motion and of life, ranging from Gods to plants, Fronterotta and Yvon Lafrance focus on the human soul by explaining its pivotal role in the process of reminiscence and knowledge. An interesting point hinted at by Brisson, which might have been further investigated, regards sexual gender (pp. 152–3); the claim that women have a less courageous soul than men (*Tim.* 90e) and are regarded by Plato only as wives and mothers of male warriors contrasts with the (however disputed) equiparation of the two sexes in *Republic* 5.

The fifth part deals with Plato's political thought. Anne Merker and Létitia Mouze refute any intellectualist or 'angelic' interpretation of Plato by arguing that he was fully acquainted with the intricacies of human desire and recommended its rational education, not its extirpation. That Plato displayed a deeply realistic knowledge of man as he is and not as he ought to be is further confirmed in the following articles. Mario Vegetti introduces within the borders of philosophy the issue of political power by arguing that the *Republic* promotes a new form of sovereignty, relying on the sole authority of knowledge and opposing both democracy and oligarchy. The mutual dependence of knowledge and power is further stressed by Francisco Lisi on the assumption that the legitimate constitution, in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*, must hierarchically account for the different natures of the citizens. Given such political 'realism', the problem is rather its compatibility with our commitment to human rights.

The volume closes with an overview of ancient Platonism, sceptic and dogmatic. Brisson's implicit exclusion of the Neoplatonists from the *Platonica familia* will provoke vehement reactions from many scholars.