

Gail Fine, ed.
The Oxford Handbook of Plato.
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Professor Fine's book (hereafter: *OHP*) is an intelligent contribution to the scores of team-written philosophy handbooks, guides and companions that have appeared in the last two decades. Like many of its closest counterparts—*The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (1992), *The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy* (2003), *A Companion to Socrates* (2006), *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic* (2006)—*OHP* features newly-commissioned work by leading specialists. It comprises 21 essays examining Plato's contributions to each of ethics, metaphysics and epistemology, as well as to topics of more special concern (love, language, politics, art, education). Some essays focus upon particular dialogues (all, appropriately, from the Plato's 'middle' and 'late' periods, as opposed to his 'Socratic' period), while others are concerned with cultural and historical matters, e.g., Malcolm Schofield's, 'Plato in His Time and Place,' and Charles Brittain's account of Platonism as it emerged and developed from the period c. 100-600 AD. Fine includes a comprehensive introduction, an extensive bibliography arranged according to topics and dialogues, *indexes locorum* and *nominum*, and a subject index. In addition, each essay includes its proper bibliography.

The volume's greatest strength is its evenness: with few exceptions, the articles are pitched at the same level as one another, rendering the pieces equally accessible to their audience. Another strength is its thoroughness: it appears to leave no real topical stone unturned in its efforts to acquaint the reader with Plato and Platonic scholarship. The lion's share of the book's audience is the graduate student and the faculty member who are either brushing up or preparing to expand their competencies. Specialists in Plato will mostly be ahead of this book's curve, as befits a companion. Each piece provides a roughly 25-page discussion that is thoughtful, articulate and, in some instances, masterful (e.g., Dominic Scott's crisp account of the mammoth *Republic*, and T. H. Irwin's absorbing examination of how Plato's corpus got to be Plato's corpus). Equally laudable is Fine's 'Introduction', itself of tremendous value to the student for its clarity and comprehensiveness.

Scholarly companions, as distinct from specialist-level essay collections, are themselves a real benefit to the discipline for both pedagogy and research, providing for the non-specialist an *entrée* into the specialist's world. But their limitation, aptly described by *OHP*'s Christopher Bobanich, nonetheless remains: They can be 'deeply antithetical' to real understanding of a subject, restricted as they are to providing but 'brief, potted summaries' (311). That said, if one were to imagine a collection of only the very best pieces taken from all the companion-type books devoted to Plato or his work,

OHP would be very strongly represented. Here are some details, excluding those contributions explicitly mentioned above.

Daniel Devereux's 'Socratic Ethics and Moral Psychology' is one of two essays devoted nearly exclusively to Socratic thought as it is expounded in Plato's early dialogues. Devereux introduces those main themes that have attracted the most scholarly attention, particularly intellectualism—the view that human virtue is a kind of knowledge, or science. Devereux's work is particularly strong in its discussion of Socrates' relationship with his main opponents, the sophists. The other is Gareth B. Matthews' 'The Epistemology and Metaphysics of Socrates', which focuses on the philosophical and interpretive problems posed in the early dialogues both by Socrates' self-proclaimed ignorance about virtue and his so-called 'elenchus', the method by which he examines his interlocutors. Additional attention to the philosophy of Socrates is carried out in topical discussions which range across a wider selection of the corpus. Hence, the Socratic *Crito* and *Apology* figure in Bobanich's essay on Plato's politics, but so do the Platonic *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Laws* and *Statesman*. Indeed, Bobanich's essay argues that the political views emerging in Plato's middle and later periods in part respond to some unresolved problems from the Socratic dialogues.

Among those Platonic dialogues receiving special attention is the *Philebus*, a dialogue known for its particularly elusive structure. Its topic is, 'What is the good life for the human: Is it pleasure, intelligence, or their combination?' Constance Meinwald's account of the dialogue focuses upon the metaphysical elements introduced by Plato in order to answer his question, particularly his use of the 'Promethian Method'. Another is the dyad, the limit and the unlimited (*peras* and *to aperion*), Meinwald's discussion of which is especially lucid and insightful. Mi-Kyoung Lee writes on the *Theaetetus*, Plato's main epistemological work. Lee's study exploits the fact that some of Plato's arguments show that select epistemologies fail on their own terms, while other arguments show them failing in association with a particular metaphysics (e.g., Heraclitean flux). This, she argues, allows us to draw positive conclusions both about Plato's epistemology and his ontology. Each of these essays is especially strong at uncovering a coherent, organic structure in otherwise dauntingly complex pieces.

Other essays focusing upon specific dialogues include Thomas K. Johansen's discussion of the *Timaeus*. Johansen's piece includes a detailed discussion of two of the central passages, 27d5-30c1 and 47e3-53c3, by way of introducing Plato's principles of cosmology. A particular aim of this piece is to show how Plato's principles help to answer questions about *coming into being*, as opposed to those about being as such. The *Parmenides*, which features a young Socrates, has provoked scholarly debate over what to make of its criticisms of the Forms. Forms famously take a beating from the dialogue's namesake, leaving Socrates in the unfamiliar role of the vanquished. Sandra Peterson's painstaking work guides the reader through the dialogue's main arguments and structural turns, and contends that the dialogue indeed discredits Forms. It is an older Socrates,

according to Peterson, who diagnoses a seductive ‘aspectitus’ in his middle-late period interlocutors, having himself been disabused of this ‘disease’ by Parmenides. Lesley Brown argues for an uncommon reading of the *Sophist*. Its central question, ‘What is the sophist?’ is typically thought to be addressed by distinguishing between the ‘is’ of identity and that of predication. Whether or not Plato succeeds in his task is a question that has produced two major scholarly camps, neither of which Brown thinks is quite right. Indeed, she holds this ambiguity of ‘is’ to be dubious. (Also notable about this piece is its clear, thorough discussion of the crucial 255e-256e and its main interpretations.)

Plato’s contributions to metaphysics, epistemology and ethics are taken up by Verity Harte, C. C. W. Taylor, and Julia Annas, respectively. Harte’s paper is an eminently accessible, comprehensive discussion about the Forms; Taylor brings together the various elements of Plato’s untidy (188) epistemological views from the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*; and Annas presents Plato not only as the first philosopher to develop an ethical theory as such, but as one for whom inquiry into living the good life remains a central focus even in his metaphysical and epistemological works.

There are also several offerings on more specific problem areas. Rachana Kamtekar focuses upon education and art, and argues that Socrates’ main difference with the sophists on these topics is one of human psychology. After all, she explains, Plato’s various discussions of education—from each of the early, middle and late dialogues—are intimately tied to his psychology. Paolo Crivelli’s chapter on Plato’s philosophy of language includes detailed discussions of the *Cratylus*, the semantic issues raised in the *Sophist*, as well as what Crivelli regards as the theory of Forms’ linguistic dimension. Hendrik Lorenz’s work on the tripartite soul—an idea fundamental to Plato’s psychology—focuses upon the well-known passage in the *Republic*, IV, and includes discussions of Plato’s incompatible (Socratic?) account in the *Protagoras*, as well as passages from the *Phaedo* and the *Gorgias*, both of which may be anticipating the *Republic* passage. Plato’s discussions of love are the focus of Richard Kraut’s essay. Kraut relies heavily upon the *Symposium*—Socrates’ and Diotima’s speeches, in particular—and somewhat less so upon the *Phaedrus*, for the former contains ‘the heart of his theory of intimacy, affection and sexuality’ (287). For Plato, Kraut explains, all human eroticism stands in need of education in order that it may lead to goodness and beauty.

Finally, there are several essays more generally *about* Plato. ‘Plato’s Way of Writing’ examines the relationship between Plato’s style and his arguments. Mary Margaret McCabe argues that, ‘how Plato writes is indissoluble from what he is trying to say’ (89). Stripping Plato’s text to its bare argumentative content, she maintains, will necessarily prevent the reader from seeing ‘what Plato does’ in each dialogue (89). Christopher Shields’ ‘Plato and Aristotle in the Academy’ exploits the fact that some of what we know about Plato comes from Aristotle, especially the latter’s criticisms of his

teacher's views. Shields provides a lucid account of Aristotle's objections (mostly about the Forms), and demonstrates how the strength of Plato's own arguments emerges once they are made to face the challenges that Aristotle provides. Studying Aristotle's passages on Plato is all but essential to the study of Plato.

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