

Nicholas R. Baima and Tyler Paytas. *Plato's Pragmatism: Rethinking the Relationship between Ethics and Epistemology.* Routledge 2021. 248 pp. \$52.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780367820275).

When one thinks of pragmatic allies in antiquity, it is likely that they return to the Sophists. No less than rhetorical scholar Everett Lee Hunt and philosopher F.C.S. Schiller saw Protagoras as an answer to the current trends in their times. Who, almost without exception, operated as the foil to those emergent strands of proto-pragmatism? Plato. Not so fast, argue philosophers Nicholas R. Baima and Tyler Paytas. In *Plato's Pragmatism*, the associate professor from Florida Atlantic University and senior lecturer at Australian Catholic University offer a lively defense of the pragmatic underpinning found in the philosophy of Aristotle's teacher. The question that looms large in what follows is a simple one: was Plato a pragmatist, or can you read Plato pragmatically?

After a brief note about abbreviations and translations, the book offers up a short prelude. The body of the work is divided into three parts, the first two with three chapters and the final one with two, followed by a conclusion/coda. Each chapter also contains useful endnotes. The backmatter consists of acknowledgments, a bibliography, and a nicely detailed index.

The 'Prelude' is best understood as a challenge to 'alethic' readings of Plato, ones that frame him as arguing that we 'should never violate epistemic norms' in pursuit of practical goals (3). The authors detail a variety of arguments in defense of this reading. But they argue that, 'in spite of all this, we believe that the Alethic Interpretation is mistaken' (7). After overviewing the outline of the book, they set about supporting this claim.

'Part I: Virtue, Veracity, and Noble Lies' focuses on refuting the first of three alethic claims regarding Plato; namely, the Absolutist Evaluative (AE) claim that 'Plato holds that truth is always preferable to falsehood' (15). What follows is an intriguing, if occasionally counter-intuitive, reading of Plato. 'Beneficial Falsehoods in the *Republic*: The Priority of the Practical' makes a distinction between genuine falsehoods 'which are located in the soul' and falsehoods in words which are 'imitative and impure' (19). The former can be framed as innocent ignorance, whereas the latter is deliberate duplicity. The authors believe that their detailed reading of the *Republic* strikes the first major blow against the AE. If, as Socrates claims, some falsehoods are needed to maintain the city-state, the claim against Plato falls. Why? Simply, because non-philosophers are often ignorant of the truth and need to be prodded towards that which is good for them (35). The manner of said prodding is taken up in 'Ethical Commitments and Persuasion in the *Law*', wherein they argue that the noble lie is equivalent to persuasion insofar as it 'promote[s] correct action at the cost of true belief' (40). Here again, the argument is directional/hierarchical in that it is predicated on the assumption that philosophers differ substantially from non-philosophers. How so? Because, yet again, 'some subject matters are beyond the grasp of certain individuals' (53). The authors then suggest, absent notation, that this settles 'an important debate among scholars' to the extent that it demonstrates that persuasion 'is pragmatic' (63). The final chapter in this section, 'The Ring of Gyges and the Nature of Ethical Commitments', begins by suggesting that Plato is more concerned with beliefs and finds 'that acts and outcomes are of secondary importance' (67). In what follows, the authors advance an argument



that we support concepts—for example, justice—for their ‘intrinsic’ value, for their ‘non-instrumental’ import (78-79). What is left open for consideration is how acts/outcomes remain secondary, given that the argument then suggests ‘that the value can only be realized though *being* just (or least striving towards becoming just)’ (80). What is not left open, in concluding their arguments against AE readings, is the directional nature of this argument: a lie is permissible when it is uttered by a person with a ‘sufficiently superior epistemic and moral vantage point’ (86).

‘Part II: Courage, Caution, and Faith’ turns to the second claim, Epistemic Caution (EC), which argues ‘we ought never . . . form beliefs in the absence of strong opinion’ (91). ‘Charming Away the Fear of Death in the *Phaedo*’ begins with the authors asserting that there are four strands of unphilosophical thinking which can be reduced to two traits: ‘a lack of skill with arguments’ and ‘placing little value on the truth’ (93). What, then, is the counter to those traits insofar as it challenges EC? Yet again, only certain types of people can do the work of philosophy. Those with certain types of ‘epistemic and ethical ability’ are allowed to tread where others should not and can do unto others—being ‘epistemically vicious,’ for instance—what others can’t do to them (100). Why? In their capable hands, such viciousness might produce benefits. In unphilosophical hands, the results are falsehoods. Further, in ‘Better, Braver, and Less Idle: Faith and Inquiry in the *Meno*’, suggests that the philosophical minded can embrace a Jamesian mindset, courageously taking ‘leaps of faith’ despite the ‘epistemic risk’ (110). Contra other Jamesian notions regarding ‘the systematic enterprise of inquiry’ (126), the authors again emphasize that a specific quality of mind, one that ‘possesses Socratic wisdom’ (123), is necessary. ‘Absurdity and Speciousness in the *Protagoras* and the *Euthydemus*’ closes this section out by emphasizing other abilities granted to those with said wisdom. In a carefully considered comparison of the tonal differences displayed by Socrates in these two dialogues, the authors suggest a philosopher-teacher who can instruct others in what they call the ‘dichotomy of circumspection principle’: be ‘more cautious’ when something seems ‘more believable’; show ‘less caution’ when something seems ‘more ridiculous’ (137).

‘Part III: Commoners, Rulers, and Gods’ focuses on a claim which is, in some ways, a reply to the previous two: the Philosopher (P) claim, which suggests that philosophers proper would never sanction ‘falsehoods and epistemic risks’ even if a layperson might (157). As such, both chapters amount in large part to reiterating and restating arguments in the previous sections.

‘Philosophers, Soul Parts, and False Beliefs in the *Republic*’ answers that, yes, anyone can become a philosopher. While philosophers-raised-as-philosophers demonstrate ‘greater depth through rational reflection’ (173), others (even Socrates) might obtain to a level of reflection even if it is ‘not as great or reliable’ (170). ‘Truthful Gods and the Limits of Divine Assimilation’ is a lengthy detailing of an answer to a simple question: do Gods lie? Let the authors’ final line in this section provide the answer: ‘to be human is to require falsehood and deception—this is one of the key respects in which we differ from the gods’ (194).

The ‘Coda’ serves as a summary and extension of the previous three parts, wherein the authors respond to potential challenges and offer a limited number of qualifications. Still, they hope that their efforts yield at least two positive results: that ‘a pragmatic interpretation of Plato is well-supported by the texts,’ and that the same argument ‘will open new avenues within Plato scholarship’ (197).

This hope is one to which we will return shortly.

There is one minor quibble, likely common to those who teach Plato. The authors engage in a bit of conflation regarding Plato and Socrates. At times, the authors write as though the character of Socrates reflects the views of Plato. At others, they suggest that Plato was a philosopher whereas the character of Socrates—‘perhaps the most philosophical of all humans’—was not (177). But there are at least two omissions which, when attempting to slot Plato into a pragmatic frame, are curious and problematic. While the authors make good use of the *Protagoras*, and do an exceptional job detailing their other sources, there is little mention of either *Gorgias* or *Phaedrus*. What references exist are at best a gloss, and at worst reductive. In the ‘Prelude’ they argue that the *Gorgias* demonstrates Plato’s aversion to ‘mere rhetorical persuasion’ which ‘is indifferent to the truth’ and ‘merely concerned with flattery and pleasure’ (5). This brief take is simply a reiteration of Plato’s claims about Sophistry, one that even his student Aristotle seemed to distance himself from. It is also a confusingly threadbare repudiation of rhetoric *as* persuasion, putting aside the question of what other sorts of persuasion exist that aren’t *merely* rhetorical. Later, in the first chapter, the authors merge another small discussion of the *Gorgias* with an equally interesting aside about the *Phaedrus*. The focus is on the myth of Boreas (22-23). Nowhere do they discuss the seductive musing of Socrates and the young Phaedrus, nor the ultimate aim of the same to detail, in quite a bit of specificity, the nature of a philosophical rhetoric that would obtain approval from Plato. These omissions, likely innocent oversights, are substantial stumbling blocks if one is to argue for reading Plato as a pragmatist.

Which returns us to the ‘Coda’. There is also one tendency that the authors display—already briefly touched upon in several instances—that suggests their interpretation is more of a thought-puzzle or engaging instances of ‘what-if.’ After advancing numerous extensions on their basic argument, they include a final section which posits the following: even if their view of Plato is incorrect, the ‘arguments and ideas . . . in the preceding chapters are worth considering in their own right’ (206). Then, in the very next sentence, they return to framing those same arguments and ideas as Plato’s pragmatism. But those are two very distinct arguments. One is that Plato was a pragmatist, or at least had strong pragmatic tendencies. The other is that there is a way of interpreting Plato pragmatically. The first demands more than the second, even as the second seems a more workable and intriguing proposition.

Plato’s Pragmatism should, as the publisher’s online description and the book’s front-matter suggests, be of interest to ‘scholars and advanced students of Plato and ancient philosophy . . . [as well as] those working on current controversies in ethics and epistemology.’ The larger questions are what sort of interest will it arouse, and to which side will readers tilt after reflecting on this potentially perspective-changing interpretation?

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