

Michael LaFargue, *Rational Spirituality and Divine Virtue in Plato: A Modern Interpretation and Philosophical Defense of Platonism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, 273pp., ISBN 978-1-43846-025-3.

Erik Nis Ostenfeld, *Human Wisdom: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2016, 382 pp., ISBN 978-3-89665-694-0.

These two recent books are alike in addressing wisdom in the Platonic tradition, but do so in different ways. Michael LaFargue's *Rational Spirituality and Divine Virtue in Plato* presents a "critical reconstruction" of Platonic ethics that can be applied to character development today. He starts from the perspective that philosophy was a way of life for Plato and other ancient philosophers, and that one of its central concerns was the cultivation of character by inquiry into and pursuit of virtue ideals. Therefore, he discounts the metaphysical interpretation of the Forms and focuses on Virtue-Forms as ideal models on which to build character. The essence of Platonic ethics, he argues, is to refine understanding of the Virtue-Forms through critical reasoning. He states that a recurring reason for the metaphysical interpretation and other distortions is an ahistorical perspective common to many philosophers.

LaFargue presents his thesis repeatedly, but at progressively deeper levels that explore details and interconnections. An introductory chapter defines his goals and provides a chapter by chapter outline of this method; the following chapter (ch. 1) is a systematic overview of the rational foundations for Platonic "otherworldly" (i.e., ideal) spirituality. The topic of chapter 2 is the objectivity of the good, which is based on the ethical perception of uncontroversial and clear-cut examples, which nevertheless may differ among people, cultures, and times. He also explores parallels in the ethical writings of Moore, Husserl, Heidegger, and Rorty.

Chapter 3 addresses interpretive issues. First, LaFargue argues that Plato wrote dialogues because he wanted to engage the reader in a Socratic inquiry into the Value-Forms, and that he didn't intend to present a systematic doctrine. Second, progress in the natural and human sciences leads most contemporary philosophers to doubt the possibility of identifying a universal, culture-independent set of virtues. Therefore, LaFargue advocates a "critical reconstruction" of Plato's ideas. This entails developing a model of Socratic method and reducing ethical claims to just those supported by this method. He argues that this approach preserves the foundations for a robust virtue-centered Platonism, but it is a "critical pluralist" theory in that it steers a course between universal ideal virtues and skeptical relativism. Therefore individuals are invited to engage in their own Socratic inquiries to arrive at ethical ideals based on their own clear and distinct ethical perceptions.

Chapter 4 expands several of these themes. First, LaFargue contrasts the virtue ethics of Plato and of his own critical reconstruction with more common contemporary ethical notions, which relate virtue to behavior and neglect character. Second, following Moore and Wittgenstein, he extends ethics to include ultimate questions, and in particular, that which is "admirable." Finally he argues that Platonic philosophy is better treated as a worldview (à la Dilthey) than as a metaphysics, and that this leaves a robust Platonism capable of dealing with ethical issues in a contemporary context.

Chapter 5 explains the practicalities of this critical reconstruction of the Socratic method as illustrated by the *Laches* inquiry into courage. Fundamentally it is an inductive process organized around conjectures and refutations. It is based on clear and distinct ethical perceptions

(which may, nevertheless differ among individuals, cultures, and times), which support both conjectures regarding the essences of virtues, but also potential counter-examples (refutations) of them. LaFargue supports his theses with a close reading of the *Republic*'s middle books, which focus on Socratic analysis of the Virtue-Forms.

Chapter 6 focuses on the relation of abstract Virtue-Forms to concrete particulars and how we can know the Forms. He argues for a correspondence between *doxa* and *aisthêsis*, on the one hand, and *epistêmê* and *noêsis*, on the other. The former are characteristic of most people, who are concrete-minded, while the latter characterize the ideal Platonist philosopher. LaFargue draws a parallel between Plato's interest in concrete sensory perceptions (the finger that is both long and short) and contradictory concrete ethical perceptions (actions that are a mixture of good and bad). The chapter is capped with an excursus on the meaning of *doxa* in the context of the virtue discussions in Book 5.

Chapter 7 continues a defense of an ethical as opposed to metaphysical reading of the Virtue-Forms. The true Platonic philosopher ascends from the "seemingness" (*doxa*) of concrete ethical judgments to the "real being" (*ontos on*) of abstract Virtue-Forms. In this way the Platonic philosopher becomes spiritual and even divine. As examples he discusses ethical interpretations of the allegory of the cave and of Diotima's ascent in the *Symposium*.

In chapter 8 LaFargue presents several examples of his critically reconstructed Socratic inquiry. Since it does not depend on a particular set of virtues, but rather involves an internal critique and analysis of any chosen virtue (critical pluralism), it can be applied to contemporary issues. Therefore he conducts an internal critique of Nietzsche's ethical ideas and of the virtues of honesty and romantic love.

Throughout, LaFargue has argued that Plato's Forms should not be interpreted metaphysically; therefore in chapter 9 he addresses Heidegger's claim that Plato is the founder of Western metaphysics. This incorrect conclusion results, he argues, from a (not uncommon) ahistorical reading of Plato, and from Heidegger's admitted willingness to "use force" when interpreting texts. To make his critical reconstruction more concrete, the book's appendix presents a sample writing exercise in Socratic reasoning, which LaFargue has used in class.

LaFargue's thoughts are obviously an outcome of regular engagement with Plato's dialogues. His experience teaching this material is evident in the way he revisits the same ideas and issues at progressively deeper levels. Occasionally this is tedious, but it reinforces the ideas. The writing is clear throughout. Readers will find in LaFargue's book both a critical reconstruction of Platonic ethical inquiry, suitable for use today, and a thought-provoking essay into the interpretation of Plato.

Missing from this account of Platonic spirituality and divine virtue is any discussion of non-rational engagement with the Virtue-Forms, such as we find in Neoplatonic philosophy, which might shed light on the non-rational origins of clear and distinct ethical perceptions. They do not come from nowhere, and a more complete Platonic virtue ethics would encompass their origin and nature.

*Human Wisdom* by Erik Nis Ostenfeld also addresses wisdom in the Platonic tradition, similarly focusing on Socratic inquiry concerning ethics. It collects two dozen articles spanning the author's career, most previously published, but a few appearing in print for the first time. They are organized chronologically, from Pythagoras to Posidonius, in three parts: Socrates,

Plato, and Later Philosophy. These are prefaced by a chapter on *peras* and *apeiron* in early Pythagorean philosophy, which argues that they are value-laden principles of order and disorder antedating the form/matter distinction, but with resonances in contemporary physical theory.

Part I focuses on Socrates and comprises seven studies on Socratic method and morality. The first five essays analyze the Socratic *elenchus* as exemplified by the early dialogues, concluding that there are four kinds, three indirect (the majority) and one direct. They are primarily used negatively, to refute a definition for example, but both direct and indirect *elenchi* are occasionally used positively, that is, toward establishing truth. The remaining two essays in Part I address Socratic morality, concluding (mainly from the *Charmides*) that one's own good and happiness is the foundation for acting justly, and (mainly from the *Gorgias*) that power and expertise (*technê*) are necessary ingredients of virtue.

Part II is the longest, comprising fourteen essays dealing with the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, Platonic psychology, and the development and interpretation of Plato. The first group focuses on mental health and on its relation to physical health and to the health of the state, as addressed especially in the *Republic*, but appearing throughout the corpus. All three species of health are influenced by Alcmaeon's notion of *isonomia*: that health is rooted in balance and harmony. Ostenfeld traces a development in Plato's thought, a growing awareness of the ineradicable and fundamentally irrational effect of the body. He notes that this is a modern attitude (in contemporary terms, a recognition of the importance of neuropsychology and unconscious processes). There is a concomitant shift of emphasis from education to social conditioning.

The *Timaeus* is the subject of the next group of essays, which focus on the nature and relation of the Forms and matter. Cosmic matter is a result of the imposition of the Forms as numerical ratios on pre-cosmic matter (chaos), which is a place-matrix of irregular solids. Motion in the pre-cosmic chaos cannot be attributed to an irrational soul, which is not supported by the *Timaeus*, but must be due to an irrational part of the world soul.

The third group of essays in Part II address Platonic psychology in the later dialogues. They have in common the idea that a soul is a self-mover, and Ostenfeld argues that this implies some kind of partition (as in the Platonic tripartite soul), and this in turn implies embodiment. In these dialogues the soul is not a substance, but a power (*dunamis*) or change (*kinêsis*), and so it must be *in* something else. Thus in the *Philebus* the soul is a mathematical harmony or dynamic structure of the body. Moreover, the later dialogues agree that a mind requires a soul, and therefore that reason is necessarily embodied. Ostenfeld argues that in the *Politicus* and other late dialogues even God must be embodied, that is, immanent, and hence Plato's theology is pantheist. The last essay in this group addresses *sophrosunê* in the *Laws* and argues that reason can control desire in three ways: self-control decreases the effect of a desire, conditioning redirects a desire toward other objects, and sublimation transforms a desire into something higher.

The last three essays in Part II focus on the development and interpretation of Plato's views. The first argues for the traditional late date of the *Timaeus*, and therefore for the importance of mathematical notions in Plato's mature thought (also attested by Aristotle). The second defends Plato's authorship of the *Epinomis* on the basis of both content and style, and therefore the importance of mathematics in the Platonic curriculum. In the final essay, Ostenfeld argues that no one character in the dialogues represents Plato's views, but that the dialogues must be taken as artistic wholes that represent his ideas holistically.

Part III comprises just two essays, which seem out of place in this collection except insofar as they address the good life and later developments of Platonic philosophy. The first considers Aristotle's notions of the *summum bonum* and *eudaimonia*. The second considers the Middle Stoa in the persons of Panaetius and Posidonius, how they foreshadow Neoplatonism's reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle, and how they also anticipate a more scientific approach to philosophy based on theory and observation.

Both books illustrate the more-than-historical contemporary relevance of Platonism, for Socratic inquiry remains a valuable tool for critically analyzing the ethical ideals on which to build character. But we now know that it is not sufficient. Wisdom also must encompass our unconscious, non-rational, and embodied nature in order to guide us truly. Understanding humans in their wholeness is necessary to a Platonic way of life that is comprehensive, practical, and spiritual.

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