

Sara Ahbel-Rappe, *Socratic Ignorance and Platonic Knowledge in the Dialogues of Plato*. Albany (NY): SUNY Press, 2018. 296 p., Hardcover, ISBN 978-1-4384-6927-0, \$95 / Paperback, ISBN 978-1-4384-6926-3, \$32.95.

Scholars are often concerned with the theses and arguments in Plato's dialogues. More rarely, they examine their effects on the reader. For example, in the case of the virtues, they study their nature, definition, or the type of ethics that focuses on them. Usually, they avoid asking how Plato envisaged that his readers would acquire the virtues or, more generally, undergo the kind of transformation he was hoping to induce in them. Such is Sara Ahbel-Rappe's (SAR) approach in this book.

Starting from the oracle quoted in the *Apology* ('no one is wiser than Socrates'), she uses it as a starting point for reading the corpus. The dialogues become sites of confrontation with a kind of knowledge, through which the reader is supposed to undergo a conversion or transformation under the guidance of Socrates. This mirror game proceeds from a distinction between two kinds of Socrates: the historical figure staged in the dialogues, who goes to the agora and subjects his interlocutors to the *elenchus*, and an "inner Socrates," who asserts the necessity of self-knowledge to reach true wisdom. This latter Socrates, SAR calls "esoteric," but in a different sense from the Tübingen unwritten doctrines or Strauss's hidden truths. Hers is a Socrates who invites us to pursue self-knowledge, not to unearth secret doctrines. To support her interpretation, SAR uses the tools of comparative philosophy, sometimes summoning late Platonism (Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, and Damascius), sometimes non-Western traditions (Buddhism, the Upanishads, and Persian philosophy). By relying on such conceptual approaches, she hopes to promote a way of finding oneself within oneself.

This book, therefore, has a triple objective: 1) taking Socrates off the beaten track so as to situate him at the origin of the initiatory traditions in Western philosophy; 2) mobilising the tools of comparative philosophy; 3) putting forward a philosophical approach in the ancient sense of the term, as highlighted by Hadot and Foucault (whom SAR does not cite), where the core of virtue is self-knowledge. To this end, after laying the foundations of Socratic philosophy and its reception, she devotes each following chapter to a dialogue which raises the question of self-knowledge: *Euthydemus*, *Alcibiades I*, *Lysis*, *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus*, before concluding with a comparison between the *Parmenides* and the *Apology*, the starting and end points of Socrates' initiation.

While this reading may arouse curiosity, it does raise specific questions of methodology. I will limit myself to the main ones. The first, and not the least for a historian of philosophy, concerns SAR's use of Plato's texts. Following the

authors to whom she has devoted her previous works, SAR operates a kind of Neoplatonic division of the passages she studies, translating one part, commenting on the next, going backwards, without always considering the context or giving the whole text in one go. While such work has an undeniable impact, it does not allow the reader easily to retrace the interpretative path. Here are two examples. The first is at the beginning of the preface (vii-viii) and concerns the conclusion that Socrates draws from his investigation into the meaning of the oracle: φαίνεται τοῦτον λέγειν τὸν Σωκράτη, προσεχρησθαι δὲ τῷ ἐμῷ ὀνόματι ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος (“Obviously, to name this man, Socrates, he uses my name to make an example of me”, *Apology*, 23a7-b1). In this sentence, SAR focuses on the couple formed by *phainetai* and *paradeigma*, appearance and model, which she finds at the heart of Platonic philosophy. Although both words appear here, it is in my view difficult to find in them the Platonic opposition between manifestation and form: a Socrates in time and space (τοῦτον) and an eternal Socrates who is a paradigm of wisdom. Socrates stands here as an example—an example to follow *here and now*. Moreover, in Plato, the paradigm does not necessarily mean the eternal model (or form), but the explanatory model for a complex reality, such as the weaving paradigm in the *Statesman*. The second example concerns a passage from the *Phaedrus* (247d5-e2), first quoted (118) in an abbreviated form (without e2) with an erroneous reference (c5 instead of d5), and then analysed in the following pages. SAR is correct to pin it down, especially for the e2 clause: τὴν ἐν τῷ ὄντι ὄντως ἐπιστήμην οὔσαν. However, by not quoting it at the outset, by giving the context in snippets and afterwards, by introducing Neoplatonic readings, she arrives at a questionable translation: “Rather, it is knowledge that is real, and it belongs to [the mind or knower] who is truly real” (119), which identifies the subject and the object of knowledge, taking it as read that the place of true knowledge for the soul is within itself. This reading is only possible if one isolates this clause. Another reading, that of Yunis for instance (2011): “but the knowledge that is real in the circumstance of what is truly Being”, has the merit of preserving the mythical character of the passage and of not anticipating its interpretation, since the reminiscence only appears two pages later, in 249c.

Another flaw is the dogmatic tone of some of her questionable assertions. This is the case, for example, with the authenticity of the *Alcibiades*. SAR points out that it is still under debate, and that scholars tend to reject it (xx and 71). However, she refrains from pronouncing herself on the issue because her project is different: to focus in the *Alcibiades* the lineaments of a theory of Socratic self-knowledge. Such a position indicates how to approach her book: less a literal reading of the dialogues than a reconstruction of a consistent

Socratic philosophy, starting from Plato and the Platonists, and finding parallels in non-Western traditions.

A final difficulty concerns the comparative dimension. This high-flying exercise needs to involve complex strategies to avoid falling into the anecdotal. More particularly, it involves taking into account the contexts of the systems of thought that are being compared and the ways in which they are theorized. Only on this condition can the contributions that are being compared become meaningful, since, in order to compare, one must know what one compares. However, this is not quite SAR's project, which has more to do with parallels intended to illustrate an analysis or a thesis attributed to Socrates or, very possibly, to remove difficulties raised by Plato's text.

To these substantive remarks, one should add some shortcomings in the presentation. For example, transliterated words are not always in italics, quotations are not always (well) referenced, and some appear in the body of the text without markers (neither inverted commas nor indentations), while some sentences appear identically two pages apart. Although some of those are mere typos, they are regrettable in a book produced under a prestigious imprint.

In conclusion, the reader who agrees to look at the dialogues anew will find in this approach many issues of interest and, who knows, an original lead, for SAR does not aim at producing a new analysis of Plato, but at trying something new around Socrates. The more traditionally-minded reader of Plato would be well advised to take this book with the proverbial pinch—or bushel—of salt.

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