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978-0-521-03379-4 - Plato and his Predecessors: The Dramatisation of Reason

Mary Margaret McCabe

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PLATO AND HIS PREDECESSORS

How does Plato view his philosophical antecedents? *Plato and his Predecessors* considers how Plato represents his philosophical predecessors in a late quartet of dialogues: the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*. Why is it that the sophist Protagoras, or the monist Parmenides, or the advocate of flux, Heraclitus, are so important in these dialogues? And why are they represented as such shadowy figures, barely present at their own refutations? The explanation, the author argues, is a complex one involving both the reflective relation between Plato's dramatic technique and his philosophical purposes, and the very nature of his late philosophical views. For in these encounters with his predecessors we see Plato develop a new account of the principles of reason, against those who would deny them, and forge a fresh view of the best life – the life of the philosopher.

Mary Margaret McCabe is Professor of Ancient Philosophy at King's College London. She is the author of *Plato on Punishment* (as M. M. Mackenzie) (1981), *Plato's Individuals* (1994). She was co-editor with C. Gill of *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (1996).

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Preface

This book had its origins in the W. B. Stanford Memorial Lectures at Trinity College, Dublin, in February 1996; I am extremely grateful to John Dillon and Kathy Coleman both for the honour of their invitation and for the warmth of their hospitality, then and thereafter. My audiences in Dublin were very generous and their various comments and questions most illuminating. In particular, Vasilis Politis and John Cleary made me clarify a good deal that had been unclear; whatever opacity there remains – and I fear there may be far too much – is despite their best efforts.

In a form close to the present one Chapter 2 was delivered at the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy in September 1996, and again at Queen's University, Belfast; and it is published in *Dialogos* 1998. I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint that material here. A French version of some of Chapters 5 and 6 was delivered at the Sorbonne in 1996, and is published as 'Téléologie et Autonomie dans le *Philèbe* de Platon' in *La fêlure du plaisir et la pensée. Études sur le Philèbe de Platon* vol. 1, ed. M. Dixsaut. Some of the same material was delivered at University College Cork and at King's College London. On all these various occasions I was fortunate in my audiences, whom I should like warmly to thank. In addition John Dillon, Verity Harte, Alan Lacey and Vasilis Politis have all read and commented upon a draft of the whole book; I am extremely grateful to them, both for their patience and for their insights. As reader for the Press, John Cooper made extensive comments on the whole manuscript with his customary care and incisiveness. I am very much indebted to him both for his encouragement and his criticisms. My particular thanks also – as well as the customary exculpation – go to Tad Brennan, Luc Brisson, Myles Burnyeat, Nick Denyer, Monique Dixsaut, David Evans, Dorothea Frede, Chris Gill, Keith Hossack,

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Preface

Chris Hughes, Denis O'Brien, David Papineau, Christopher Rowe, Anthony Savile, Mark Sainsbury, Malcolm Schofield, David Sedley, Bob Sharples, Richard Sorabji, Raphael Woolf.

Over the last six years there has been a long-running weekly seminar on ancient texts at Kings; the seminar is always an invigorating occasion, marked by its co-operative approach. I should like to thank all its members, especially Tad Brennan and Verity Harte who have joined me in convening it; and especially, also, those who were involved in the seminars on the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*. I have no doubt that in what follows any ideas that may have any merit will have come from someone else; I hope whoever it may be will forgive my disastrous memory and my failing to mention it in the particular case.

Pauline Hire at Cambridge University Press has been an exemplary editor; my warm thanks to her for her encouragement and help. Muriel Hall copy-edited the manuscript with the sanity of a light touch; my thanks.

In the academic year 1997–8 I was fortunate to hold a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Senior Research fellowship; I am extremely grateful to the Academy and the Leverhulme Trust for their support.

As before, I should like to acknowledge two major debts in writing this book. The first is to the Department of Philosophy at King's – it is a wonderful place to do philosophy; my deep thanks. The second is to my infinitely tolerant family: my two daughters, Kate and Poppy, my mother Sarah McCabe, and my husband Martin Beddoe. This book is dedicated to Martin, with much love.

MMM