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978-0-521-85932-5 - Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing

Christopher Rowe

Frontmatter

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PHILOSOPHICAL WRITING

Plato's dialogues are usually understood as simple examples of philosophy in action. In this book Professor Rowe treats them rather as literary-philosophical artefacts, shaped by Plato's desire to persuade his readers to exchange their view of life and the universe for a different view which, from their present perspective, they will barely begin to comprehend. What emerges is a radically new Plato: a Socratic throughout, who even in the late dialogues is still essentially the Plato (and the Socrates) of the *Apology* and the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues. This book aims to understand Plato both as a philosopher and as a writer, on the assumption that neither of these aspects of the dialogues can be understood without the other. The argument of the book is closely based on Plato's text, but should be accessible to any serious reader of Plato, whether professional philosopher or classicist, student or general reader.

CHRISTOPHER ROWE is Professor of Greek in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Durham University. His recent publications include *Plato: Phaedo* (1993) and (with Terry Penner) *Plato's Lysis* (2005).

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I offer in this book what is in some respects a new approach to Plato: one that attempts to take account of his strategies as a writer who writes, for the most part, in order to *persuade* his readers; an approach that attempts, in particular, to understand the way in which those strategies help to shape what he writes. In other words, my first concern is with understanding the nature of Platonic *rhetoric*. What he actually says, or has his main character – usually Socrates – say, is usually only a version of what he wants to say, designed to suit a particular audience on a particular occasion, as defined by the *dramatis personae* and the setting of the individual work; and he may well offer us different versions of the same thing, either in the same dialogue or, more usually, in others. It is one of the main claims of this book that trying to read off Plato's thinking from the surface of the dialogues is unlikely to be a reliable method for understanding him; especially when such a method is combined, as it often is, with a tendency to interpret different treatments of the same topic in chronological terms, that is, as evidence of 'developments' in his thinking. What will emerge, by the end of the book, is a Plato who will be, to most readers, and often for different reasons, unlike the Plato they have come to think they know.

At the same time, however, I am conscious of returning, in some respects, to an earlier tradition, which I identify particularly with Paul Shorey, among the Anglophones, and among French scholars with figures like Auguste Diès, Joseph Moreau, and more recently Monique Dixsaut, the sensitivity of all of whom to the complexity and sophistication of Plato's writing resists domination by any particular school of interpretation – whether one that sees Plato as a purveyor of doctrines, or one that treats him as a thinker who above all wants *us* to think, for ourselves. (These are caricatures, one of an ancient tradition of interpretation, the second of a more modern one.) This may be wishful thinking, and I may be on my own, as in some parts of the book I surely am; nor would I claim the protection of the figures just named for the outcomes of this book. It is, however, certainly true

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that the book finds itself opposed to the two tendencies I have just referred to. It is opposed, particularly, to the second type of interpretation, the non-doctrinalist one, which in one variety or another currently dominates Anglophone Platonic scholarship – usually in combination with a special ‘developmental’ thesis: that Plato started as a Socratic, but broke away in mid-career to become a Platonist. My own rival thesis is that Plato stayed a Socratic till the end. That is why, for the most part, he keeps Socrates on as his main speaker; ‘Socrates’, indeed, is his *alter ego*, his *persona*, his mask. And as it happens, this thesis also turns the normal non-‘developmentalist’, or ‘unitarian’ (also ‘doctrinalist’) type of interpretation on its head. The normal, contemporary ‘unitarian’ view starts from the ‘mature’ Plato and works backwards, so that Plato’s Socraticism is submerged and obliterated. This view too I find mistaken and unhelpful, even if, over the centuries, it or some version of it has given the world what it understood as ‘Plato’. So from at least two perspectives this will appear a radical book. Yet, as I have implied, I believe that this appearance has more to do with the directions that Platonic interpretation has taken in the last century than with the book’s theses in themselves. As I read Shorey’s *The Unity of Plato’s Thought*, for example, from 1903, or Diès on Platonic *transposition* (1913), I have the sense that I am in large part only walking old and overgrown paths again.

However the book is not written primarily in order to argue *against* any particular view of Plato. Rather, its purpose is to argue *for* a view which happens to be in opposition to others. This is reflected in the fact that I make relatively little reference to existing literature on Plato, rarely engage directly with others on particular points, and frequently fail to acknowledge that others have arrived before me at what may look like the same interpretations. My explanation, and excuse, apart from the fact that the book is already long enough, is that despite the extended and detailed discussions of particular stretches of text that occupy the larger part of the book, my overriding concern at every point is less with those discussions in themselves than with the larger argument they are designed to support. It is chiefly for that larger argument, and the light that *it* brings to Plato’s texts, that I claim whatever degree of originality the book may have. My broad characterizations of current trends in Platonic scholarship are a product of ten years’ service as compiler of ‘Booknotes on Plato and Socrates’ for *Phronesis*, with up to fifty books a year to read – mainly in English, but also in French, German, and Italian, occasionally in Spanish (or Catalan); crude my characterizations may be, but I dare say they are true enough to life.

My argument is, inevitably, still a work in progress. Since it will never be complete (and I have already had to cut out at least a third of what I

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had originally intended to include), now is as good a moment as any to bring it to publication. If the book's title recalls Richard Rutherford's *The Art of Plato* (1995), and, more polemically, Thomas Szlezák's *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie* (originally 1985; volume II, 2004), that is accidental. *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (PAPW) has a much closer relationship to the book Terry Penner and I co-authored on Plato's *Lysis* (Cambridge University Press 2005), of which it is, in a way, a direct descendant. My part in *Plato's Lysis* was the first fruit of a five-year Personal Research Professorship awarded to me by the Leverhulme Trust; PAPW is the second – and indeed it was the original project for the Professorship. However, as it turned out, *Plato's Lysis* was a necessary first step, helping to shape many of the central ideas in PAPW. In some important respects PAPW even presupposes the earlier volume, while also applying aspects of its outcomes to a much larger quantity of text: perhaps, in one way or another, up to half of the genuine dialogues. At the same time PAPW brings together, and gives a fuller context and meaning to, a significant number of my other publications, whether commentaries, articles or book chapters; some of this published material has been absorbed into the new book, but nearly all of it has been completely re-thought and re-written to fit the new, larger context.

My thanks go, first and foremost, to the Leverhulme Trust, without whose support neither *Plato's Lysis* nor PAPW would probably have emerged until five or ten years from now, if at all; in second place to Terry Penner, who as usual has been ready with philosophical support whenever asked, but who is completely innocent of any philosophical crimes that I may have committed over the following pages; then to all those friends, colleagues and students with whom I have discussed various parts of the book, in various parts of the world, over the last fifteen to twenty years; to my talented and inspiring departmental colleagues in Durham; to Durham University, for awarding me a Sir Derman Christopherson Fellowship for the last, crucial stages of the writing of the book; to the Durham Institute of Advanced Studies, for a haven and good philosophical company over the last months; to the two long-suffering readers for the Press (one of whom was Thomas Johansen); to Jodie Barnes, Sarah Parker, Michael Sharp and especially Linda Woodward (best of copy-editors) at the Press; and last but hardly least, to Heather Rowe.

Durham, May 2007