

## BOOK REVIEW

*Plato's Wayward Path: Literary Form and the Republic*. By DAVID SCHUR. Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2014. Pp. xii + 132. Paper, \$22.50. ISBN 978-0-674-41721-2

The “and” in the second part of the title of David Schur’s book—*Plato’s Wayward Path: Literary Form and the Republic*—is decisive. His book falls into two equally short and largely independent parts. The first takes up generic form as it pertains to the history of the interpretation of Plato’s dialogues, especially the inadequately grasped distinction between literary and expository genres. The second draws out some features of the *Republic* that account for its being fictional, provisional, recursive, and concerned more to depict a conversation focused on investigation than to assert discoveries in metaphysics and ethics.

The book’s two halves do not, of course, lack all connection. The second half would have risked appearing a superficial or arbitrary reading of the *Republic* were Schur not to have motivated it as an alternative to the “dogmatic” or “rhetorical” readings adumbrated in the first half. The first half would have risked appearing only one more excoriation of mainstream Plato interpretation were Schur not to go on to show the way to a more authentic or fecund approach to the dialogue. All the same, it would be difficult to say that the book *progresses* or *culminates* from one half to the next in specific findings, formulations, or interpretations. Rather, both halves nudge their readers, if insistently, to reflect on their goals when reading (or studying, or teaching, or writing about) the *Republic*. On Schur’s view, those reflections are to include something like, “What sort of things might this dialogue most directly be about?” and “Am I supposed to be learning anything from reading this dialogue?” Though the goals of each half are the same, then, I will address them in turn.

I should say something first, however, about the first part of the title. “Plato’s Wayward Path” refers to Schur’s twin claims that (i) Plato’s work should not be read as defending a unified substantive position (whether or not obscured by stylistic ornamentation or generic blending) and that (ii) it should be read instead as presenting conversational inquiry as travel along a splitting trail, full of

detours and roundabouts. It does not refer, as the words might imply, to waywardness as such in Plato's intellectual career or fashion of writing (both of which could have been tenable theses); that is, the book is neither biographical nor psychologicistic, concerned neither with Plato's life nor even, in some sense, with his conscious intentions.

The first half (3–56) of the book is the more successful of the two. Indeed it is successful enough as to warrant recommending it to any scholar or student for whom the right way to read Plato's dialogues has become an urgent question. Schur begins with an enlightening and efficient exposition of the ways Wilhelm Tennemann, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and René Schaerer aimed to coordinate their vision of Plato as a philosopher communicating a cogent and innovative set of philosophical statements with his use of the dialogue form as contradictory, disconnected, and often concerned more with its characters' argumentative failings than with the argument's significance itself. This recovery of foundational German and French scholarship (now little discussed in Plato studies) provides a touchstone for Schur's critique of almost all Plato scholarship, not just so-called "analytic" but also the seemingly revisionary "literary," "holistic," or "dramatic" approaches (for example by Richard Rutherford, Charles Kahn, and Christopher Rowe). The problem with all these approaches, Schur argues in the first two chapters, is their proclivity to read Plato's works "rhetorically," that is, as aiming to persuade their readers of substantive theses, even if that persuasion involves the instrumental use of "literary"—i.e., colorful, oblique, or hidden—strategies. Reading Plato's works in this trope- and texture-sensitive way still takes them to be didactic expositions of refined and confident positions, lenses (even if kaleidoscopic) into Plato's doctrine-asserting mind. In the third chapter, Schur urges attending to the techniques of distancing and modalization found throughout the dialogues, techniques that serve to decouple what identifiable propositions we might find in them from any presumption that they must represent Plato's considered beliefs.

Schur's distinction between literary and expository modes provides a salutary conceptual distinction for our scholarly discussions about reading Plato. It should be admitted, however, that Schur does not quite index this conceptual distinction to other (more familiar) anti-dogmatic stances found in the recent literature. For example, critics of the "mouthpiece" view hold that we should not assume that the assertions of Socrates represent the assertions of Plato (e.g. Debra Nails, Angelo Corlett); still others doubt that there are even so many assertions ascribable to Socrates (e.g. Sandra Peterson). More disappointing is

Schur's decision not to engage with the question of the "Socratic dialogue" as such (of which Plato's dialogues are likely even if peculiar instances). Even if literary and fictional, this genre also has a specific historical, apologetic, social, and even philosophical context, in particular as a response to Socrates' execution and perhaps more precisely Polycrates' *Accusation of Socrates*.

The book's last three chapters (59–114) argue that the *Republic* depicts a conversation that ends up being principally about the method of (conversational) inquiry itself. Socrates' retelling of this conversation—which repeatedly uses travel imagery—is full of conditional statements, qualifications, approximations, detours, and longcuts. The most important topics, for example the Form of the Good, are blatantly circumnavigated or set aside for another day. Chapter six argues provocatively that the Cave passage is not to be read allegorically but as a "theoretical argument."

Like the salutary distinction between literary and expository forms, Schur's minutely detailed cataloguing of the patterns in Socrates' storytelling, especially his circumlocutory avoidances of direct assertion, reinvigorate one's wish to read the *Republic* with as much sensitivity to Socrates' exact words as possible. But again something important feels absent, and not just the full-blooded assertions about the nature of soul and justice, for example, that Schur has told us not to seek. That feeling of something lacking is quiescent when we take to heart Schur's claim that the dialogue depicts Socratic conversation, a form of verbal investigative exchange full of digression, self-questioning, and hopes of progress. But the feeling reactivates when we wonder what makes the *Republic* special over and beyond the other Platonic dialogues deeply concerned with conversation, like the *Protagoras* or *Laches*. Schur does observe, to be sure, that the *Republic* takes up especially hard and vital questions, such as about the illuminating or existential nature of the good; and Schur's tightly circumscribed reading of the text (attuned almost exclusively to Socrates' metaconversational remarks) shows us an oft-read dialogue from a bewilderingly new vantage. But for someone already convinced that he or she should not assume knowledge of Plato's persuasive goals in the *Republic*, it may be uncertain how now to deal differently with the dialogue—in other words, how to read the dialogue, with the purest of intentions, in a way that would seem to develop one's thinking about virtue and the good life, as Socrates and Plato, I am conjecturing, would have wanted. Schur's non-rhetorical literary approach may provide the resources for figuring out how

to read it this way, but the book, probably due to its brevity, does not set them out.

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