

BOOK REVIEW

Platonic Dialogue and the Education of the Reader. By A. K. COTTON. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 330. Hardcover, \$125.00. ISBN 978-0-199-68405-2.

As her title suggests, Cotton is interested in offering an explanation of what a reader of Plato's dialogues learns, irrespective of the period of Plato's oeuvre a particular dialogue is thought have been written.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I contains three sections in which Cotton explains the character of the response of a reader of Plato's dialogues by understanding the activity of his interlocutors as a complex model for the reader. Part II contains five sections in which Cotton provides case studies in order to show how the dialogues engage the reader in the educative manner she argues for. In effect, then, the first half of this book is about the Platonic interlocutor, and the second is about the reader of Plato.

In laying out her argument at the beginning of the book, Cotton introduces the textual indeterminacy argument from the *Phaedrus* (276 b-d) and applies it to all the dialogues. The limits applied to writing in that work complicates how we are to read these texts and how seriously we can take what is said by any of the participants. The dialogues themselves, however, not only complicate the division between written and spoken communication, but also, as she points out, call into question the philosophical value of writing in education. She focuses, then, on the reception within the dialogues by the *interlocutors* (along the lines of reader-response theory), whose responses she understands as commentary on appropriate and inappropriate responses in the *reader*. If reading can be learning, all of the interlocutors' activity can function as a model for the activities of the reader, and can therefore provide a reference point for understanding how the responses that are invoked in a reader can contribute to a reader's own development of independent learning.

In her final section (2.8), Cotton reminds us that in Part I she has explored and substantiated the familiar claim that the reader engages and in a dialogue with the texts in a way that is parallel to the dialogues' interlocutors in kind and in value, and that the result is a type of learning. In Part II, she explores this analogy

through case studies that illustrate the ways in which the dialogues shape the reader's response. Cotton characterizes "learning" as having four features: the reader's effort and participation; a second figure to trigger the experience and ensure appropriate stimuli for her stage; a cognitive-affective character to the engagement; and a range of experiences, such as disbelief, confusion, anger, frustration. All of these experiences will be different within every stage of philosophical development, and they will be handled with greater and lesser deftness (as modeled per "early," "middle," and "late" interlocutors) as a result.

In the book's last sections, Cotton connects the dialectical virtue she has argued for with civic virtue. For all of his focus on eternal truths and away from the imperfections of everyday affairs, Plato simultaneously encourages us to think about everyday morality, the law courts, the symposium, the gymnasium. His invocations of judicial language—that someone should put forward a viewpoint of sufficient strength to convince a jury in court (*Phaedo* 88c-d)—reinforces the pragmatic (not simply academic) skill of being able to distinguish what is true and false: the philosopher must return to the cave (cf. section 1.2). Cotton's argument is that we are to become active receivers, by choosing the philosophical life and taking responsibility for our own decisions and actions, both personally, but, as shown by Socrates' death, civically as well. As such, the dialogues help her progress philosophically as well as prepare the reader for challenges in she will face in learning and in life.

This is a book worth reading, not only for the inventiveness with which Cotton approaches some very old interpretative challenges in reading Plato. The very issues that have given scholars the most problems are exactly the most important strengths that the dialogues possess in order to teach us: issues of dialogical unity (e.g., the two halves of the *Phaedrus*); how to understand the doctrinal approach to dialogues (e.g., the "Socratic" works vs. the "dialectical" later dialogues); how to incorporate into account the "literary" elements of the dialogues; how to understand the characterizations and responses of various interlocutors. In this way she can reframe the division "early" "middle" "late" into phases or steps of philosophical sophistication.

By focusing on education as a journey and not a destination—the goal being independent learners, not being knowers per se—Cotton argues that education is central to the project of the dialogues while avoiding the problem of the doctrinal approach to what else Plato might be teaching the reader. She is also able, I think, to handle Blondell's approach that the interlocutors in the dialogues encourage identification and closeness in the nature of our engagement with them

(108–112).¹ In Cotton's view, our experience of the interlocutors is more likely to invoke distance rather than identification; the more jarring or disruptive a moment there is in the flow of a conversation, the more the reader is engaged in reflective and thoughtful evaluation, rather than closeness and emotional inwardness.

I sympathize with Cotton's examination of civic engagement in the very last section of the book, but I am not sure it follows necessarily from the rest of the discussion. One can stay cognitively engaged in these various dialogues, and not necessarily become politically engaged. The political and civic are present in Plato, to be sure, but they are often made anew: they are in a number of cases philosophical constructs or they lead to abstract ideas, and the real political and current civic events and places with which Socrates and the interlocutors are engaged do not exactly get a positive review. Cotton might say in response that that is exactly the point, and that these conflicts with the political and civic (as in the *Crito* and the *Apology*) necessitate our engagement with them. However, it seems that one could argue that the civic becomes intellectualized and abstracted as much as it becomes concretized regarding the *realpolitik*.

I am not sure about textual evidence for an "internalized, deeper, and more enduring" response in the interlocutors in the very latest works. For example, though the *Laws* gets quite a bit of discussion, you will note that there is no mention above of the *Timaeus* (the only entry in an index is the coupling *Timaeus-Critias*). I would have liked to see Cotton engage with the *Timaeus* in particular since there are dialogical exchanges only up to section 29e. Perhaps the exchanges between 17a and 29e are enough to establish the interlocutor modeling that Cotton is arguing for; alternatively, perhaps the answer is that the reader must be so advanced to be able to engage fully in that work, that there is that point no more guide to help out: she is more or less on her own. While Plato's later texts are indeed more challenging, we might ask if in every case the responses or philosophical phases of the interlocutors in those works are necessarily more sophisticated.

One note, though: as mentioned above, Cotton very briefly discusses the second-century Platonist Albinus as someone sympathetic to her reader-response argument (56–57). Albinus talks about dramatic setting and especially

¹ For Blondell's approach, cf. (2002), *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues*, Cambridge (especially 80–112).

character (even *ethopoiia*), as well as the importance of question and answer in the dialogue; he, like Cotton, discusses the importance of *logismos aitias* in order to secure what the reader learns. She might have applied the idea that Plato's philosophy "is like a circle" (however one wants to interpret that statement), and that the order in which certain texts should be read is only appropriate for readers in certain "dispositions" (*scheseis*). In this way, she could have invoked Albinus' short introduction in various points in the book, adding further support to some of her points.

But again, the argument that all of the various interpretive problems we tend to see in Plato's dialogues are actually solutions is novel, and the process of reading through her book is an invitation to engage in some very productive ways of thinking about reading Plato.

The book is well edited. (There are very few problems: e.g., contrary to what I wrote above, there is a reference to *Timaeus* 43c-44d, 47b-c, 90b-d [p. 260 n.80] that is not found in the "General Index" or in the "Index of Works.")

RYAN C. FOWLER

Franklin and Marshall College, ryan.fowler@fandm.edu