

ANOTHER HANDBOOK OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY (AND MORE): A REVIEW PAPER<sup>1</sup>

**Gerald A. PRESS, Mateo DUSQUE (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Plato*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, XXIX + 521 pp., ISBN 978-1-3502-2723-1, £130.00.**

The second edition of a book providing an overview of the philosophy of one of the greatest philosophers – Plato – has been delivered to the reader. On the one hand, the work appears to be very voluminous (over 500 pages), but on the other hand, considering the subject matter – Plato's philosophy and its reception – and the contemporary state of research on it, the number of pages is not as impressive and even makes one wonder about the advisability of such an undertaking. As the editors themselves point out (p. 2), as many as 110 authors participated in the creation of this work, and they wrote 164 texts on various aspects related to Plato's philosophy. Simple arithmetic alone allows one to see that the individual texts cannot be long, and indeed they are not, with the editors justifying this by their desire to achieve a multifaceted (and dialectical – p. 7) and as complete a treatment of the subject as possible (p. 2). Arguably, such an approach is also dictated by the target group the publication is intended to reach, which is primarily students and those with a general interest in philosophy (p. 7)<sup>2</sup>. The work contains the word “Handbook” in its title, which already implies that its primary value is to inform about the subject in question, so it is also a kind of encyclopaedia, guide, or handbook on Plato's philosophy (p. 6)<sup>3</sup>.

Because it is a very comprehensive work and presents so many themes, in this review I will not refer to everything contained in it but will only turn my attention to a few issues that may be controversial or questionable. The whole work is divided into five sections, the first of which primarily discusses the historical, literary, and philosophical context of Plato's work. The second presents the content of individual writings; the third presents the various features of Plato's dialogues; the fourth addresses the sundry issues dealt with in Plato's works; and the fifth considers the reception, interpretive strategies and influence of the philosophy of the founder of the Academy<sup>4</sup>.

In the first section, my attention was primarily drawn to the chapter “Orality and Literacy” (written by Joanne B. WAUGH, pp. 23–25). Five paragraphs introduce the reader to the problem of orality itself and, in the context of Plato's philosophy, point to an important study in the form of HAVELOCK's monograph *Preface to Plato* (1963 [Polish translation: 2007]). Only the last two paragraphs indicate – and, unfortunately, somewhat superficially – that by paying attention to the issue of orality mentioned in the title, different interpretative results can be obtained, and only in relation to a few texts (e.g. *Phaedrus* 274 B–E; *Letters* II and VII) or issues (*technē, paideia*). This

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “another” in the title because in the German-speaking area, there is a work: *Platon-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (HORN, MÜLLER, SÖDER 2009, <sup>2</sup>2017).

<sup>2</sup> I would therefore add to the abbreviations “MS[S]”, used several times in the book (e.g., p. 49, n. 67), as those not specialised in ancient literature may not know it.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of the range of issues presented, it certainly stands out from other guides – see e.g., KRAUT 1992; BENSON 2006; EBREY, KRAUT 2022 – although the price is a much more truncated presentation of individual issues.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed table of contents, see: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/bloomsbury-handbook-of-plato-9781350227231/> (accessed on 15.06.2023).

seems to make either the question of orality appear as something marginal regarding the interpretation of the *Corpus Platonicum*, or it still requires a great deal of research. With that said, the second possibility seems to me to have little research appeal, since when one turns to the findings of the leading scholars of this issue in the non-philosophical literature (e.g. THOMAS 1992, cited by WAUGH), there are generally a lot of sceptical themes, pointing out, for example, the enormous difficulty of separating (especially in Plato's time and later) the oral and literary orders, and thus that the two aspects of culture intermingle and should be considered together (THOMAS 1992: 4)<sup>5</sup>. It is also worth bearing in mind the distinction between orality conceived as a kind of tradition (which is what we are dealing with in the case of the first Greek poets) and orality conceived as oral communication. It seems that, in the case of Plato's works, we are essentially dealing with the latter, for he is, after all, the author of dialogues, i.e. conversations between X and Y, where, on the one hand, X and Y are people present in the literary work, and on the other hand, at least in antiquity, when works were read aloud and perhaps even some of the dialogues were presented (RYLE 1966: 23 ff.), X<sub>1</sub>, X<sub>2</sub>... are the people in the dialogue, and Y<sub>1</sub>, Y<sub>2</sub>... the listeners, to whom the philosophical content is delivered precisely by means of orality. Of course, this can be considered a sham orality (SANDBACH 1985: 492), and it is an open question to what extent this form of communication affects the understanding of the text of Plato.

As already mentioned, the second part presents Plato's individual dialogues, and they are arranged in alphabetical order. Undoubtedly, the need to present the content concisely poses a formidable challenge for the most extensive writings – the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Although the *Laws* are a larger work than the *Republic* (*R.* = 294 pages and *Lg.* = 345 pages in the Stephanus edition), their presentation in *The Bloomsbury Handbook...* is not only volumetrically opposite (*R.* about 7 pages and *Lg.* just over 2 pages), but also different in terms of the way they are covered. In the case of what is probably Plato's last dialogue, we learn little about its content (the exception being the last – the tenth – book of this work) and more about general methodological problems. In the case of the *Republic*, on the other hand, the author, Nickolas PAPPAS, has chosen to cover the issues arising in this work in a systematic way, and these are, in turn: (I) politics (pp. 117–118), (II) psychology and ethics (pp. 118–119), (III) benefits of justice (pp. 119–120), (IV) poetry and other arts (p. 120), (V) metaphysics (pp. 120–121), (VI) good (pp. 121–122). Arguably, this difference is due to the methodological pluralism advocated by the editors in the Introduction, but in the case of these two especially important (if not the most important) works, the *Laws* certainly deserves at least equal attention. Yet another difference in the discussion of the two works is that in the case of the *Laws* there is an indication of the possibility of consulting a collective bibliography (SAUNDERS, BRISSON 2000), whereas in the case of the *Republic* the bibliographical indications refer to individual issues rather than to the work as a whole. It may have been worthwhile to supplement the references with such holistic coverage, especially as several such items are included in the bibliography<sup>6</sup>.

In this section of the handbook, one other small detail in the chapter on *The Hippias Major* (written by Jacques A. DUVOISIN) caught my attention. After discussing the content and form of the text, it concludes by drawing attention to the question of its authenticity, which has been repeatedly questioned (e.g. by HEITSCH 2011). Therefore, DUVOISIN rightly notes that “the question of textual provenance should not be simply forgotten” (p. 83), but it seems to me that it would have been worthwhile to emphasise explicitly at this point that, even if the authenticity of this work is definitely not questioned, it can still be considered legitimate to doubt its authenticity and thus to

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting, however, that studies attempting to point to oral aspects in Plato's works occasionally appear; see, for example, VERANO 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., ANNAS 1981; BENAARDETE 1989; FERRARI 2007; MCPHERRAN 2010. It is also worth mentioning the multi-volume Italian-language project edited by M. VEGETTI (1998–2007).

include this dialogue in the group called *dubia* (it is mentioned in the chapter “Dubia and Spuria” written by John M. DILLON and revised by Mark JOYAL, p. 66).

The third part of *The Bloomsbury Handbook* is devoted to the various literary features of Plato’s dialogues. Here three texts caught my attention, and they are focused on humour, irony, and playfulness. In the first of these, David ROOCHNIK points out that comedic elements are contained in Plato’s texts, and he even considers the founder of the Academy an “inveterate punster” (p. 149). A good example, and one that ROOCHNIK presents, is Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*, which on the one hand contains many elements that can even today bring a smile to the reader’s face, but on the other hand, conveys a gloomy message (p. 150) that could even be called tragic (e.g. STRAUSS 2001: 134–135). Aristophanes is aware at the beginning of his speech that he is perceived and received primarily as a comic writer, but he wants his speech to be taken seriously (*Smp.* 189 A–B). However, it is worth bearing in mind a certain historically subjective element present in the case of recognising what evokes hilarity – not everything that made the reader from that time laugh will be funny today, although it can be assumed that Plato’s literary mastery allowed him to construct the Model Reader (to use U. ECO’s terminology [1979; Polish translation 1994: 72 ff.]) in such a way that the comic effect would have as universal a dimension as possible. The depiction of hilarity seen in the *Symposium* suggests considering seriousness and hilarity (*geloion*), or even ridicule (*katagelaston*), as opposites. But irony can also be considered as the opposite of seriousness, and irony is presented separately by Samuel SCOLNICOV. He distinguishes three types: “simple”, “complex” and “open” (p. 151). The first of these has an ancient provenance, and the other two have a modern one. These types are found in the dialogues, but SCOLNICOV also points to an irony present on a meta-level, namely that which concerns the dialogue–reader relationship. In this case, the irony makes it possible to conjecture that not everything Plato wrote should be considered an expression of his views (p. 152) but may simply be some leavening of considerations to be carried out by the reader himself. The question arises, however, as to which of the three types of irony are we dealing with at this meta-level?

Finally, seriousness can be contrasted with playfulness, although, as Holger THESLEFF points out, what the Greeks referred to as *paidia* can contain a certain amount of seriousness (p. 167). THESLEFF rightly points to the multi-layered nature of playfulness in Plato’s dialogues, which is primarily aimed at gaining distance from an issue and which is often seen in the confrontation of different positions (thus also linked to irony). Plato was fully aware of the benefits and dangers that this can bring to a person. In the first case, for example, it helps in the educational process to master various scientific disciplines. On the other hand, it can be a source of trouble if, for example, one judges works of art aesthetically, without considering the intellectual elements. It is worth pointing out here (which THESLEFF fails to do) that the issue of pleasure is intricately linked to play, and it is in this connection that the positive and negative aspects of play can be clearly identified (PACEWICZ 2016: 199 ff.). Additionally, THESLEFF makes an excellent point about the playfulness present in the dialogue–reader relationship (pp. 168–169). In this case, the metaphors, figurations, and analogies used in the works may themselves be perceived as thought-play, or they may contain playful elements, the presence of which the reader should extract and consider how much they weigh on the interpretation of a particular way of expressing the author’s beliefs.

The fourth part of the textbook contains as many as 74 (*sic!*) concepts, issues and questions present in Plato’s dialogues. The individual elements are elaborated brilliantly, and I would only draw attention to two things. First, the chapter “Orphism” by Gabriele CORNELLI (pp. 311–313) could have been moved to Part One, since, firstly, it is very difficult to reconstruct precisely the beliefs associated with Orphic religion, and secondly, the presence of these beliefs in the work of Plato can be considered marginal (although certainly, the Orphic context is worth taking into account when interpreting some passages). Secondly, Dorothea FREDE points out in her chapter “Pleasure” that Plato’s grasp of the said phenomenon changes. The author accepts the standard chronological division of the dialogues into three groups. Among the Socratic dialogues, she distinguishes the *Gorgias* in terms of its treatment of pleasure, and she considers the fundamental

critique of pleasure to be a consequence of the reflections pursued in this work. However, it seems that the critique presented in the *Gorgias* does not have such a complete dimension. It can be argued that the object of Socrates' rejection is thus that particular form of the concept of pleasure, which is an extremely subjective process of unlimited filling, but he does not make any statement about hedonism in general or about other possible forms of it. Considering Socrates' statements, it can be concluded that there are pleasures that can be valued positively – they are useful. Consequently, granting a higher value to the soul than to the body in an anthropological perspective, it seems appropriate to refer such pleasures primarily to the soul, but it cannot be completely excluded that some of them may involve the body. A hierarchisation is also considered at the spiritual level, where *phronēsis* plays a dominant role, subordinating emotionality (*epithymia*), by which the attitude called *sōphrosynē* is formed. But what does this subordination and ruling of the emotional sphere consist of? A reasonably clear answer can be given with regard to a pleasure conceived as a process whose source is sensory impressions. In this case, it is a matter of not allowing overflow, of not exceeding the right measure. If, for example, I develop a craving for something sweet and begin to consume sweets, my *phronēsis* determines the limit (one, two or more) – and it determines when the craving is satisfied. The process of such satisfaction is a pleasure that at some point reaches a limit (PACEWICZ 2016: 103–104).

The concluding section of the handbook is devoted to the reception of Plato and has been divided by the editors into three parts: (A) reception in antiquity, (B) reception in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and (C) reception in the Modern and contemporary periods. Regarding (A), it is puzzling that there is a separate chapter devoted virtually only to Philo of Alexandria (although it is entitled “Jewish Platonism (Ancient)”, pp. 374–377), and the issue of so-called Middle Platonism, which seems to be a key moment in understanding the transition from the Old Academy to Neoplatonism, was not covered at all<sup>7</sup>. In section (B), the presence of Platonic thought in various religious systems – Islam, Judaism and Christianity – is emphasised, and the revival of Platonism in Italy is presented extremely briefly. It is unclear, however, why this section includes a chapter on the Cambridge Platonists. On the one hand, historically speaking<sup>8</sup>, this philosophical movement has its origins in the Renaissance – if one considers John Colet as one of the first representatives, but the author of this chapter (Sarah HUTTON) herself historically situates this figure “in early modern England” (p. 391). Part (C) contains an excellent presentation of the full range of interpretations of Plato's work from Descartes to the present day. Attention may be drawn to as many as three chapters devoted to what Plato probably did not write down, i.e., the so-called *agrapha dogmata*, indicating that this problem has already become a permanent feature of the interpretation of his philosophy. In the first (“Plato's Unwritten Doctrines”, pp. 416–418), Hayden W. AUSLAND first points to sources indicating the existence of a doctrine that appears to differ in content from what the dialogues contain, and then he presents possible approaches to the reconstruction of this doctrine by modern scholars. The main interpretive problem here is to determine the reliability

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<sup>7</sup> Additionally, it is worth pointing out that a deeper understanding of the reception of Plato's philosophy in antiquity can be gained from the collective volume *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plato in Antiquity* (TARRANT *et al.* 2017).

<sup>8</sup> The problem here, of course, is to set a time limit between eras. This can be done in a somewhat arbitrary way, for example, as is the case with the end of antiquity, by setting it at 395 (the division of the Roman Empire), 476 (the death of the last Western Roman emperor) or, in the case of philosophy, 529 (the closing of the Academy). In the case of the turn of the Renaissance/Modernity, the date could be 1517 (Luther's theses) or 1548 (the Council of Trent), but it is possible to extend the first of these eras as far as the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the philosophical and scientific publications of Bacon, Galileo or Campanella (HANKINS 2007: XII–XVI). But the 17<sup>th</sup> century is also recognised precisely as the early modern era, at the origin of which the works of Bacon, Hobbes and Descartes appear (RUTHERFORD 2006).

of Aristotle's testimony (as well as that of later ancient philosophers). Since one of the foundations supporting the consideration of the philosophical content attributed to Plato by Aristotle, among others, is that Plato did not entrust his findings to writing, the next issue is the question of recognising the possibility of considering the esotericism of Plato's philosophy ("Esotericism", pp. 418–420). Such a reading can be seen, according to Hayden W. AUSLAND, in scholars such as Paul FRIEDLÄNDER, Leo STRAUSS and, later, in the proponents of taking into account the aforementioned unwritten doctrine clustered around the Tübingen and Milan centres, with FRIEDLÄNDER's and STRAUSS' account of esotericism having a primarily existential and political dimension, while scholars such as Hans J. KRÄMER and Giovanni REALE primarily emphasised the metaphysical aspect. In contrast, it is the findings of the Tübingen researchers that are presented by Thomas A. SZLEZÁK, who first presents the assumptions made (p. 420) and then sketches the results of the research (pp. 420–421). The only deficiency I feel with these three texts is that there is too little emphasis on the critique of this approach to Plato's philosophy. As I have already mentioned, it is important that unwritten doctrine should be considered in the presentation of Plato's philosophical findings, but not uncritically, as one may have legitimate doubts about this.

Despite the above minor doubts and polemical remarks, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Plato* gives the person who wants to get acquainted with the most prominent issues and findings concerning Plato an excellent and recommendable introduction.

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