

RAPHAEL WOOLF, *Plato's Charmides*, Cambridge studies in the dialogues of Plato, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023, x+271 pp., ISBN 978-1-009-30819-9.

In Plato's *Charmides*, Socrates narrates a conversation about σωφροσύνη (translated by Woolf as "temperance") that he had held in a wrestling gym just after returning to Athens from the Battle of Potidaea. His chief interlocutors were a beautiful youth, Charmides, and the youth's older cousin, Critias, both relatives of Plato and both eventual leaders of the infamous oligarchy that ruled Athens in 404-403. Although the *Charmides* had been rather neglected in comparison with more "constructive" dialogues, in the last decade it has been the subject of monographs by T. Tuozzo, D. Levine, V. Tsouna, and I. Cohen-Taber, of a translation and commentary by C. Moore and C. Raymond, and of a host of papers.

Raphael Woolf now offers us a new reading. It is not a traditional line-by-line philological/philosophical commentary *cum* translation but rather an original interpretation, to which Woolf invites readers to "formulate, as I hope they will, their own critical responses" (256). Throughout, the book raises problems I had not considered and challenges various assumptions. At times, though, I felt that I was being given assertions or speculations, and I do not share all Woolf's methodological principles. Nevertheless, students of the *Charmides* and of Plato's communicative strategies will profit from Woolf's carefully thought-out analysis.

The first of Woolf's methodological principles is Agnosticism: "the idea that we attempt to read the *Charmides*, and in particular the character of Socrates, as independently as possible from what we (think we) know about what goes on in other works of Plato" (253), lest we fall prey to a question-begging and/or vicious circularity (5). The second, the principle of Separation, stipulates that "we should not assume that what is said or done by any of Plato's characters is necessarily endorsed by Plato himself, or identifiable with Plato's own views or motivations (11)."

After years of debate about Plato's authorial voice, some version of Separation is by now widely accepted. The principle of Agnosticism, however, opens up controversy. Woolf allows for some dialogues to refer to other ones (e.g. *Phaedo* to *Meno*, *Timaeus* to *Republic*), and in fact, he enlists the *Apology*, *Lysis* and *Symposium* in places to support findings that he seeks to ground first in the *Charmides*. The good reader will seek to take a work on its own merits, but I would contend that we may understand it better in confrontation with other works of the author.

Woolf posits two central elements of our dialogue's structure. Its horizontal structure is formed by the sequence of events from beginning to end. Its vertical structure consists in "a series of compositional levels": Plato composes; Socrates narrates a first-person monologue to an unnamed companion; conversations and events, some of them recalled from anterior time frames, make up Socrates' narrative (16-17).

From the way Socrates comments on the thoughts and feelings he had during the events he narrates, and in line with the principle of Separation, Woolf distinguishes Socrates' and Plato's goals. Socrates' "critical inquiries into temperance do not have as their ultimate goal the discovery of the truth about temperance. Rather, that goal is subordinate to his desire to attain a vision of beauty ... his enquiry is in the service of his erotic drive" (18). Woolf proffers this solution as the best explanation for what he sees as a seeming lack of coherence between two halves of the dialogue, viz. Socrates' interactions with Charmides and his intricate discussion with Critias. For Woolf, Socrates' aim in the Critias half is to "seduce" the listening "Charmides into baring his soul once more" (26). Socrates' erotic interest in Charmides' soul, then, is the unifying element of the story. On the other hand, Plato's goal in writing the dialogue is to "use his portrayal of Socrates' pursuit to instil in his readers ... the stance of enquiry" towards what Socrates says and towards propositions in general (18, cf. e.g. 28-9, 31, 40-3, 225). As Plato's goal, this is too thin; surely any Platonic dialogue challenges our critical engagement. Woolf does suggest as well that despite the dialogue's aporetic ending, readers may discern a valid sense of temperance. He proposes "the art of self-realisation" throughout a whole life as that valid sense (165, 233), inasmuch as temperance is defined by Critias as "self-knowledge" and then, in response to Socrates' questioning, as a species of ἐπιστήμη, which can include knowing how (17-19).

Alongside their different goals, notes Woolf, Socrates and Plato also have different modes of communication: Socrates' is oral, Plato's written. Woolf submits that Plato gives us Charmides mutely taking in Socrates' discussion with Critias, and Socrates' unnamed listener mutely taking in the entire story, in order to invite us "to reflect upon what our own engagement with the written work should be" (29). The same message, he speculates (cf. "may have set up," 149), is conveyed by Critias' taking more care than Socrates to interpret discourse (159-64, 182-4, 240, 255-6). I incline more toward Harvey Yunis' conclusion, however, that "Plato's Socrates can be considered the critical reader par excellence."¹

Woolf tackles the narrative proper by enlisting his principle of Separation to urge us to "maintain ... a certain critical stance towards Socrates' perspective" as narrator. To assume that Socrates' outlook is normatively privileged "is simply fallacious," for some narrators in literary works are unreliable (31), as testimony often is (40-1). Woolf enlists his principle of Agnosticism to say that "Socrates' featuring as a *recurrent* [W.'s emphasis] leading character in the corpus" does not license us to privilege his "perspectival viewpoint" (32-3). A "certain oddness" in Socrates – his "eerily calm reaction" to what happened in the battle; his "startling level of nonchalance" to questions about it; his suppression of details from before and after he arrives at the wrestling gym – leads Woolf to emphasize that Socrates

¹ H. Yunis, "Thucydides, Plato, and the Emergence of the Critical Reader," in H. Yunis, ed., *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge 2003, 189-212, at 206, a paper not cited by Woolf.

“is *curating* [W.’s emphasis] his narration” (40). Woolf strikes me as toying with but stopping short of considering Socrates an unreliable narrator; compare “we may wish to exercise caution about taking on trust Socrates’ description of Critias here” (127) with “The effect is spoiled if we label ... Socrates’ self-characterization as ‘dishonest’” (141 n. 142). Woolf tells us what some characters think: e.g. Charmides is “stung” (134), “humbled” (137), is “a willing player of the game. He knows that he is being seduced by Socrates ...” (250). Information about Charmides, though, comes only from narrator Socrates, toward whom, Woolf says, “Plato may not be adopting an uncritical stance” (28). On Woolf’s principles, it remains mysterious how Woolf knows these thoughts of Charmides. Overall, I remain hazy about what Woolf’s problematization of Socrates as narrator accomplishes.

Accordingly, I am convinced neither that Socrates’ *primary* goal is “to look at a beautiful soul” (128) nor that Socrates’ “deployment of erotics” toward Charmides (on which cf. below) “is for the benefit of himself” (137 n. 128, cf. 251). Readers are likely to agree with the late Jerry Press that Socrates is “one of the most well-formed characters in the history of Western literature”.² Who is that character? The standard view is that the Socratic writers depict a man whose primary goals were to try to figure out and live out the qualities that make a person’s life good and to benefit others by taking them into the search. In the words of one early voice, “Socrates was occupying himself with the ethical virtues and was the first to seek to make general definitions about these” (Arist. *Meta.* 1078b17-19). Another editorialized, “Socrates throughout his whole life, spending the greatest part of what was his, was benefitting all who were willing; for he sent away better those who consorted with him” (X. *Mem.* 1.2.61). In a dialogue, Socrates says of his love (*erōs*) for Alcibiades, “although I know no subject matter which I could teach a person to his benefit, yet I thought that, by being together with him, I could make him better through love” (δὲ τὸ ἐρῶν, Aeschin. *Socr.* 11.c). Socrates exhorts his fellow citizens young and old to live virtuous lives (cf. e. g. *Ap.* 29e–30a, *Grg.* 521d, 526e). In Plato, Socrates is described as hanging around wherever there is some piece of learning or undertaking that can benefit youth (*La.* 180c2-4). In *Lysis* 223a1-2, Socrates has in mind to “stir up” one of the older bystanders when his discussion with two boys has failed to reach a definition of “friend,” as though philosophical discovery is his goal. The principle of Agnosticism rules out interdialogic connections only if that principle is obligatory. In the *Charmides*, Socrates would “much more gladly” (πολὸν ... ἥδιον) examine with Critias than with Charmides whether the definition of temperance as “doing one’s own things” is true or not (162e4-5). Woolf describes Socrates’ tactic here as “to fall back to the position that merely discovering the truth is what they are after” (124). “Merely” ignores Socrates’ “much more gladly.” Socrates soon reiterates his concern for

² J. Press, “The *Elenchos* in the *Charmides*, 162-175”, in G. Scott, ed., *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchos in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*, University Park, PA 2002, 252-65, at 265.

seeking the truth because he himself does not know (165b8-c2, 166d1-4). He adds that he does the same for his friends' (ἐπιτηδείων) sake, and he gains Critias' agreement that "it is a common good for practically all people for the way each thing is to become evident" (166d4-6). Woolf does not confront these passages' implications for Socrates' primary goal.

Woolf has many insights into Socrates' erotic drive and its immediate object, (prospective) beauty in Charmides' soul. His presentation of Socrates as though practicing an "erotic art," however (61, 93), is not anchored in the text. Woolf argues (19, 93) that it is likely ("hinted at") that Socrates claims an erotic art, since Socrates considered (ἐνόμισα) Cydias to be wisest in respect to erotic matters (155d5). For Socrates to have a belief about erotic matters, however, does not require him to have or claim an art, τέχνη, about erotics. An art would presumably rest on knowledge, ἐπιστήμη, and neither of these epistemic states about erotics is claimed for Socrates in the text; Socrates only talks about lovers and loving (*Chrm.* 154-155) and has belief about Cydias. Is Woolf inadvertently importing, against his own Agnosticism, what he has read in other dialogues about Socrates' claims to have an art (*Phdr.* 257a) and knowledge (*Lys.* 204b-205a, *Smp.* 177d) about *erōs*?

By now it should be clear that I fall into Woolf's group of "readers who find the principle of agnosticism uncongenial" (12). [1] Traditional literary characters are invested with a certain coherence when they are presented to audiences in new works. Audiences receive such characters with attitudes already conditioned by tradition. In the earlier fourth century, "dialogical unities" about Socrates were being produced, on average, one per month.³ While we do not know how soon the character, Socrates, became traditional enough to acquire "coherence," it seems probable that consumers of a new Socratic dialogue would import expectations about the Socrates character into their experience. We do not have evidence that fourth century audiences held the principle of Agnosticism. [2] Woolf already acknowledges some intertextuality within the Platonic corpus. Moreover, some passages call for illumination from other dialogues: e.g. the "dialecticians" remain opaque in the *Euthydemus* (290c5), but their craft is described in presumably later dialogues. [3] As a principle, Agnosticism can needlessly restrict. Deeds and words in one work can be enhanced by comparison with those in other works of the same author, in which the same characters appear. Think of Euripides' portrayals of Menelaus, or of Shakespeare's Prince Hal plays, Faulkner's Snopes novels, or Alcott's *Little Women* and *Little Men*. [4] Agnosticism rules out interdialogical investigation of salient philosophical issues, such as the elenchus, virtue as knowledge, definitions and universals, or the nature of relative terms. Readers who wonder what the *Charmides* contributes may chafe at Woolf's narrowing of the inquiry.

³ L. Rossetti, "Le dialogue socratique *in statu nascendi*," *PhilosAnt* 1, 2001, 11-35 at 31-2. On an intertextual, "standard Socrates" see Rossetti's "The Sokratikoi Logoi as a literary barrier. Toward the identification of a Standard Socrates through them," in V. Karasmanis, ed., *Socrates. 2400 Years Since his Death*, Athens 2004, 81-94.

On the other hand, as I followed Woolf through the dialogue, many times I wrote “good” opposite analyses of particular passages, e.g. that: tensions between Socrates’ story about the soul-body doctrine of the Thracian doctor and his offers to apply it to Charmides’ headache are resolved if Socrates cares about the well-being of soul over body (98-100); Charmides’ first definition of temperance as “doing everything ... in an orderly and quiet way,” despite its limitations, does appear to picture temperance as “capable of suffusing a whole life” (232); if knowledge of knowledge is “directed at internal relations between propositions,” we might be able to flesh out the scaled-back benefit Socrates envisions for it in 172b-c (204); if our self consists in what we think, by testing propositions we contribute to realising ourselves (223). Woolf lays bare many discontinuities in Socrates’ narrative. The reader comes away with much over which to ruminate about this challenging dialogue.

Woolf writes with an engaging style. The book is well produced, and I noticed only one typo. The extensive and current bibliography, mostly of works in English, is followed by an index of ancient passages and a short, general index of topics and names ancient and modern. I recommend Woolf’s reading especially to those interested in the relationships that Plato represents between Socrates and interlocutors, in Socrates’ attitudes toward those individuals, and in Plato’s strategies for pushing us to deeper critical responses.⁴

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OLIVER PRIMAVESI, CHRISTOF RAPP, BENJAMIN MORISON, *Aristotle: De Motu Animalium. Text and translation*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2023, 256 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-887446-1.

The book under review comes at the end of a long and truly remarkable scholarly journey punctuated by the dissemination of several outstanding research products and involving, at every stage of the process, serious and unselfish teamwork. Let me recall, briefly, the main lines of this journey. Everything started with the discovery of a small group of recent manuscripts that preserve a pure, that is uncontaminated, version of the Greek text of the *De motu animalium* (hereafter *De motu*). The discovery was made by the late Pieter De Leemans and made available to the public in his edition of the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *De motu*

⁴ I am grateful to Chris Raymond for comments on an earlier draft of this review.