

J. H. Leshner, 'Analytic Approaches to Plato' from G. Press, ed., *A Companion to Plato* (Continuum Press, 2010).

### **Analytic Approaches to Plato**

During the past half-century a number of scholars have sought to apply the techniques of modern analytic philosophy to Plato's writings. This has involved recasting portions of the dialogues as concisely stated deductive arguments, exploring questions relating to validity as well as to truth, exposing contradictions and equivocations, and making explicit all essential assumptions. The rationale behind this approach, as Gregory Vlastos has explained, is that:

By means of these techniques we may now better understand some of the problems Plato attempted to solve and we are, therefore, better equipped to assess the merits of his solutions. The result has been a more vivid sense of the relevance of his thought to the concerns of present-day ontologists, epistemologists, and moralists. (Vlastos 1971:vii)

The classic example of the genre is Vlastos's study of the Third Man Argument (TMA) in Plato's *Parmenides* (Vlastos 1954). Although the name derives from Aristotle's restatement of the argument, the *Parmenides* version holds that positing the existence of a Form such as Largeness commits us to the existence of an infinite number of Forms of Largeness. Vlastos identified two assumptions essential to the validity of the TMA: (1) self-predication (that the form of F is itself F); and (2) Non-identity (that anything that has the character of F must be non-identical with that in virtue of which it has that character). Vlastos maintained that while the two assumptions are inconsistent (they imply among

other things that the form of F cannot be identical with itself), Plato never clearly saw the inconsistency or he would have stepped back from embracing both principles. Vlastos concluded that the TMA reflected Plato's 'honest perplexity', but others have argued that Plato introduced the TMA to call attention to inadequacies in earlier formulations of his theory of forms.

Three other studies by Vlastos focused attention on issues in Socratic philosophy. A 1974 account of Socrates' attitude toward civil disobedience prompted a series of discussions of how the apparently inconsistent positions Socrates embraces in the *Apology* and *Crito* might be reconciled. A 1983 exploration of the Socratic method of elenchus or 'cross-examination' sparked debate on the assumptions underlying Socrates' distinctive approach to philosophizing. A 1985 analysis of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge as constituting 'a complex irony' exploiting two distinct senses of "know" prompted others to reflect on Socrates' conception of knowledge and its relation to virtue.

In his famous 1963 paper David Sachs charged that the main argument of Plato's *Republic* traded on two different conceptions of justice and was therefore fallacious. 'Platonic justice' consisted in the parts of the soul working in harmony with one another while 'vulgar justice' consisted in refraining from behavior normally counted as unjust (acts of theft, sacrilege, etc.). Since the challenge posed to Socrates by Glaucon and Adeimantus was to show, in effect, that vulgar justice is profitable, Socrates' explanation of the benefits of Platonic justice was irrelevant. The many published 'responses to Sachs' failed to yield a consensus, but most found a greater degree of coherence in Plato's account

than Sachs had claimed.

Analytic techniques have also been put to use in connection with epistemological and metaphysical aspects of the *Republic*. One example of this approach, with a positive objective in view, is Richard Ketchum's inquiry into the grounds for Plato's rejection of the knowability of things in the sensible world (Ketchum, 1987). As Ketchum explains the situation, Plato's thesis that we can have no knowledge of things in the sensible realm assumes a distinctive view of the nature of truth. To assert the truth, as Plato sees it, is to assert of a thing that is that it is (or of things that are that they are). But of any occupant of the sensible world it can be said not only that it is (in some respect) but also that it is not (in some respect), and therefore one cannot say of it that it is *tout court*. And since knowledge (both for us and for Plato) requires truth, it follows that, strictly speaking, no occupant of the sensible world can be known. While Ketchum leaves unanswered the question of why Plato might have embraced this rather demanding view of the requirements for truth (Parmenides B 2 seems a likely candidate here), his explanation of the rationale behind Plato's denial of knowledge of things in the sensible realm has much to recommend it.

Few passages in Plato's writings have attracted greater attention than Socrates' refutation of Euthyphro's third definition of piety. When Euthyphro (unwisely) states that the gods love what is pious because it is pious (10d) Socrates explains that if this were the case, and if 'pious' did mean 'beloved by all the gods', then the gods would be loving what is beloved because it is beloved—which contradicts the principle established at 10c that no one can love a thing because it is beloved. Socrates' refutation of Euthyphro's definition

has been thought to pose problems for any attempt to ground moral values in acts of will or approval, divine or otherwise. A second issue posed by the *Euthyphro*, memorialized in Peter Geach's charge of 'fallacy' (Geach 1966) is whether Plato held that we can discover the essential nature from an inspection of individual instances *and* that we must first know the essential nature of a thing in order to identify genuine instances of it.

Two dialogues generally regarded as works of Plato's maturity have also been thought to anticipate issues of interest to contemporary philosophers. In his *Philosophical Investigations* (Secs. 48 ff.) Ludwig Wittgenstein identified the account of simples and complexes in 'Socrates' Dream Theory' in the *Theaetetus* as a forerunner of the philosophy of logical atomism embraced by Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein himself, and others. Similarly, Gilbert Ryle claimed that the alphabet model of language introduced in the *Tht.* and *Sophist* anticipates aspects of Frege's theory of meaning (Ryle 1960), and many consider Plato's conception of knowledge as 'true belief plus a *logos* or rational account' a forerunner of the modern standard or tripartite analysis of knowledge.

These studies lend credence to the claim that the use of modern techniques of analysis can help us to understand and assess Plato's achievements as a philosopher. But in focusing attention on texts that lend themselves to logical analysis we run the risk of slighting other important if less logically structured aspects of Plato's thought. It would clearly be an error, for example, to develop an interpretation of a Platonic dialogue without attending to details relating to setting and characterization. Nor can the analysis of individual arguments, however expertly done, determine the larger significance of the

dialogues in which those arguments appear. Thus we can profit from Vlastos's analyses of individual arguments without necessarily agreeing with his claim that the dialogues give us an 'early or elenctic Socrates' as well as a 'mature' one (see Beversluis 1993), or that they divide into 'early', 'middle' and 'late' works (see Nails 1993). The relevance of Platonic thought to modern philosophy has also sometimes been overstated. Plato's conception of knowledge, for example, may bear a formal resemblance to the standard analysis of knowledge, but at *Tht.* 206c Socrates describes the *logos* as what we add to a belief we already have, not (as required by the standard analysis) as some body of evidence or reasoning that led us to adopt the belief that p.

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