

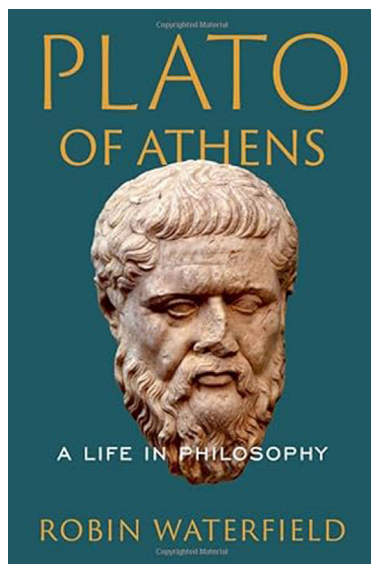
Book Review

Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy

Waterfield (R.), Pp. xxvi + 255, ill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £21.99, US\$27.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-756475-2.

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Nobody is better qualified to write this book than Robin Waterfield. He has published excellent translations of many of Plato's dialogues; and as the author of some wonderfully accessible books on Greek history he also has the knack of setting the work inside the life inside the times. He does not talk down to the reader, but neither does he assume any prior knowledge (of Greek, Greek History or Philosophy). The voluminous bibliography at the end of this book suggests that the book could have been ten times the length; and it is to the author's great

credit that he wears his immense scholarship so lightly. Problems in reading and interpreting this (sometimes difficult) author are made part of the excitement of studying him.

Plato certainly lived in 'interesting times'. His life straddled seven decades of traumatic history as Greece went through the terrors of war and revolution. It is easy to see why Plato devoted so much energy to writing about politics when everything in the political arena seemed to be up for grabs and where empires could rise and fall within a heartbeat. The steamy world of Sicilian politics (as encountered by Plato in his three visits to the island) is vividly recreated here as Waterfield narrates the philosopher's fraught attempts to inject philosophy into Syracusan politics. Waterfield deals sensibly and briskly with some of the legends about the man which have accumulated – was 'Plato' a nickname? (No). Was he gay? (No more than any other man of his class at the time). Did Plato have to run into hiding abroad after the execution of Socrates in 399? (No). Did Chaerephon go to the Delphic oracle to ask if Socrates was the wisest of men? (Probably not). Pythagoras, we learn, did not even invent Pythagoras' theorem (p. 113).

Plato famously set up his Academy in Athens where public lectures were available and no fees charged. Students had to pass an entrance exam which looked for moral rather than merely intellectual excellence, and Waterfield neatly contrasts Plato's Academy with the rival school of Isocrates: this latter was more like a conservatoire where technique was pushed with a view to success rather than the Platonic quest for disinterested knowledge. In the Academy there was a heavy emphasis on maths (including astronomy) to be pursued by reasoning (rather than mechanics) and there was no dogmatic Platonist orthodoxy to be ruthlessly enforced. The big names who worked there disagreed with Plato – a lot. That was the whole point.

Cicero complains (*Letters to Atticus* 2.1.8) that Cato 'speaks as if he were in the *Republic* of Plato, and not on the dung heap of Romulus' and the possibility of applying higher philosophy in the grimy world of society was one which haunted Plato for much of his life, and especially in his late writings and in his visits to South Italy and Sicily. In Croton he met the followers of Pythagoras where he had what Waterfield calls 'an aha moment' (p. 116) as he saw that philosophers really could be political leaders. In Syracuse Plato sought to make his follower Dion into his agent and so influence the rulers Dionysius I and II towards enlightened rule within an agreed framework of constitutional laws. Plato was surely right to insist that 'in states that lack an authentic ruler... law must be sovereign' (p. 193), but things were not simple. The new ruler Dionysius II did not think he needed the moral education offered and even ended up outsmarting Plato in a complex blackmail concerning Dion who had been banished by the ruler on specious grounds of treachery but who ended up making a dramatic military comeback. The ruler was impressed by Plato – and for a time his court was awash with philosophy—but his dedication to philosophy was 'no more than skin-deep, like a suntan' (Plato *Seventh Letter* 340d).

The early 'aporetic' dialogues are usually seen to be testing to destruction the knowledge of 'experts' and end with something of a shoulder-shrug, while the late works (such as *Timaeus* and *Laws*) can be dense and remote. It is the 'middle dialogues' which many find the most rewarding, and Waterfield is right to state that this string of works (including *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*) 'constitute probably the most famous sequence of philosophical writings that the Western world has ever produced'. In a key chapter, Waterfield takes us through the key philosophical areas which these dialogues explore – love, epistemology, the theory of Forms, Ethics – and reminds us that these texts 'are not mere academic exercises but ... attempts to get readers to rethink their most basic beliefs and change their lives accordingly' (p. 176).

The same can also be said for this timely and eloquent book. It encourages the reader to go back to Plato himself and (re)read those texts where the dialogue form is so skilfully used to explore issues which could be a matter of life and death rather than airy philosophy. When Callicles chillingly warns Socrates (*Gorgias* 486a3-b4) that his philosophising could end up costing him his life, he was not joking, and Waterfield ends his book with a passionate and inspiring plea for the place of philosophy in the education of the young. Colleges could start by buying and using this excellent book.

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