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Review: Myth, Metaphysics and Dialectic in Plato's Statesman

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Book Reviews
Buchbesprechungen

White, David A. 2007. *Myth, Metaphysics and Dialectic in Plato's* Statesman. Hampshire: Ashgate (282 pages, ISBN 978-0-7546-5779-8; $ 124.95, £ 23.75, € 72,99 (hardback))

White's *Myth, Metaphysics and Dialectic in Plato's Statesman* is an ambitious work that aims not only to interpret the message of Plato's *Statesman,* but also to situate the dialogue within Plato's corpus as one that serves as a transition between Plato's earlier metaphysics and his more mature views in later dialogues such as *Philebus* and *Laws*. White makes several adept observations of oddities sprinkled throughout *Statesman,* and he frequently connects these observations to thoughtful claims concerning possible motivations on the part of Plato as well as possible revelations concerning Platonic metaphysics and philosophy. However, justifiably made inferences are difficult for the reader to discern, as White tends to obfuscate his message with difficult and wordy prose. In addition to these flaws, White makes frequent references to many other Platonic dialogues with little explanation in the way of contextualization. While I find this aspect of White's thinking to be impressive and indicative of both extensive knowledge and great aptitude for synthesis in thought, readers are warned that novices of Plato scholarship might get lost in the copious references to dialogues beyond those central to the book. That being said, in most respects, White's interpretation is both sound and refreshing. In my opinion, the virtues of this work heavily outweigh any imperfections.

In this book, White argues that *Statesman* was intended as an aporetic piece, suggesting that Plato may have been intentionally leading the reader "into realizing the need for further reflection rather than presenting substantive doctrine" (vii) concerning both the questions raised in the dialogue as well as the line of questioning subtly running beneath the surface of the interlocutors' discussions. The ostensible question being considered is *what is the art of statecraft*? White adds to this inquiry the questions *what are the natures of Forms?* and *what is the Good?* For White, any successful pursuit of an answer to the first question will require some prior settling of the last two questions. White argues that, since the interlocutors in this dialogue have not established knowledge concerning the Forms and the Good, their inquiry into the nature of statecraft is doomed from the start.

In the first chapter, "The Dialectical Road to Myth", White comments on the first segment of *Statesman*, ranging from 257a-268d. *Statesman* commences with Theaetetus being relieved by his student, "Young Socrates", who is no relation to Plato's beloved teacher, Socrates. Socrates the elder then points out that this switch is appropriate, given that Theaetetus resembles Socrates in physical appearance and young Socrates is related to Socrates the elder nominally; since each is "related" to older Socrates, each should have a certain amount of attention paid to him. White surmises that this switch is metaphorically indicative of an underlying set of questions: *what does it mean to be related in the sense of kinship?* And *what is it to resemble?* White argues that the nature of the interlocutors, the discussion of nominal relatedness, and the absence of Socrates the elder all suggest that the discussion that follows, like Theaetetus and Socrates the younger, merely resembles "the real deal". According to White, the conclusions reached via dialectic in this section are not to be taken too seriously. The interlocutors are only superficially related to characters Plato regularly enlists as his mouthpiece, therefore their argumentation and conclusions might only superficially resemble the methods and ideas of Plato.

White turns his attention to how the Eleatic Stranger and Young Socrates try to discern the nature of a statesman and his craft by considering it apart from other things that they are not. This strategy leads to an exhausting series of somewhat arbitrary divisions of "genera" into "species". Several of these faulty divisions appear to result from considering natures via negation (i. e., trying to define a nature as what it is not), while others seem to stem from a preoccupation with names or arbitrary qualities rather than complete natures. The Stranger acknowledges that conceptual division should address differences in class, not parts (e. g., characteristics that might be shared across classes). However, White points out that despite this acknowledgement, absent a clear and certain method of dialectic, the interlocutors cannot heed their own warning. It appears that they have confused parts and classes and, just as the two concede that their method has gotten them turned around, the Stranger decides to introduce the myth of the reversed cosmos.

White's careful summary of the text is well written and useful to the professional scholar or graduate student. However, he does make frequent references to the following dialogues with little or no time wasted on summarizing those aspects of the works that inspire him to draw the connections that he does: *Sophist, Parmenides, Republic, Cratylus,* and *Phaedrus*. Readers who are unfamiliar with these dialogues are likely not to benefit from much of White's commentary. Similarly, White makes references to "Wittgensteinian language games" and "oracular inscriptions of Derrida" (25) without concern for the uninitiated reader who might not be familiar with 20th century philosophy.

White's second chapter, "The Cosmos: Motion, Matter, Measure", addresses the myth of the reversed cosmos and the interlocutors' discussion from 268d-274e. White focuses on the claim that the myth is necessary for the interlocutors to get their discussion on the right path. The god, whom White calls "the demiurge" for convenience, is representative of the statesman. For White, this myth not only exhibits how a divine leader might rule, it also suggests that a doctrine of the mean is in place; each extreme of total rule and utter chaos is undesirable, and the best way is something in-between (54). The demiurge must weave opposites into the order of the cosmos just as the statesman will be shown in the next section to be similar to a weaver who takes opposing materials and blends them into a worthwhile product.

While this chapter is also rich with many of White's sharp observations, it occasionally detours into a series of questions and wonderings that do not seem to be on point. For example, White discusses the claim in the myth that, "'of its own accord' the cosmos rotates in the opposite direction, since 'it is a living creature and is endowed with wisdom'" (38). White later asks "But why, assuming the cosmos is unique, should it need wisdom in the first place? After all, there would be no need for the cosmos to be wise unless the cosmos were faced with situations requiring wisdom or, more generally, that wisdom should be present to the overall functioning of the cosmos" (40). The fact that the cosmos has wisdom (*phronesis*) seems to me to be a basic premise stipulated by the Stranger when he tells the myth. A more interesting question to which White does attend is *why is it wise to do what is opposed (opposite) to what the god had previously guided the cosmos to do?* The Stranger suggests that the cosmos' need for change given that it is not divine and has a share in body grounds the wisdom of the change in motion (269e). I think that the Stranger's claim that having a share in body requires the cosmos to constantly change was certainly the key; the cosmos changes and declines because it is not a Form. To my mind, it seems that Plato is illustrating the difficulties of ordering and reigning over the imperfect objects within the sensible realm, and such difficulty is analogous to that of ordering and ruling a society or state, which is also liable to frequent change and occasional decline. This last comment is not inconsistent with what White discusses. However, it is not clearly stated in this chapter.

Chapter 3, "Paradigms: Knowledge and Reality", deals with sections 274e-283b of *Statesman.* White comments on these sections with clear summaries and helpful observations while focusing on a few central issues. The first that receives substantial attention is the issue of the two errors made by young Socrates and the Stranger in the analysis of the myth of the reversed cosmos: the greater error of describing the "shepherd of the human flock" of the cycle of Cronos when it should have been that of the cycle of Zeus, and the lesser error of describing a divine shepherd when the task at hand is to learn about the statesman, who is human. From here White argues that paradigms may be used to help one to have a true opinion, but not knowledge in the strict sense (i. e., knowledge of forms). White explains that since the inference from a paradigm to the object of inquiry is hazy, and since the object *must* be distinct and disconnected from the paradigm in nature, the relation considered is not one of being a form or of participation with a form. White points out that, "the fact that the Stranger continues his quest for statecraft through the epistemic medium of paradigms suggests that although he recognizes truth and can give a provisional account of its reality, he does not control the methodological means to attain truth. The best that the Stranger can provide young Socrates – and the student of the *Statesman* – is a paradigm establishing true opinion, a derivative degree of truth, about statecraft" (67). White surmises that Plato's intention "is not to advance a substantive metaphysics, or to revamp the theory of Forms, but merely to continue eliciting the relatively barren implications from metaphysical notions inherent to the Eleatic tradition" (77). In addition, White claims that paradigms do not illustrate the supreme value inherent in forms: "a paradigm is structurally unable to exhibit knowledge of its subject matter. A successful paradigm can seemingly display part of or an aspect of a Form but it cannot bring into view the inherent valuational dimension of that Form" (79). This last suggestion requires more evidence than White provides. The nature of paradigms is described such that the paradigm being used must be valuationally inferior to the object of inquiry. This suggests to me that paradigms are useful in illustrating comparative value, at the very least. White argues that comparative value cannot be applied to Forms since all forms are equally good. I am not convinced that this is the case – especially given the status Plato has placed on the form of the Good in other dialogues (c.f. *Republic*). Still, White argues convincingly that paradigms only slightly illuminate objects of inquiry and, therefore, only serve to establish true opinion, and not knowledge.

In chapter 4, "Measurement and Dialectic", White comments on the portion of the dialogue from 283b-287b, focusing primarily on the notions of measurement and its two types, productive arts and value. White points out that the interlocutors seem to be discussing two different kinds of measurement; on the one hand, there is a two-place relative kind of measurement, such as that between greater and smaller. On the other hand, another kind of measurement asserts "the actual existence of excess and deficiency 'according to the nature of the mean'" (82). White argues that these two types of measurement must be intimately connected in order for arts, their products, and value to exist. According to White, in order for an artist to produce something, the artist must have a certain intention prior to crafting the product and that artist must craft the product out of certain material. In order to do this well, the product and its genesis must follow a standard of a mean, which can be approached and either achieved or missed by a greater or lesser degree. In other words, "greater and less must be measured not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to the establishment of the mean" (83).

White turns his focus to this second type of measurement, arguing that it implies a need for an account of value. He considers this class of arts in light of the Stranger's claim at 284b that such arts produce works that are good and beautiful when they "preserve the standard of the mean" (88). White argues that either this standard is a form or nature

(since there is a connection between Forms and the Good) or the standard might be a relative standard of "more or less" if the mean is on a continuum (since continuums can be divided and Forms, canonically conceived, cannot). White concludes that the constructed forced interpretation applies to epistemological concerns: "these descriptions apply because *something* in what makes the mean to be a mean has been seen only partially and must therefore be "forced" into the cognitive awareness of the investigators and then inserted as a component of reality. The concerted references to "forcing" bring out the difficulty of discovering the formal element within a material complexus" (88f.). Therefore, according to White, interpretation that would presuppose a Form is most likely correct, ontologically speaking.

Finally, White turns to the discussion of the length or measurement of the myth and dialectic. The interlocutors conclude that the myth was long, but not unnecessarily long. While dialectic is the best method to discover the truth about the noblest things, in their case, the myth was necessary to be open and primed to perform good dialectic. White concludes that the Stranger was not able to see clearly how dialectic could get him to the truth about statecraft until he considered the myth of the cosmos; this myth coupled with Plato's *Philebus* fills in the gaps preventing the Stranger from grasping the truth.

Before White can argue that *Philebus* provides aid to his conclusions, he must finish commenting on the remainder of *Statesman* in his fifth chapter, "The Art of Statecraft", which addresses sections 287b-311c. In these sections, the Stranger corrects the second flaw that was addressed in Chapter 3 – that of fleshing out how one might practice the art of statecraft through ruling. Here, the Stranger explains that, ideally, a knowledgeable king would rule without laws in ways that positively affect members of the polis by improving upon their character. As White puts it, "laws as such remain inflexible and unyielding to circumstances – and, as emphasized earlier, circumstances in an individual's life are always in flux" (107). Only a ruler with knowledge and justice can see the solutions required on a case-by-case basis. However, if no such ruler is available, a polis with laws might be the next best thing, since it would be worse to have a tyrant as a ruler who mimics the good ruler but has no knowledge of or appreciation for justice. White explains why the Stranger does not advocate democracy: "The knowledge of government cannot arise from a multitude of people, for if it could so arise then statecraft would be the easiest of arts" (106) – and this is clearly not the case. So a second-rate government that relied upon laws should found those laws based on the principles detected by a few persons who come closest to having knowledge.

White notes that *Statesman*, unlike other dialogues such as *Republic*, attends to the interests of individuals as well as the state and acknowledges that individuals ruled well would warrant more freedom of choice. These elements of the discussion suggest significant growth in Plato's view. However, the Stranger makes it clear that all forms of government, including all present forms of government, are mere imitations of the best ideal ruling relationship. Therefore, these additions, though mildly optimistic, are hardly overthrowing skeptical sentiments found in earlier Platonic works.

The final sections of *Statesman* address the question of a unity of virtues. The Stranger points out that it would appear that certain virtues such as courage and self-restraint are at variance with one another. White writes, "courage and decorum are inimical to one another because the same characteristic (slowness) producing one virtue (decorum) will, if applied to another virtue (courage), negate that virtue" (122). However, White reconciles the differences based on excess and deficiency. For White, this discussion illustrates the usefulness of the image of a demiurge blending distinct elements into a unity of opposition, and this discussion not only justifies that aspect of the myth, but it also grounds the use of weaving as a paradigm for the art of statecraft. White concludes that the purpose "of statecraft's 'web' is producing this unity of opposites within a living society" (127). While

White is satisfied with this definition, another question plagues him: *what is the significance of the distinction between true opinion and knowledge?* While the Stranger and young Socrates have declared that the ideal king would have knowledge of the art of statecraft, the Stranger himself resorts to paradigms because he is confident that true opinion is the best that the two can manage. White thinks that this discrepancy points to a need for addition to this dialogue. For this reason, he contends that *Philebus* is equipped to fill in the gap between true opinion and knowledge with its substantive account of the Good.

In chapter 6, "The Good: *Statesman* and *Philebus*," White contends that the flaws of *Statesman* result from a lack of a positive account of the Good and the positive account of the Good offered in *Philebus* is what is needed. White begins this chapter with a summary of what was argued earlier coupled with the following possible inference: "Since the demiurge intentionally withdraws at a certain juncture during the formation of the cosmos, it may be inferred that the demiurge did not sufficiently apprehend the Good and, as a result, was unable to finalize forming a fully balanced and harmonious cosmos" (133). For White, the absence of an accurate view of the Good extends even to the divine characters in the myth of the reverse cosmos. From here, White analyzes the triune nature of the Good described in *Philebus*.

In *Philebus*, the Good is said to appear "as a combination of apparently discrete elements" (140): beauty, proportion, and truth. White elicits from the dialogue, *Phaedrus*, that "beauty is the most palpable Form (250d), which may mean that instances of beauty are more readily experienced as emblematic of the Form beauty than, say, instances of just action are of the Form justice" (141). Proportion, White argues, is about particulars since 1: "proportion presupposes plurality" 2: "the elements of this plurality must differ fundamentally from one another," and 3: "proportion presupposes parts" (141). On truth, White writes, "Truth is defined by, or includes, the Forms (58a; cf. 64b)" (142). In summary, White writes:

> Truth refers to Forms; Proportion refers to the relation between and among parts within a unified whole at the level of particularity – and therefore, by implication, to particulars determined as unities by participation in Forms, Beauty refers to that which provides a sense of propriety in terms of "measure and proportion" (64e). The *Philebus* implicitly connects the Good to Forms, explicitly connects beauty to truth and measure, and correlated measure to the Forms. The triune character of the Good shows the living presence, so to speak, of the Good not only in the realm of the Forms but also in the welter of particular existing within and throughout the cosmos (142).

White argues that the Good as described in *Philebus* "includes, necessarily, relations to non-formal elements" (150). But if, as is declared in *Statesman*, the cosmos is good, beautiful, and material, then an account of how the Good can be substantiated in material objects is needed. White convincingly shows both that the interlocutors of *Statesman* lack a clear view of the Good and that the interlocutors of *Philebus* have a view of how the Good applies to the materials that a true statesman would "weave" when ruling well.

White's final chapter, "The Good and the Aporetic Structure of the *Statesman*," brings together White's observations in the first five comment chapters in light of the conclusions drawn in Chapter 6. Perhaps the most helpful discussions in Chapter 7 involve the nature of particulars, their genesis, and their relationship to Forms. White argues that *Statesman* fails to provide a substantive account of such matters primarily because it lacks a clear view of Forms, which precludes the interlocutors from achieving any knowledge of how Forms relate to particulars. In addition, White argues that *Philebus* serves to illustrate this point since its account of the Good is inherently one concerned with both Forms and particulars.

This last chapter is mostly redundant. White writes that the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate "the extent to which the aporetic structure of the *Statesman* depends on the fact

that the metaphysic of this dialogue, explicit or implied, lacks full recognition of the nature of the Good" (153). This purpose is, essentially, the point of the entire work. While White does, at times, elucidate more clearly what was only touched upon earlier in the book, I think it would be better to have incorporated such discussions earlier on where it would seem more natural given the organizational scheme. However, the extensive discussion of the nature of particularity is new to the work, and those sections are worthwhile.

The final chapter is followed by a 29-page epilogue comparing the claims put forth earlier on in the book with Plato's later work, *Laws*. White takes it as given that Plato puts forth his most sincere and mature views on political matters in *Laws*. In this epilogue, White illustrates how issues raised in *Statesman* are picked up in *Laws*, and some of these matters develop in different ways from how they were presented in *Statesman* – a fact that White thinks reinforces the idea that *Statesman* is largely aporetic.

Myth, Metaphysics and Dialectic in Plato's Statesman argues a clear and defensible point concerning the instructional role that this dialogue plays as well as the integral position the Good plays in any account of Platonic metaphysics. It is evident that White is extremely knowledgeable of Plato's works and he is well versed in contemporary Platonic scholarship. For these reasons, this book is a "must read" for scholars working on such issues. However, this work is inappropriate for most students and novices of Platonic scholarship. Full comprehension of White's arguments requires familiarity with just about all of Plato's works. In addition, White frequently gestures towards his point without clearly stating it. One such example is the first section of Chapter 6. While this section is called "The *Statesman*: Structure and the Aporetic", it consists of ten lengthy sentences, only one of which is declarative, and the rest are interrogative. Judging by the title of the section, a reader might expect something more informative or argumentative. Instead, it is left as an exercise for the reader to infer information from an embedded argument. This difficulty is compounded by the somewhat mysterious organizational structure employed by White. While White does make frequent use of section headings, sub-headings, and numeric and letterforms of bullet-points, presumably in efforts to enable the reader to navigate the organizational scheme of a chapter, such organizational choices are unintuitive. The manuscript lacks uniformity in whether subtitles are bold or italicized and whether they are embedded in the first sentence of a paragraph or separate from subsequent paragraphs. In addition, several of the headings and sub-headings seem similar to others that appear elsewhere in the same chapter or alternative chapters (e. g., "Myth and the Good" immediately followed by "Systematic Incompleteness: Myth, Paradigm and the Good" in Chapter 6, which are distinct sections from "Myth and the Good in the *Statesman*," which appears in Chapter 7; "The Question of Happiness: *Statesman* and *Philebus*" followed seven sections (some with sub-sections) later by "The Metaphysics of Happiness"; "Truth," which is a subsection on pages: 142,153, and 212). While this book is, at times, difficult to read, it is worth it to the scholar of Plato to work through the text in order to consider White's astute observations and unique interpretations.

Audrey L. Anton

Kateb, George. 2011. *Human Dignity*. Cambridge, MA / London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (xiii + 238 pp. ISBN: 978-0-674-04837-9).

Man's place in the world is a significant matter, both from an existential and a practical viewpoint. George Kateb's *Human Dignity* deals with, *inter alia*, moral philosophy, philosophical anthropology (establishing the basis for human dignity) and philosophy of law (addressing the subject of human rights). Despite the scope of the inquiry, the author has managed to present his ideas in a book of modest proportions.