

Book Reviews

Alex Priou: *Becoming Socrates: Political Philosophy in Plato's "Parmenides."* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018. Pp. ix, 246.)

Lewis Fallis: *Socrates and Divine Revelation.* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018. Pp. vii, 186.)

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The admirer of Plato is necessarily familiar with the remarkable variety of positions one may hold and yet consider oneself a friend to his work. This variability is reproduced in the Straussian diaspora, where Leo Strauss's contention that the fight between reason and revelation is one of the foundational questions of political philosophy continues to breathe life into current debate. A dual case in point can be found in these two books.

While Priou's book begins with the notion that human access to precise knowledge about the highest things is impossible, Fallis's book is committed to exploring the real relation between divine inspiration and rational morality. The two together form a dialectical puzzle that perhaps only a Platonist—in something other than the current sense of this word—could love. But taken together, these radically different starting points provide singular insight into Plato's understanding of political life, and, one might justifiably hope, our understanding of the political good, not to mention the Good itself.

In *Socrates and Divine Revelation*, Fallis argues that there is a "Socratic thesis" that unites the dialogues *Euthyphro* and *Ion*. Socrates sets out to prove that the divinity or divine character of a believer's experience can be discerned only with the help of a moral standard, that is, it can be judged to be truly divine only by the believer himself if this criterion is in place. This thesis is not to be confused with the well-known puzzle from the *Euthyphro*, according to which the gods are either subordinate to unchanging philosophical principles or the arbitrary masters of any principle whatsoever. Instead, Fallis sees the driving problem of both texts not as an aporetic struggle between these two limited options, but as the Socratic endeavor to test out precisely what the believer believes himself to be doing in the moment he experiences a prophecy or a text as divine. Euthyphro's underlying insight, Fallis argues, is that piety is for the sake of the common good, and while Socrates can only demonstrate his failure to disprove this insight, it remains standing at the dialogue's end, despite Euthyphro's various other inconsistencies.

Fallis's thesis is harder to maintain in the *Ion*. The frenzy that Socrates claims the believer to exhibit in that text seems difficult to reconcile with a notion that there is moral content or moral judgment involved. For example, given the absence of intelligence in the worshiper when possessed by the god, this makes even subsequent judgment that such an experience is moral, as Fallis argues, questionable at best. Likewise difficult is the idea that Dionysian madness would be a hallmark or sign of "morality"; Fallis posits, however, a connection between the moral content of the Homeric scenes that Ion relates and the moral passions Ion finds in himself and his audience, by which Ion subsequently judges his experience to be divine (100). Finally, Fallis argues that Ion's infamous claim to possess the skill of the general at war is likewise representative, positing that the general's art is of necessity a moral one. Ion's claim to have the knowledge of the general is his attempt to stake out a claim, against Socrates's refutations, to a real grasp of an "architectonic moral-political art" which comes from Ion's true, rationally driven interpretation of Homer (117).

This is a novel approach, to say the least, to two of the most frequently taught Platonic dialogues, and it turns out to be genuinely helpful for recasting the action of the dialogue in terms of the believer's own inner conflict—which, as even Socrates's most earnest admirers would admit, may at times not be fully articulated or fairly treated by Socrates. But given this emphasis, the reader might be puzzled to find, in the end, the individual's personal moral relationship with the gods dubbed a *Socratic* thesis, and, as Fallis hints, one of the operative drives behind Socrates's own dialectical approach to philosophy—the more so as Socrates's own *daimōn* or private divine interlocutor is not addressed in Fallis's work. The book's real puzzle, however, rests on what is encompassed by Fallis's appeal to "morality." Fallis initially defines morality as "a recognition that and how one ought to subordinate one's self interest for the sake of something higher, or of greater dignity or importance, than oneself" (3). Such a definition places morality already quite close to the Fichtean or even Universalist Unitarian claim, that god, the divine, or the higher is nothing more than and is identical with our experience of morality, full stop; and a self-denying morality at that. But Fallis, although at times treading very close to this position, seems to hold out for their disjunction, even briefly considering the argument that virtue itself, without "divine blessing," is somehow less than Good (132).

More difficult still is the connection to politics: Fallis is explicit in his claim for an identity between piety and justice as well, that is, that morality and politics are essentially the same, a difficult proposition at best. Likewise for him *both* the beautiful and the good are adequate signs of such a morality, a point necessary to reconcile Ion's and Euthyphro's divergent experiences of art and religion respectively. Such an argument would have been clarified by a more direct appeal to Strauss's writings, which on occasion articulate compelling reasons why the term "morality" is not a fully adequate gloss on what the Greeks mean by "justice," even if in his (still debatable) view the resemblance

of “obedience to divine law” to piety remains a point of similarity between Greek and biblical thought (“The Mutual Influence of Religion and Philosophy,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 [1978]: 111).

But the book’s real weakness is its often vague sense of Greek religion, where the conversational “by Zeus” becomes the “most sacred oath,” despite its lack of libation or blood sacrifice (46), and the supervisory figure-head of the “king archon” in Athens, the presiding religious authority over the heads, presumably, of the cult of Athena Polias (24). Most awkward of all is the sidestepping of the terrible problem that the Greek gods are not good; which, as Homer makes canonically clear, is a problem extremely obvious to all humans involved in their quite precarious worship. Indeed, Fallis notes that he consciously chooses to abandon the term “religion” in preference for “piety,” the latter being, in the Greek sense, as he argues, “more amenable to the claim that only one account of the cosmos, divinity, and human beings is correct” (6), a notion fundamentally alien to Greek polytheism. As it stands as a gloss on Athenian believers, it rings as all too classically Socratic a derivation, rather than one specific to Euthyphro or Ion; and whose account is really being examined by the book, Socrates or the believer, remains unresolved.

Fallis’s work, however, has a saving grace: his writing lacks the sort of barbed cynicism towards the question of gods many Strauss-influenced works possess, and his good-faith approach to these questions enlivens his thinking and gives it sharper aim. Fallis has a genuine philosophical interest in his subject and a sense of the urgency of his question that is a pleasure to witness, and marks his work in an important sense as truly Platonic. All in all, the work is a highly polished addition to a specific project with respect to Plato, namely, to explore with his help the relation between morality, education, and politics, in service of thinking through the oddities of modern politics and modern life.

Becoming Socrates, by contrast, is still more philosophically ambitious in scope, and more responsible in its sense of how its chosen dialogue relates to Platonic philosophy as a whole. As such it bids fair to be of more general scholarly interest. Priou seeks to place the *Parmenides*’s ostensibly metaphysical arguments in the context of a Plato who, while not uninterested in metaphysics, nevertheless considers political philosophy to be philosophy’s primary goal, as for example Cicero claimed; that is, a Plato for whom “political philosophy is first philosophy” (194). Of course, for Priou, the appeal to politics here is not to a restrictive modern sense of the term; “politics” stands as the locus of the terrifying trio of the Good, the Beautiful, and the Just, to which Socrates’s interest in metaphysics is owing. On Priou’s reading, the *Parmenides* is first and foremost the story of Socrates’s true education as one who knows he does not know, and so this dialogue provides deeper insight into his philosophical activity than either Diotima’s methodological work in the *Symposium* or Socrates’s own later changes of heart detailed in the *Phaedo*. He argues convincingly that the unifying thrust of the *Parmenides* is

the attempt to respond to the character of the “skeptic,” who warns that Socrates’s youthful attempt to solve the problems of his philosophic predecessors, that is, his metaphysical innovation of the infamous “Platonic Forms,” might ultimately make knowledge of our world impossible, and thus knowledge of the beautiful, the good, and the just here on earth impossible as well.

Priou insists, with absolute justice, on a close relationship between the *Republic’s* guardians, whose rule in the ideal city is premised on their claim to have such knowledge, and Parmenides’s discussion of the impossibility of our human access to godlike political knowledge, which renders the guardians’ bid to rule highly suspect. His sense of this underlying connection across dialogues is part of the excitement of the book, and he succeeds admirably in tying all the knots required between the familiar Plato-as-political tropes and the more arcane: between the political need for successful education and education’s dependence on logos’s truth-telling (Priou thinks the outlook is grim); between Socrates’s refutational activities and the problems of the Forms’ participation (logos cannot assess its own dependence on participation, therefore refutation is our best path); and between our human desire for living gods and the individual’s wish to become a god himself (both ill-fated). Ultimately, our relation to the Beautiful and Just comes down to our willful reasons for wanting to hypothesize their reality, and as such our philosophizing is limited to the horizon that our human failings give to such. Our necessary employment of more than one political regime, in contrast to the gods’ monistic and perfect one, is a sign of our fundamentally imperfect and therefore inevitably fractured political knowledge (54).

Much of this argument comes as the analysis of the first part of the dialogue. The bulk of the book, however, is taken up with a commentary that runs through the eight hypotheses or deductions that form the *Parmenides’s* second part. Since more scholarly attention has been addressed to the first half where Socrates and his forms are dramatically refuted, it is much-needed work, and crucial to making the case for the political angle here in this notoriously difficult section. In contrast to those who see the second half as representative of Plato’s own views, or as a more or less serious satire of the Eleatics, Priou reads the hypotheses as Parmenides’s attempt to continue his critique of Socrates’s theories (59), and as an educational display meant to hasten Socrates’s path towards complete skepticism. It cements Socrates’s understanding that while the forms are the necessary architecture of eponymy in language, as radically separated entities they remain impossible for us to access, and the impossibilities that follow from the One’s radical separation from all else is a sign of this failure. Priou offers a very helpful analysis of the reactions of Parmenides’s youthful interlocutor Aristoteles, whose mounting despair, through his wish to maintain the ability to speak of a unity unmixed with plurality and his discomfort with the limitless, becomes manifest as a foil to Socrates’s own limitless zeal for speeches. In all of this, Priou shows a careful eye for the crucial textual wrinkles overlooked at the reader’s peril, and, most pleasantly for

the reader, a keen sense for the limitless puns Plato sees possible in this strange kind of talk about *to be*.

Readers who come to the book with a desire to fit this otherwise exceptional dialogue into a scheme of political philosophy will be given grounds for comfort, and Priou's work makes a real contribution to this effort. For readers who, on metaphysical grounds, object *prima facie* to such an argument, it becomes necessary to undergo the very kind of gymnastic exercise the great Parmenides himself recommends: that the aspirant to true philosophy must also experience precisely the wrenching sort of sensation that an argument based on the opposite premise to one's most treasured conviction provides. Such a gymnastic exercise has all the benefits Parmenides and Priou claim. Likewise, Priou's choice to make the difficult arguments of *One, Limit, et alia* on their own terms, without importing the language or logic of later philosophers, possesses a charm that is philosophically rich; the reader also receives the unexpected benefit of responses to certain problems via correspondence from Stewart Umphrey (St. John's College, Annapolis), author of *Zetetic Skepticism*.

There is an oddity to Priou's approach worth mentioning, however: his very strong commitment to a skeptical Plato—a Plato not too far from the Academic skepticism of Carneades who argued for the reality of justice one day and against it the next. At many points, the impossibility of the Platonic Forms as knowable objects becomes a vehicle for proving the impossibility of *any* metaphysical account whatsoever. This lack of a skeptical eye towards skepticism renders his Socrates rather less than Socratic. Since it goes without saying that the possibility of some modification of strict neo-Platonic metaphysics would be relevant for the possibility of political knowledge and practices toward the common good, one could wish that even within in the confines of the *Parmenides*, the reader could be given a glance beyond the purposefully infuriating *eidē*—as of course Plato's most faithful student Aristotle immediately sets out to do.

For instance, Priou coins the term "analytic obfuscation" to name the problem he sees with the dependence of intelligibility on plurality as such: since all terms must be broken into parts and defined using other further terms which are "understood only insofar as their relation to one another is relevant to the first" (82), no real definition or fixed knowledge is possible; he notes, "analysis inherently obfuscates what the matter under consideration is" (*ibid.*) and "any determination of what something is invokes other beings" (194). That this problem is insurmountable with regard to the kind of knowledge required for just rule is presented as conclusive (114). The possibility that some principles are first, and therefore are necessarily undefinable but still knowable sources of the rest, is not explicitly refuted, and here a consideration of phenomenology, any sort, or even of Aristotle's contention that the things first known to us are less knowable than what is knowable in itself, would have been helpful. Still, Priou's sense that it is our human willfulness

that “personifies the beings into wholes” (196) is not without a ring of truth, if one could but add “on occasion.”

Ultimately, Priou’s Socrates is perhaps all too historically Parmenidean in his final despair at the impossibility of the attempt to give an order to the cosmos by means of discursive reason, and his sense that humans must inevitably take the way of opinion, which is the weaker if necessary path; the pious man and the philosopher-statesman are united in missing this key point (56). But it is in this guise that the book sits closer to the underlying problem at issue in Fallis’s work as well, one that Strauss identifies with what we may as well call our piety: whether reason and revelation, conceived of as mutually exclusive, can be given equal consideration without being dishonest to the one or the other. On Priou’s reading, the *Parmenides* lends credence to Strauss’s notion of the forms as the equally flawed substitutes for the Greek gods, where the forms represent the true sort of revelation we most earnestly desire and yet are fated to see *not even* through a glass darkly (197, 205). What this would mean for the common good, however, remains on his reading troublingly opaque.

That Plato, as an author, can inspire in his readers and interpreters the most absolute religiosity *as well as* the most dissolute skepticism is a sign of the strength of his writings rather than otherwise. As counterintuitive as Academic (or Platonic) skepticism would seem to current academic philosophy’s metaphysical turn, it is a reasonable stance to take within the cosmos of writings Plato offers us, and certainly does not lack historical precedent. Likewise, the willingness to follow the divine magnetism that links us to the gods where it leads, as was seen so beautifully in the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century, is not more unreasonable an approach. *Becoming Socrates* and *Socrates and Divine Revelation* are helpful contributions to such lovers of Plato as are willing to admit that, even if consensus were possible regarding Plato’s understanding of the gods, the forms, or the good, it is hardly desirable; and this is no less true of works that owe their inspiration to Strauss, than to any other Platonic tradition.

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