Review of “Classical Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction”

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Routledge’s *Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy* now includes, after nine volumes on philosophical problems, Shields’ engagingly written introduction to Greek philosophy. Its natural home is an intelligent but not presumptuous one-semester thematically-driven survey of the period from Thales up to but not including the Hellenists. That theme, the development of epistemology, governs the selection and discussion of authors and texts throughout. The bibliography provided at the end of each part is repeated, with additions, at the end of the book, and the index is also suitable for a volume of this size. “Suitable” here means just enough for the reader whose initial enthusiasm for the subject might without much difficulty be crushed.

Part 1, Philosophy before Socrates, includes presentations of Thales and Anaximander, Xenophanes, Heracleitus, Parmenides and Zeno, Democritus, and Protagoras. Milesian philosophy, satisfied to have boldly but baldly pronounced upon the cosmos, provided grist for the epistemological mills of Xenophanes and Heracleitus, whose skepticism was alike in terms of human knowledge being perspectively bound, but unlike in terms of its being *necessarily* so bound (only Heracleitus explicitly affirmed it). Next comes Parmenides who, like Heracleitus, restricted justification to the *a priori*, but in place of Heracleitean aphoristic provided argument. (It is unclear why Pythagoreanism receives no dedicated hearing in this context, especially given Shields’ discussion of Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s over-reliance upon *form* – e.g. in general terms, 118; in terms of psychic separability, 135). It is worth noting that Shields’ view of Democritus as a philosopher who did not really address Parmenides’ objection rests upon standard-issue Parmenides as concerned with epistemology and metaphysics; this image has recently been seriously challenged by Kingsley, who argues that Parmenides was in fact a practical Pythagorean (*In the Dark Places of Wisdom* [Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Press, 1999]). True, this might have spoiled the plot being presented, but that is in fact a non-negotiable element in the job description for every historian of philosophy.

Part 2, Socrates, presents Socrates as an analyst of knowledge claims. The Socratic elenchus is discussed at length in the contexts of virtue (*Meno*) and piety (*Euthyphro*); other themes less extensively treated are Socratic ignorance, irony, paradox, and integrity. It is precisely the “uncompromising character” (32) of Socrates, particularly in the face of impending death, which is celebrated by Plato and accepted by Shields, but questioned by the more “pedestrian” and less philosophically interesting historian Xenophon (56 n. 2; in the same note we read that Socrates wrote “nearly nothing” – but no indication of what he did write is given), who suggests that Socrates in effect committed suicide (**Socrates’ Defence** 1, which
contains an opaque but likely reference to Plato, and especially 6-8, 27, and 33). While the Crito contains important information concerning Socrates’ political philosophy, it seems plain enough that what Shields finds philosophically interesting about Plato’s portrayal of Socrates’ attitude towards his own death (in particular the *unlikelihood* of personal utter annihilation) is to be found in the Phaedo; but there “Socrates” argues in support of *metaphysical* forms, something Shields in Part 3 recognizes as Plato’s distinctive contribution. In Plato’s Apology Socrates is clearly agnostic with respect to personal survival (40c-41c), and so Xenophon may in fact be a superior source regarding Socrates just because, unlike Plato, he has no philosophical axe to grind.

Part 3, Plato, concentrates upon the Forms, especially but not exclusively their epistemological function (*Meno* part two, *Theaetetus*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*). The Form of the Good, metaphysically and epistemologically the kingpin of Platonism, receives special attention since it constitutes a development from Socratic analysis of knowledge claims to the objective basis upon which alone any such analysis might actually *succeed*. Plato’s project, according to Shields, is not to affirm nominalism or relativism, but to reject nihilism and so to endorse realism (72). Although Shields does not make use of it, this realism (e.g. of the form of justice) is made evident even in the state which I think must be regarded as defective insofar as it is premised upon luxury rather than simple necessity (*Republic* II, 372e).

The Form of the Good provides the general backdrop for Part 4, Aristotle. Shields begins this final section with the *Categories*, used primarily to elucidate Aristotle’s criticism of Platonic metaphysics. Next comes a discussion of the four causes (*Physics*) and their application to human nature (no textual basis for Shields’ discussion is provided within the narrative, although several passages of *de Anima* are referred to in two section endnotes) and the good life (*Nicomachean Ethics*). He notes that Aristotle’s preference for the middle position between extremes results in a philosophy which is both complex and elusive.

Three features especially stand out about this book. First, Shields provides helpful analytical reconstructions and not overly-complex assessments of key premises in the arguments pertinent to the selected philosophers’ epistemological positions, while candidly indicating on many occasions that the problems involved are in fact difficult matters of considerable scholarly controversy; these assessments often occasion the opportunity to introduce and explain contemporary technical philosophical terminology in a way that is not off-putting, for example his discussion of eliminativism and reductionism in the context of Aristotelian natural teleology (126-32). Second, he provides clear expository transitions between Parts (and within Part 1), showing how subsequent thought modifies earlier thought while being affected by it; the reminders of positions and authors previously discussed constitute an object-lesson in the Aristotelian mean. A good example of his user-friendly, enchanting, almost conversational writing style, particularly with the general university student in mind, is his initial characterization of *a posteriori* cognition in Plato as “knowledge” (59), a characterization which fits very well with current conceptions of science as productive of knowledge; that Platonic *knowledge* is in fact restricted to *a priori* cognition is gradually revealed only 12 pages later. And third, he narrates the adventures of Greek philosophy without committing what might be called the developmental fallacy of supposing that a philosophical sequel is obviously an advance over its prequel; for instance, he regularly suggests how an earlier thinker, later criticized, might reasonably respond to that criticism, though without tipping his own hand concerning which side of the argument, if any, he himself endorses; another example is his observation that many contemporary philosophers seem content with the shallow victory resulting from their principled but uninformed rejection of teleology in biological science (126).
Potential adopters who would like to use the accompanying set of readings, either in addition to or in place of this volume (xi), may be disappointed with the omission of bibliographical data for this specially assembled set of readings.

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