Review of “A History of Ancient Philosophy: From the Beginnings to Augustine”

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As I read this book I found it hard to resist imagining myself sitting in Prof. Johansen’s (really long) introductory course in ancient philosophy. It was generally a pleasant experience; he is an engaging storyteller. His choppy writing style -- a direct result of those endless dashes -- was irritating until I began to think of it as a speaking style. It was rather easy, then, to imagine him reading from his notes at the front of the class, pausing at the beginning of a dash, and without at all lifting his head looking up from his notes and scanning the class in that half inch between his eyebrows and the top of his glasses as he explained what he meant by what he had just read, then continuing where he had left off.

In this book Johansen has set himself the task of narrating the history of ancient philosophy from the beginnings through Augustine, even though by most accounts Augustine belongs to the medieval period. Given that he accomplished this in just 624 pages, his treatment is not surprisingly basic and dogmatic. References to the secondary literature are sparse, as is discussion of scholarly debates, both of which are good things in an introductory text. I can imagine the book being of value to the casual reader who wanted a general overview of the philosophy of the period without having to read the actual textual materials themselves, although I doubt that such a reader would be willing to hand over the $140.00 US required for this general overview. It might also be useful for the new instructor with minimal background in ancient philosophy who has been assigned to teach it in addition to the other courses he or she was really hired for. The inclusion of paraphilosophical cultural material helpfully illuminates, though again at an introductory level, the interaction between what is happening in philosophy and what is happening in other areas of civil life, e.g. science, politics, history, and the arts. But those whose academic energies are primarily spent in ancient philosophy will probably find the book a disappointment; it is certainly not one they would choose as a course text in place of the primary materials. I base this judgment on my close study of Plato’s *Timaeus* in particular and substantial experience with Greek philosophy in general. Since Johansen’s narrative is written at roughly the same level of sophistication throughout, as far as I can see, it would be very surprising if others did not feel their own special fields of study handled as roughly, superficially, sometimes even misleadingly, as I did mine. Let me illustrate.

The place of the *Timaeus* in the Platonic corpus is a matter of considerable importance, not least because if it was written after the *Parmenides*, then at least two consequences surely seem to follow: first, that Plato has not rejected his theory of forms after all, as it might appear he did from...
their very rough ride in the *Parmenides*; and second, that since Plato already realizes from his work in the *Parmenides* that no moment of time can be the first one as he sets out to write the *Timaeus*, the literalist reading of the dialogue is easily eliminated. Conversely, if the *Timaeus* was written before the *Parmenides*, then the *Parmenides* might just be a record of the death and burial of the forms, which would imply a fairly significant change of mind on Plato’s part, and the literalist reading of the generation of the world would not so easily be ruled out, at least not on the grounds of the understanding of time presented in the *Parmenides*. Much effort already has been expended by others trying to determine the “correct” order of the dialogues; this effort is likely to continue. It is in this context that Johansen simply asserts, without any discussion at all (219, 241), that the *Timaeus* was written after the *Parmenides*. Thus his statement that there is no change in Plato’s opinion between the *Republic* and the *Laws* (249) is evidently not a conclusion but rather a (seriously questionable) premise.

On to details. The reader’s first encounter with the question concerning the eternity of the world in Plato is a bald assertion from Johansen, without any comment at all, regarding what is to this day a highly controversial question, namely that Plato’s world in the *Timaeus* is eternal (95). The Demiurge, he much later says (238), is “symbolic”, the generation of the world “a story,” “a fable” (238), basing this view on Plato’s repeated use of the word “*mythos*” in this dialogue. Now if this were the only language Plato used to describe what he is doing here, it might be reasonable to infer that the account Timaeus narrates “is expressly presented as a fantasy” (243). But Johansen simply and completely ignores the fact that Plato about as often uses “*logos*” to describe what Timaeus is doing: giving a plausible account of the generation of the universe. Obviously even mentioning this fact would have made the thesis being repeated here less ‘clearly true’ than not mentioning it would have, seriously misleading the first-time reader of Plato. Johansen does, it is true, later revisit the subject, when he comes to Xenocrates (264), but there says dismissively only that “[Xenocrates] has a strangely literal imagination.” Whatever else might be said, to call a literal interpretation of the dialogue strange without any consideration of the arguments involved amounts to nothing more than an *ad hominem*, and I was disappointed to find that Johansen somehow found it necessary to take that step. In actual fact, the argument in favor of Johansen’s thesis concerning this aspect of the *Timaeus* is not anywhere near as obvious as he makes it out to be, although it is clear he has studied Taylor¹ and Cornford² closely, who also believe that in the *Timaeus* “all motion in the end is owing to a self-moving first mover, the cosmic soul” (361) and that consequently “it is probable that the ‘evil’ [world-] soul [in the *Laws*] corresponds with the necessity of the *Timaeus*” (252). None of this, again, is obviously true. For those who are interested in detailed and powerful arguments to the contrary, see T.M. Robinson’s chapter on the *Timaeus* in *Plato’s Psychology* and many further references there.³

Regarding a sampling of the other dialogues, a few illustrations will suffice. (1) The five arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* are handled in one and one-half pages (187-88). (2) When it comes to the *Republic*, one reads that “[Plato] can conceive of nothing but his good little state in a constant state of war” (199). That is because, we soon are told, his ideal state is premised upon luxury (202). I am repeatedly astonished to see how widespread the view is that Plato actually *endorses* the project of a life spent in pursuit of material luxury. Nothing could be further from the truth. The simple Socratic state is Plato’s ideal one, too. It’s just that the general run of humanity as a rule doesn’t, can’t, or won’t see this, and so the second-best would be the sort of state outlined in this dialogue, complete with army and philosopher-king. (3) The significance of the location of
Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium* is no sooner mentioned than just dropped as “another matter” (191). As well, Eros is misleadingly described (negatively) as a demon, not (neutrally) as a daimon or spirit. This might be a fault simply of translation. (4) Describing the *Laws* as “Plato’s last message” -- an outmoded way to regard the dialogues, but clearly not yet extinct -- Johansen asserts, without any argument at all, that “surely the Athenian is not Plato” (249), and does not even deign to mention Diogenes Laertius’ claim to the contrary, let alone dispute it.

I do not doubt that someone else who had made a special study of Aristotle would critique Johansen’s treatment of Aristotle similarly to my critique of his treatment of Plato. (Same for specialists in the presocratics, the hellenists, Plotinus, even Augustine.) The general presentation is one thing, the particulars are quite another. Space restricts me here to few comments on Aristotle, but enough to raise important issues. (1) Regarding the *Metaphysics*, Johansen says that for Aristotle “the world does not exist because god created it; god exists because the world exists” (363). The first part is correct, of course, because Aristotle’s world is eternal. But the second part, as it stands, is either seriously mistaken or seriously misleading. The world needs god as its object of desire; god strictly speaking has no metaphysical need of the world. If Johansen has some special meaning in mind, he owes the reader an explanation of it. (2) Regarding the *Ethics*, Johansen says this: a “strange circular structure is attached to the moral virtues: we become just by performing just acts” (374). I don’t see what is so strange about this. The preconditions for action in Aristotle are rational deliberation and decision, neither of which a youngster is capable of; consequently the youngster does not, strictly speaking, act. So how then does a youngster become just? Aristotle’s answer seems to me quite simple: by imitating a just person. Insofar as the youngster’s actions proceed from imitation, they can’t yet count as authentic, naturally. This is one way out of the problem inherited by Aristotle that only the already just can do just things. The act, in other words, is potentially just in the case of the imitator, actually just in the case of the actually just person. Perhaps the Danish here rendered as “strange” is not connotatively negative. (3) Regarding the *Politics*, Johansen correctly mentions Aristotle’s view that “the more useless, the better”(390), but he does not convey the explanation Aristotle himself gives for this view. I cannot imagine why Johansen would withhold such crucial information from his introductory audience.

Another irritation is that the author seems to conceive of his audience as one he expects no intelligent response from, who really are beginners. Given this, it is surprising how often foreign words and phrases are left untranslated by the translator, e.g. “Gebrauchwissen” (184), “expressis verbis” (187), “hors de combat” (189), “sub specie aeternitatis” (211), “eo ipso” (219), “Empfindung” vs. “Wahrnmung” (224), “dolce far nieute” (250), “das Wahre is das Ganze” (255), and so on, both before and after this sample. I strongly doubt that many casual readers of ancient philosophy, or introductory classes for that matter, at least in America, are going to understand on their own what such words and phrases mean. It would not have been difficult for the translator to have given English equivalents in square brackets. Some of the phrases can no doubt be looked up in a good dictionary, although why the onus is suddenly put upon the introductory, casual reader is beyond me; in any case, others word and phrases probably cannot be, and in cases like that the language employed does not invite but rather repels, the last thing I would have thought Johansen was interested in doing.

Lastly, a few items of a more philological sort. (1) The “noble lie” in the *Republic*, according to Johansen, is a mistranslation for “symbolically true fable” (204). By now the reader is already used
to getting little or no justification for important views held by the author. But how kalos can be rendered as “symbolically true” is a mystery to me. The word means “good,” “beautiful,” even “excellent,” but not “symbolically true.” The lie, then, says Plato, is a really good one. What this in turn might mean is another question. But that is a question of interpretation, not of translation. I for one have little doubt that Plato’s point is not that this lie is good because of what it is, but rather that it is good because of what it does. Some evils, in other words, are in fact instrumentally good, and this is one of them. This lie somehow conduces to the preservation of the state, and is to be understood in that context. (2) Johansen renders the Greek for Aristotle’s formal cause, to ti en einai, as “to-be-what-it-was” (355). This word-for-word translation is just wrong. The whole point of this type of cause is to define X in terms of its completed state, what it will one day be if it is not completed already, and so it is truer to say that an acorn is a young oak than that an oak is an old acorn. More helpful renditions would therefore be “what X would someday be” or “what X would turn out to be,” on the understanding, of course, that nothing interferes.

Although I have been critical of this book, I have done so from the vantage point of a specialist in ancient philosophy. Clearly it serves a need for the less demanding, less exacting reading public. It does do well, in other words, what it aims to do. Perhaps it would be most helpful to think of it as a basic guide for the academic tourist who wants to know what all the fuss is about in Greek philosophy.

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