

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics.* By William J. Prior. London & Sydney, Croom Helm, 1986. pp 201. Reviewed by J. Angelo Corlett, University of California – Santa Barbara.

Prior argues against two opposing approaches to Plato's metaphysics. "Radical revisionism," he holds, goes to the extreme of arguing that the Platonic corpus involves radical changes in Plato's metaphysics, while "unitarianism" argues that Plato's metaphysics remain essentially the same throughout the corpus. Prior offers an alternative to these positions, a view which I shall call "moderate developmentalism". In his argument for the development of Plato's metaphysics from the *Timeaus* to the *Sophist* Prior claims that "there is considerable continuity in Plato's thought, and at the same time considerable development" (p. 165). Hence Prior argues for a mediating position between both radical revisionism and unitarianism.

To support his position Prior derives evidence for moderate developmentalism by way of the following analysis. He commences with evidence from the earlier and middle dialogues which show a fundamental unity in Plato's thought. Many traditional problems are discussed, including the self-predication and self-participation of forms and the Being-Becoming distinction. Prior concludes that "Plato does not accept self-predication as a general principle," though he does accept the fact that some form (such as the form of Beauty in the *Symposium*) are self-predicative (p. 29). Indeed, Prior's discussion of Plato's metaphysics in the earlier and middle dialogues is not one which treats the theory of forms in itself. Instead, it is one which discusses the merit of specific philosophical problems of paramount importance to Plato.

Prior takes the stylometric evidence for the dating of the *Parmenides* as a middle dialogue to be persuasive. In so doing, he considers the dialogue as a challenge to some key aspects of Plato's thought in the dialogues dated earlier than the *Parmenides*. Prior takes the challenge of the *Parmenides* as evidence for development in Plato's thought:

The arguments of the *Parmenides*, though they do not refute the Theory of Forms, do expose certain problems, ambiguities and

weaknesses in it. In so doing, they present a programme of sorts for the development of that theory in the late dialogues (p. 84).

The remainder of Prior's book, however, consists of a discussion of the *Timeaus* and the *Sophist*. He argues that the *Timeaus* is Plato's response to the metaphysical problem posed regarding the theory of forms in the *Parmenides*. The former dialogue, Prior thinks, vindicates the earlier and middle dialogues against the problems of self-predication posed by the latter dialogue. It is largely because of this that Prior argues against the revisionists in dating the *Timeaus* later than the *Parmenides*.

In the *Sophist* Prior sees Plato putting to new use the theory of forms used in earlier dialogues. Thus, Prior dates the *Sophist* after the *Timeaus*. He further argues that

the *Sophist* contains no evidence of the abandonment of the view that the Forms are paradigms; rather, it contains evidence that the metaphysical scheme of original and image is still part of Plato's thought. (p. 128).

Prior sees this as evidence for unity in Plato's thought.

Even if one grants Prior that his textual analysis supports his moderate developmentalist claim, there are fundamental problems with Prior's notion of moderate developmentalism itself. Precisely to what does Prior's claim of moderate developmentalism amount? What is the sense of his claim?

The first reason Prior's claim is problematic is because it is not altogether clear what he means by the expressions "unity" and "development." That is, his use of these expressions is ambiguous. Certainly by "unity" he does not mean that Plato's beliefs form a coherent metaphysic when considered from the vantage point of the entire Platonic corpus (p. 163-4). He seems to mean that there are certain fundamental ideas which characterize Plato's beliefs throughout many of the dialogues (p. 164).

But what does Prior mean by the "development" of Plato's metaphysics? Perhaps he means that whatever contradicts, significantly disagrees with or significantly modifies the fundamentals of Plato's beliefs constitutes a development in Plato's thought (p. 163). If this is what Prior means by "development," then any belief found in the corpus which

contradicts (or is not reconcilable with) what is believed to be a fundamental doctrine of Plato's is simply a development of Plato's metaphysics. But this is objectionable because it assumes part of what Prior's moderate developmentalism is trying to prove, i.e., that there is indeed unity concerning Plato's beliefs which goes to make up Plato's metaphysics. If this is not what Prior means by the development of Plato's metaphysics, then perhaps he means that it is a breakthrough in Plato's thought which represents an extension of his concepts rather than an abandonment of them (p. 140). But if Prior means by the development of Plato's metaphysics that Plato's views differ only in substance from one dialogue to another (or within a dialogue) on occasion, then Prior is (by implication) attributing to Plato a philosophical attitude in which Plato never actually abandons one of his views or concepts. Is one to think that one of the greatest figures in philosophy is also a most sterile and immutable thinker?

Not only are there ambiguities concerning the key terms of Prior's claim, his claim is problematic when taken as conjunction. It might be taken in one of a number of ways. There is a weak sense in which it might be taken to mean that some unity and development exists in the corpus. This is a very safe claim, amounting to the assertion that unity and development of Plato's thought does exist in the corpus:

(A) Some unity and some development exists between the substantive concepts contained in the Platonic corpus.

To support (A) all Prior needs to do is to provide at least one instance of a Platonic unity-concept and one instance of a Platonic development-concept. (By "unity-concept" I mean a concept which Prior would consider to support the claim that there is unity in Plato's thought. By "development-concept" I mean a concept which Prior would consider to support the claim that there is development in Plato's thought.) Perhaps no contemporary philosopher disputes Prior's ability to do this. In fact, one might question Prior's reason for making such a claim in light of the fact that the majority of philosophers hold some form of moderate developmentalism regarding Plato's metaphysics. Certainly Prior is not making a novel claim. If this is the sense of Prior's claim, then it is philosophically uninteresting. This is not to say, of course,

that Prior's support of this claim is philosophically uninteresting.

But Prior's claim might be taken in a stronger sense according to which only unity and development exists in the corpus. If the expressions "unity" and "development" are used in such a manner that their respective senses are contradictory (i.e., nothing that counts as the unity of Plato's thought can at the same time count as the development of it), then Prior's argument is reducible to an exclusive disjunction. That is, if a concept in the corpus is interpreted as being either a unity-concept or a development-concept, then such a concept cannot be both a unity-concept and a development-concept at the same time. Otherwise the concept is self-contradictory. Furthermore, assuming that there are no concepts in the corpus except those of unity-concepts and development-concepts, either a concept belongs to the former category or it belongs to the latter category. (Note that nothing in Prior's statement of moderate developmentalism precludes unity-concepts and development-concepts from being both mutually exclusive and exhaustive.) Now Prior's claim becomes an exclusive disjunction:

(B) Each substantive concept in the Platonic corpus is either a unity-concept or a development-concept, not both.

However, the difficulty with (B) is that it is tautological since: 1) Every concept in the Platonic corpus is either a unity-concept or the development-concept and not both; and 2) The respective senses of "unity" and "development" are contradictory. (B) is tautological because it is a claim which is true by virtue of its logical form:

$$(p \vee \neg p) \ \& \ \neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$$

where "p" is a unity-concept and where " $\neg p$ " amounts to a development-concept: (B) is tautological in that no matter what truth value ("the truth" or "the false") is substituted for "p," the schema has "the true" as its truth value.

There is another difficulty with (B). There seems to be no manner by which to provide a disproof of it. It is unfalsifiable. By this I do not mean that no possible mass of textual evidence can be brought to bear against Prior's claim, but that no single

piece of textual evidence can count against the moderate developmentalist position in that such evidence can always be used (in one way or another) to support moderate developmentalism. No matter which concept within the Platonic corpus is considered that concept is either a unity-concept or a development-concept. For example, if the meaning and use of *eithos* differs significantly from either one dialogue to another or from one passage to another within a dialogue, then such evidence can be used to support that aspect of Prior's claim which is developmental. On the other hand, if passages containing *eithos* possess a significant degree of continuity either within a dialogue or between dialogues, then this can be used to support that aspect of Prior's moderate developmentalism which emphasizes the unity of Plato's metaphysics. In either case, Prior's claim is supported since (according to this way of construing Prior's claim) there are no other concepts possible than those of unity or development.

It appears that the only manner by which to falsify (B) is to show that one of the following is the case: 1) That none of Plato's beliefs develop or contradict one another in any fashion throughout the corpus (unitarianism), 2) That all of Plato's beliefs change radically from dialogue to dialogue, from context to context (radical revisionism). But even this approach to falsifying this construal of Prior's claim is problematic, since no matter how many ideas one brings forth in favor (and only in favor) of either unitarianism or radical revisionism there is still the possibility that one has not considered every one of Plato's substantive concepts within the corpus. This being logically possible, one can never be certain that there does not remain another such concept in the corpus which would contradict either unitarianism or radical revisionism. Therefore, the only means by which to falsify (B) are methodologically impossible, making this construal of Prior's claim unfalsifiable.

The point of this criticism is to introduce Prior's Puzzle. It is a puzzle for the moderate developmentalist. If Prior's moderate developmentalist claim is taken in the weak sense (A), then it is philosophically uninteresting. Most all who study the Platonic corpus believe there is unity and development of thought within the corpus. If his claim is taken in the stronger sense (B), then it is tautological and unfalsifiable. It is true by virtue of its logical form, and every

substantive concept found in the Platonic corpus supports his claim necessarily. Taken in either case, Prior's claim is problematic.

In Prior's statement of moderate developmentalism, ambiguities regarding "unity" and "development" lead to multiple interpretations of the claim which are philosophically uninteresting, tautological and unfalsifiable. How can moderate developmentalism (a view which most philosophers think is intuitively correct) be stated to avoid these difficulties?

If Prior's moderate developmentalism is to have any sense as a philosophical claim about beliefs which might be attributable to Plato, then this claim must be restated in a manner which evades the ambiguities and difficulties discussed above. I am aware of no way by which this puzzle might be resolved. If it cannot be resolved, and assuming that Prior's Puzzle is a puzzle and is properly formulated, then it seems that his moderate developmentalist claim is problematic in the ways I outline above.

Prior provides some information and penetrating analysis regarding, for instance, the third man argument (pp. 64-74). Moreover, many of his arguments are plausible. However, Prior is not careful to clarify the claim which such evidence is supposed to support: moderate developmentalism. This carelessness takes something away from the overall quality of his project.

*Reality at Risk* by Roger Trigg. New York: Barnes and Nobel, 1980. Pp. xx + 216. Reviewed by Leslie Jones, University of Kansas.

In his earlier book *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge, 1973) Roger Trigg concludes that

What in fact has been missing from so much recent controversy in religion, science and other fields is the notion of objective reality—of things being the case whether people recognize them or not.

The purpose of the present work is to provide further arguments supporting this conclusion. Unfortunately, Trigg fails to provide a lucid definition of 'objective reality'. Trigg calls himself a 'genuine realist', but he is never very clear about what kind of realist this is. There are, of course, many independent forms of realism. Being a realist about entities such as electrons and quarks does not entail that one is a realist about other entities such as cultures, characters, and coffee cups. Nor does it entail that one is realist about theories. Simply put, being a realist does not place strictures on what one takes to be "real." Among the various positions of realism there is one which Hilary Putnam has called "metaphysical realism." Its main differentiating characteristic is that it supposes that the world, i.e. reality, is not dependent *in any way* upon the actions and cognitive capacities of man. It is this position which has been brought into question not only by interpretations of quantum mechanics, but by arguments of philosophers as well. Trigg seems to argue from a position something like metaphysical realism. Nonetheless, Trigg is not concerned with any particular realism, he simply wishes to show that the question of what reality is like is independent of the question of how we can conceive of it.

The discussion of Realism in *Reality at Risk* runs the gauntlet of analytic philosophy. He begins by discussing and arguing against the various not-realist-enough positions in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, epistemology, and the philosophy of science. He is a "thorough-going" realist faced with a philosophical community leaning towards various forms of non-realism which, he argues, are close to idealism. In response, Trigg is quick to point out that "reality is far stranger than our developing conceptions of it may at one time suggest." He uses the changing descriptions of it in the history of science and philosophy as evidence. Whereas this portrayal of human limitation leaves open the possibility that these limits may, in the future, be extended, such a humble description of human intelligence does not jibe very well with a realism impervious to the vicissitudes of human inquiry. For how then did we acquire the knowledge that reality is possibly so different from what we are capable of knowing? Further, how is this important knowledge of an "independent" reality to be

distinguished from a mere socio-historical quirk? This central question is not particularly new to realism of any camp, and quite a number of plausible answers have been attempted. None of these answers, however, allows metaphysical realism to remain unscathed. Putnam's "internal realism" attempts to deal a heavy blow to any form of realism which claims to be fully theory independent, while at the same time maintaining the existence of a persistent world. Ian Hacking's near-Baconian realism claims a theory independent world but maintains that our conception of reality is dependent on evidence received from experimentation, and thus what counts as reality is theory-dependent.

Admittedly, these and many other arguments for realism, i.e., the metatheories of reality, seem to lack the kind of precision that is required for a palatable account of reality. In this respect Arthur Fine, in "The Natural Ontological Attitude" (*Scientific Realism*, ed. J. Leplin) remarks,

Metatheoretic arguments must satisfy more stringent requirements than those placed on the arguments used by the theory in question, for otherwise the significance of reasoning about a theory is simply moot. (p. 85)

It is such requirements that *Reality At Risk* also fails to provide. In fact Trigg displays some mercurial justifications for holding a realist view, particularly in his discussion of the relation between 'genuine' realism and Science, in its study of reality. At a few points he states that science "provides a test case for realism." Yet, in chapter 6, "Reality and Quantum Mechanics," he avers that no scientific discoveries can either refute realism or do damage to the realist position. Vacillations of this sort are, of course, more than a symptom of the problematic position of metaphysical realism. They are the very fabric out of which it is made. Realists of Trigg's genre fail to provide satisfactory answers to questions concerning the relations between language and the world.

For the most part Trigg's discussion of Reality presents negative answers to the question of what reality is like. He does tell us that observation and experience are avenues into reality, but he does not specify how they provide this access. In fact, he generally refrains from giving any answer to the tough questions which metaphysical realism faces, though he



does ask these questions when raising objections to other accounts of realism.

Consequently, the conclusion of *Reality at Risk* is less forceful than one would expect from a defence of metaphysical realism: man is only a part of objective reality. He does not decide what is true, rather he pursues truth, i.e., the correct account of reality. Trigg tells us that this is the goal of science and philosophy and "the repudiation of [this] goal would not only destroy science, but would make human intellectual activity totally pointless." So, it seems that even though Trigg passes over pragmatic considerations when initially discussing reality he ends with a defence of metaphysical realism which is essentially pragmatic; that is, we must assume an independent reality if we are to make sense of the way we make sense of science and human intellectual inquiry. But I can not help wondering why one would call this 'genuine' realism.