Robin Waterfield, *Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2023), pp. xxxix + 255, ISBN 978-0197564752. £21.99

Theology, and not just Western Philosophy, is indebted to Plato. Plato's view of the gods as a positive force, his emphasis on living a virtuous life and his justification for a transcendent realm of existence provided an intellectual framework that many Christian theologians depended on. For this reason, a long-overdue book-length biography of Plato, covering his whole life and not just his writings, is worth a read for theologians as well as philosophers.

Robin Waterfield is a familiar name for many who have read his translations of Plato and Aristotle's texts. In this, his most recent publication, he lends his expertise to investigating various sources on Plato's life, including his philosophical works, in order to provide a new critical biography. Waterfield offers his own interpretation of Plato's life, adding the basics of Plato's political and ethical philosophy to the mix.

Before commencing with the biographical details, Waterfield justifies his choice of the extensive range of sources, explaining the problems with some of these. His main sources, however, remain Plato's dialogues themselves. Chapter One starts by placing Plato's birth at 424/3 BCE after careful consideration of many factors pointing to this date, rather than the customary 428/7. Plato's early years will not have been idyllic. Waterfield paints a convincing picture of what it was like to live in an Athens that was at war with Sparta. Nevertheless, Plato, coming from an aristocratic and well-connected family, was still able to benefit from a proper education, both in and outside of school, with tutors and older lovers who prepared him for his full participation in Athenian public life. Pederasty was customary in Ancient Greece and Plato, being aristocratic, will have had an older lover as a patron but there is no mention of who this could have been. It is undeniable that Plato was a poet, but Waterfield admits that there is no way of ascertaining whether any of the acclaimed poems attributed to Plato are genuinely his. An interesting suggestion is made that Plato may have become a philosopher – questioning whether virtue can be taught – when observing how fellow students, sons of wise men, were nothing like their fathers. Unfortunately, Waterfield only dedicates a few pages to Plato's religion. Plato appears to have believed in both the Olympian gods – for public worship – and one God with whom we are to achieve communion. It would have been interesting to have learnt more

about Xenophanes or Antisthenes, followers of Socrates, who had similar quasi-monotheistic ideas to Plato and how 'assimilation to God' (p. 31) relates to discovering the Form of the Good.

Any biography would be deficient without an overview of the philosophers and philosophical schools that influenced Plato, including, of course, Socrates, Plato's philosophical hero and protagonist in almost all his dialogues. This is the topic of Chapter Two, with sections on the Presocratics, the sophists, Socrates, and Plato's colleagues, who were fellow followers of Socrates. Some time is dedicated to constructing a short but reliable biography of Socrates, an endeavour that is even more challenging than doing so for Plato due to the exclusively oral character of Socrates' philosophy. Socrates initiated philosophy as a self-reflective discipline, and it is in the area of ethics where this is most apparent, and Aristotle's summary of Socrates' ethics is consulted in order to establish what kind of philosopher he was. Aristotle attributes the theory of Forms to Plato, not Socrates, but Plato's inspiration was drawn from Socrates' continuous search for essentialist definitions. The remaining details on Socrates are derived from Plato's dialogues. Many are discourses in honour of Socrates, Plato's way of highlighting that it was his master, not him or his thirty-three colleagues, who pioneered philosophy.

Plato was undeniably interested in politics. Initially, as one of the wealthy of Athens, he would have wanted to have been involved in the new democratic state that was established after the failures of the Thirty Tyrants, had it not been for Socrates' trial and death. This seems to have been a turning point for Plato, explored in Chapter Three. Waterfield dismisses the myth that Plato fled Athens for fear of his life after Socrates died: 'It is not as if Socrates was universally reviled' (p. 71), he explains. It remains unclear exactly where Plato went before returning to Athens in order to take part in military service and to start writing those dialogues of his early period. The second part of this chapter proposes a revised chronology of the dialogues – retaining the conventional early, middle and late periods – based on both content and stylometric and contextual criteria. *Theaetetus*, for example, is placed in the doctrine-building, middle period, and so dated earlier than conventionally thought to around the same time as *Phaedrus*. This new ordering will provide a basis for the further construction of events that actually happened in Plato's life.

A natural progression is to then examine Plato's attitude towards writing and research in the next chapter. Plato is not entirely averse to

writing, as his dialogues evidence, but his view is that it should serve as a memory aid only. The first of these aids was probably the *Apology*, as it appears introductory, setting the scene by explaining what it is that Socrates teaches and why. Trying to remain faithful to historical facts, Waterfield proposes a more credible explanation of Socrates' visit to the Oracle at Delphi – pronouncing Socrates to be the only wise man – as just a literary technique, rather than a literal-historical reading. Other early dialogues are summarised in relation to their common features: their quest for a definition, their aporetic ending, and the supposedly expert nature of Socrates' interlocutors. The focus is on the method of inquiry rather than its results. One particular lesson is singled out as fundamental: the distinction between knowledge and belief. Justifiably so, as knowledge is ultimately what philosophers seek. To further his learning, Plato then embarked upon a Grand Tour of southern Italy, encountering various Pythagoreans, as well as Dion, the tyrant ruler Dionysius I's brother-in-law, who was to become a great friend of Plato. On his return voyage back to Athens, Plato's ship was intercepted – possibly by pirates, possibly by the Aeginetan navy – and he ended up on the slave market in Aegina. Fortunately for Plato, Anniceris, a member of the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, was in the area and paid the ransom. Plato was freed.

After an adventurous few years in Italy, Plato returned to Athens to set up his Academy. The curriculum, Waterfield informs us in Chapter Five, was more like that of our current higher education, whereas Isocrates' rival school was more like general education. Drawing on evidence from Plato's own dialogues, and Aristotle's notes and letters, we learn about Plato's teaching and research activities in the Academy and the tasks he will have set others. Not only was it an institute focusing on mathematics, as the famous epigraph above the entrance affirms,[196] but also a place of training and consultancy in international politics. There were some successes in this respect, including Hermias, a ruler of nearby Atarneus, who was advised by Plato's students and, as a result, curbed his tyrannical impulses.

Chapter Six summarises Plato's key ideas, exploring Plato's most creative period that produced the middle dialogues. It is the doctrines in these dialogues that are characteristic of Platonism, where Plato's Socrates becomes more ambitious, 'asserting positive doctrine rather than claiming to know nothing' (p. 158). There is an outline of Plato's metaphysics of

[196] The epigraph read: 'Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here' (p. 138).

love, a lesson in the depth psychology of relationships as well as a recommendation for the ideal lover (a lover of wisdom). The discussion of love and its object, beauty, logically progresses to an exploration of the Form of Beauty and Plato's theory of Forms. Although the Forms are given only cursory treatment in this section, discussion of them is a thread which provides a central theme throughout the chapter. They are evident in Plato's Pythagorean influences: behind his dualist theory of the soul, his theory of Forms derived from the immaterial nature of mathematics and his theory of recollection. Plato's epistemological claims are examined as they appear in the dialogues *Meno* and *Theaetetus*, where Forms appear again as the only possible objects of knowledge. Their metaphysical nature also informs Plato's ethics and the Good, which is considered the key to his most famous dialogue, the *Republic*.

After a reclusive period of writing, teaching and purely philosophizing, Plato sets off on a new venture. He has established his Academy and is able to leave it in the capable hands of Eudoxus in order to return to Sicily for a second time, at the request of Dion. Plato hopes to contribute to founding a philosophically-inspired state. Chapter Seven tries to untangle whether Dionysius II, the son of the previous tyrannical ruler Dionysius I, did have a genuine interest in philosophy, rather than keeping Plato in his court, by implicit force, in order to gain a reputation of being interested in philosophy. It appears he did have at least a superficial interest, but it was not enough to be of political import or for him to change his ways. Eventually a relieved Plato is able to return from Sicily, although disappointed that he couldn't realise his aim of training a genuine philosopher king and leaving him in charge. The best he can hope for is that a ruler be wise and law-abiding. Plato is forcefully persuaded to return to Sicily for a third time, which ended up being equally unsuccessful, antagonising the tyrant further. His friendship with Dion, who eventually turned traitor after being banished for fear that he may overthrow Dionysius II, didn't help matters. Dionysius went further still when forcing Dion's wife, who remained in Syracuse, to remarry. Plato later reported Dionysius' actions to Dion when they met at the Olympia festival in honour of Zeus. This may have triggered the subsequent series of events: Dion's battle against Dionysius, his unlikely victory, his coup and his eventual assassination. Having borne the bad news which precipitated this series of events, Plato declined any further involvement. From Plato's *Letter 7* it is evident that Dion had invited him to join his 'desire to do

evil', but Plato had only been willing to help in a possible reconciliation (p. 202). This is one of the most engaging chapters, telling a story of political intrigue worthy of a dramatization in itself.

In the first part of the final chapter, Waterfield continues with the ensuing political situation in Sicily and Plato's involvement, although Plato is now elderly. Plato was politically engaged to the very end but after his encounters with Dionysius II, he comes to the conclusion that it is unrealistic to expect a ruler to be wise. This is an opportunity to introduce the late and more difficult monologues of Plato – in particular his *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus* and *Critias* – intended to provoke discussion in the Academy. These works focus on the 'method of division' used to define something, the introduction of categories as Forms – such as being and non-being – and the clearly fictitious Atlantis story. A further turning point for Plato seems to be his interest in studying the physical world, in *Timaeus*, which he rejected in his middle period for being the realm where only opinion and belief are possible. The circumstances of Plato's death are unknown, although there have been numerous speculations over the centuries. Waterfield favours the suggestion that he died of a fever while still writing. The chapter ends with an account of how Plato would have been venerated immediately after his death, and the importance of both the Academy and his works to his legacy.

Waterfield should be commended for his thorough examination of Plato's life, presented in an accessible and compelling manner. He does not neglect the philosophy or the intrigues. A careful evaluation of the reliability of the sources allows him to justify why many hagiographical myths should be dispelled: from the claim that he was named after his broad head to the suggestion that he died due to an infestation of lice. Having a background in translating ancient Greek texts certainly helps. He is able to offer invaluable insights into the culture of the time and paints a picture, easy to imagine, of the life that Plato would have led, his character, why he thought the way he did, and what he was aiming to achieve with his writings. If you wish to understand Plato and his philosophy, this work is a good place to start from.

Karen Parham

Dr Karen Parham is a philosophy teacher, an independent scholar, and the author of Who the Hell is Plato? And What Are His Theories All About? *(Felixstowe: Bowden & Brazil, 2020).*

https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i1.2759