

PLATONIC UNITARIANISM, *or* WHAT SHOREY SAID

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I COME not to bury unitarianism but to praise it. And since, as Agathon suggested (Plato *Symp.* 195A), the proper way to praise a thing is to begin by saying what it is, I follow his advice. Or rather, since Paul Shorey is the most quotable of Platonic scholars, let us hear his own description of this reprehensible and unfashionable thesis. On the final page of *The Unity of Plato's Thought* he writes: "I have not meant to sophisticate away the obvious and inevitable variations in Plato's moods, and minor beliefs from youth to old age. Nor in the study of such development would I reject the aid of a sober and critical method of style statistics. My thesis is simply that Plato on the whole belongs rather to the type of thinkers whose philosophy is fixed in early maturity . . . rather than to the class of those who receive a new revelation every decade. . . ." ¹ Or again: "Without wishing to be held to say that Plato had no period of growth and never changed his mind, I think the dialogues do show that he belongs to the thinkers whose thought is first revealed to us in its maturity and remains essentially the same through life, rather than to the Hegels and Schellings who go through periods and have a first, second, and third manner." ² The fact is that, if we listen to "what Shorey said," there is no need to suppose that his conception of unity precludes development, or to hold, with such a scholar as J. E. Raven, for instance, that there is a great gulf fixed between the evolutionary view of Plato's work, and the Shoreyian or static view. ³

Having given this brief description of the Shoreyian view, I now proceed to praise it. And this I shall do, not directly, but by noting the special qualities of Shorey's Platonic scholarship—qualities which appear to me to entitle their possessor to almost any view of Plato he might care to advocate.

First to be noted is Shorey's quite extraordinary knowledge of the dialogues. Passages from the *Euthydemus*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws* spring as readily to his retentive mind as passages from the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and the *Republic*. The margins and notes of *What Plato Said* are packed with seemingly inexhaustible cross-references to points of doctrine, idiom, and stylistic device. By this system of cross-reference Shorey succeeds in counteracting "the atomism . . . that treats each dialogue as an isolated unit," such treatment being, he says, "the renunciation of all method." ⁴

A paper read at the meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in Lexington, Kentucky, on October 31, 1974.

1. *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (Chicago, 1903), p. 88. This work will be hereafter cited as *UPT*.

2. "Recent Platonism in England (II)," *AJP* 9 (1888): 276.

3. J. E. Raven, *Plato's Thought in the Making* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 41.

4. *UPT*, p. 8. What he would say to the present-day superatomism, in which the journals are crammed with papers on isolated *pieces* of dialogues, I shudder to think.

This remarkable ability of his to keep all dialogues in mind at all times lends authority to such a statement as the following: "The chief obstacle to the theory [of development] in the mind of a genuine Platonist will always be the ever-strengthening impression of essential unity which the Platonic dialogues make upon repeated perusals."⁵ If we have failed to perceive the essential unity, it could well be that our perusals are not sufficiently repeated.

A second strength of Shorey's is his good general acquaintance with philosophical problems, and his consequent understanding of what is and what is not philosophically possible. In defending the necessarily paradoxical character of the theory of Ideas, for instance, he writes: "From Heraclitus to John Stuart Mill human thought has always faced the alternative of positing an inexplicable and paradoxical *noumenon*, or accepting the 'flowing philosophy.' No system can escape the dilemma" (*UPT*, p. 28). This brief statement holds, I believe, the key to his successful interpretation of the so-called self-criticism of the Ideas in the first part of the *Parmenides*. Proponents of what might be called the "crisis" theory of the *Parmenides* have assumed, in Shorey's words, "that Plato was bound to answer [the criticism] or give up the ideas" (*UPT*, p. 36). But "all such theories ignore the obvious fact that every philosophy that admits any metaphysic or religion is exposed to objections essentially identical with those here brought against the theory of transcendental ideas. Any philosopher who cannot or will not accept the alternative of pure positivism or thoroughgoing materialism must disregard or evade these difficulties as Plato did."⁶ And, in a more general passage, exhibiting the tart and testy style which brings joy to the hearts of his admirers, he writes that "expositors of Plato seem strangely oblivious of the limits thus far set to all systems of philosophy. . . . They habitually write as if they themselves and their intelligent readers were in possession of a final philosophy which reconciles all conflicting claims of metaphysical analysis and common sense, and from the heights of which they may study merely as a historical phenomenon Plato's primitive fumbling with such problems as the nature of universals. . . ." (*UPT*, p. 6). Shorey's own perception of traditional philosophical difficulties apparently enables him to recognize that Plato shared this perception. The result is an increase in the sensitivity and accuracy of his interpretation of Plato.

A third quality in which Shorey excels is his awareness and application of the canons of literary criticism. In the present age of Platonic studies we have been making the remarkable discovery that Plato wrote dialogues. But in 1903 Shorey was already writing that "... Plato's dramatic quality affects not only the artistic setting and the personages, but the ideas which he brings upon the stage. . . . the hasty reader is more likely than not to receive as Platonic ideas that have a purely dramatic significance; or that are falsified by isolation from their context" (*UPT*, p. 6).

The proponents of the development theory appear to Shorey particularly insensitive to literary values. Their "implicit canon" is, he writes, "that

5. "Recent Platonism," p. 309.

6. *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1933), p. 289; hereafter cited as *WPS*.

variation in literary machinery and expression must be assumed to imply divergence or contradiction in thought." Shorey proposes an opposing canon, that "... we are to assume contradiction or serious alteration in Plato's thought only in default of a rational literary or psychological explanation of the variation in the form of its expression" (*UPT*, p. 5).

More specifically, he inveighs against the assumption that what Plato does not say he cannot have thought: "The absence in any work of explicit insistence on a thought is supposed to prove the absence of the thought from Plato's mind at the time, and as a consequence, we are expected to believe in the most incredible combinations of maturity and naïveté within the same writing."⁷ Nor must Plato always employ the same words for the same thought, "unless we assume," as Shorey drily remarks in another context, "that Plato [is] bound to repeat himself verbatim" (*WPS*, p. 314). Of the word *anamnesis*, for instance, he writes that "... as the word occurs without the doctrine in the *Philebus*, so we find the doctrine without the word in the *Politicus*" (*UPT*, p. 43; he refers to *Philebus* 34B and *Politicus* 277D). Again, the Platonic Idea is always supported by the polemic against Heraclitus, as in the *Theaetetus*, and "suggested by the antithesis of the one and the many" (*UPT*, p. 34), as in the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*. At the same time, "the vague untechnical use of *εἶδος* and *ἰδέα* is always possible in Plato" (*UPT*, p. 74).

As it is useless to attempt a chronology of Plato's work on the assumption that he will inevitably employ the same term for the same thought, so it is useless to try to date the dialogues by means of fuller and slighter treatments of the same thought: "The rapid outline of an argument is alternately regarded, according to the requirements of the 'chronology,' as an anticipatory germ or a later résumé of the fuller treatment to be found elsewhere" (*UPT*, p. 4). But, as Shorey sensibly perceives, it is completely impossible "to determine *a priori* whether the slighter treatment is an anticipation or a résumé of the fuller discussion" (*UPT*, p. 66). Nor do expressions of familiarity affect the issue since "the simple truth is that Plato may at any time refer to any part of his permanent beliefs as familiar doctrine" (*WPS*, p. 468). But of course "anything may be argued," Shorey says, "if the dialogues are supposed to grow out of one another and not out of Plato's mind" (Loeb *Republic*, vol. 2, p. lvii, n. c).

The final Shoreyian characteristic on which I wish to comment is, perhaps surprisingly, his humility. I mean his humility not before other Platonists (which is not after all very striking) but before Plato. This quality is especially manifest in his treatment of the *Republic*. This work he regards as "the chief witness to the unity of Plato's thought" (*UPT*, p. 78) in that he sees it both as answering "nearly every problem left unanswered in the Socratic dialogues" (*WPS*, p. 71) and as containing the ideals still present in the *Laws* (*UPT*, p. 85). Those who would break up the dialogue are assailed in typical Shoreyian terms: "The chief and fundamental fallacy

7. *UPT*, p. 4. Cf. his observation in *Plato: The Republic*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2 (London, 1935), p. xxii: "... we can infer nothing as to the composition or date of the *Republic* from the fact that the ideas are not mentioned where there is no reason for mentioning them. . . ."

is the application to a great and complex literary masterpiece of canons of consistency drawn from the inner consciousness of professional philologists" (*UPT*, p. 79). Or again, "... it is the height of naïveté for philological critics who have never themselves composed any work of literary art to schoolmaster such creations by their own *a priori* canons of the logic and architectonic unity of composition" (Loeb *Republic*, vol. 1, p. xiii). It may be that Shorey tends too much toward the view that Plato can do no wrong, but his attitude appears to me to produce a truer appreciation than the view that Plato can do very little right.

Unusually comprehensive knowledge of the dialogues, understanding of the limits of philosophy, employment of sensible literary principles, and humility before the mind of Plato: these are the qualities I find most impressive in Shorey's Platonic writings. To be honest, he also has mannerisms which can prove irritating. His style can be too slangy and pert, and his analysis of dialogues, especially in *What Plato Said*, sometimes smacks of the slapdash. His use of poetic parallels sometimes illuminates but more often simply clutters up the notes. Perhaps it could be argued, too, that his perception of unity in Plato springs to some extent from his own unitarian temperament—as witness the fact that at the end of his life he can still refer with approval to his Munich dissertation of some fifty years before.⁸ But for sanity in the interpretation of Plato he seems to me unrivaled in American scholarship. A "Shorey revival" would do much for Platonic studies in this country—or indeed in any country.⁹

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8. At vol. 2, p. x, n. a of the Loeb *Republic*, he cites his *De Platonis idearum doctrina atque mentis humanae notionibus commentatio* (Diss. Munich, 1884). For a typically sensible Shoreyan remark in this early work, see p. 21: "Nam doctrina illa mutari videtur, nec, ut plerique credunt, secundum tempora Platonis vitae sed secundum quaestiones quas tractat philosophus."

9. Werner Jaeger's *Paideia* is a monument to the Shoreyan point of view. See for instance vol. 2, pp. 96–97 of the Hightet translation (New York, 1943): "Many scholars who have upheld the theory that Plato's dialogues represent different stages of his development convict themselves of a failure both in aesthetic and in philosophic understanding, by assuming that in every one of his books Plato says everything he can possibly say."