

Book Reviews

Iakovos Vasiliou. *Aiming at Virtue in Plato*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 311. Cloth, \$99.00.

Iakovos Vasiliou argues for reading Plato's early dialogues and the *Republic* in light of "the aiming/determining distinction." Aiming questions are concerned with the selection of our overriding ends. Determining questions ask how we can identify actions which secure those ends. As Vasiliou argues, Socrates claims to know an answer to the central aiming question, namely that virtue must be supreme (SV). Virtue functions sometimes as an explicit end and always as a limiting condition: we must never do wrong. For wrong action damages the soul, which is the most important locus of harms and benefits for us. Vasiliou traces this argument as it is offered with increasing fullness in the *Crito*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*. But all this leaves open which actions are virtuous. Socrates' definitional inquiries into various virtues attempt to answer this determining question, but all end in *aporia* and failure. To say that virtue is knowledge is not much help, for it gets us no further towards grasping what the virtuous person would do. In the *Republic*, Vasiliou argues, we are at least given a promissory note: the philosopher-kings will be able to answer determining questions through their knowledge of the Forms. He argues further that non-philosophers, who in the kallipolis will also be committed to SV, will be virtuous inasmuch as they are ruled (albeit indirectly) by that knowledge.

Proposals about the structure and organization of Plato's thought have to be judged by their ability to illuminate particular texts and solve their puzzles, and this one is highly successful. One important upshot noted by Vasiliou is that although we must never be swayed against virtuous action by prudential considerations, these may well be factors in determining what the virtuous action is. An obvious point, perhaps, but Vasiliou shows convincingly that previous interpreters have gone astray here in discussing the *Apology* and *Crito*. There need be nothing illegitimate or merely rhetorical about Socrates' references to his reputation and his family (for instance) in these texts. Vasiliou's reading of the *Crito* as a sample of Socratic deliberation—i.e. as the settling of a particular determining question in the ethical 'here and now'—is as helpful and convincing as any I know, and makes both *Crito*'s own arguments and those of the Laws look much stronger and more Socratic than they usually do.

Vasiliou's presentation of the "determining" question, however, seems to flatten out a number of different philosophical problems. For one thing, it is not quite true that all the what-is-F dialogues are concerned with how to determine virtuous actions: this is urgently the question in the *Euthyphro*, but in the *Laches*, *Euthydemus*, and *Protagoras*, the problem at hand is rather that of *education*. And the question, "What course of education will make a young person virtuous?", is not really reducible to the generic, "What action in my situation is the virtuous one?". The conception of knowledge deployed here is also a bit undifferentiated. It is one thing for Socrates to "know" SV in the loose sense of having warranted confidence in it; another for him to be able to defend it dialectically; and yet another for it to fit into the kind of systematic grasp of a subject-matter which is constitutive of a *technê*. Which is in play in any particular context, and how they are related, is open for debate. These epistemic distinctions and the associated puzzles call for much more detailed discussion than Vasiliou

gives here. And they leave me skeptical that Socrates can really know SV (in *any* sense or degree) without knowing (in a correlative sense or degree) what virtue is.

Vasiliou's discussion of the *Republic* rightly emphasizes that a principal role of the Forms is to enable the philosopher-kings to answer determining questions unerringly. But since we are not actually told what the form of Justice consists in, he is forced to allow that this is at best a promise of an answer to the determining question. Indeed, the book as a whole inadvertently makes clear that Plato's dialogues have remarkably little to offer in answer to our determining questions, for all their practical importance and conceptual primacy. (As Vasiliou convincingly argues, just action must be conceptually prior to justice in the soul: a just action is not such because a just person decides to do it, but vice versa.) That a knowledge of the Forms would settle our determining questions was already explicit in the *Euthyphro*, and at that level of abstraction, the *Republic* has nothing much to add. So it seems more perspicuous to treat the middle books of the *Republic* as addressing the question: how can we raise young rulers-to-be so as to secure not only their commitment to SV but their reliable performance of virtuous actions? And this problem of education is, again, not quite reducible to either an aiming or a determining question; rather, like much of what goes on in these texts, it seems to be provoked by reflection on the epistemic conditions for answering both.

I conclude that some of Plato's central concerns cut across aiming and determining questions, and that the two cannot be disentangled as cleanly as Vasiliou suggests. But the distinction is still one well worth drawing, and the kind of skeptical reflections I have offered here are more a tribute than a critique: this is a very engaging (if sometimes repetitive) book, certain to provoke running dialogue and argument in any informed reader. It is lucidly written, carefully argued, and philosophically sophisticated, with sensitive close readings and some refreshing challenges to scholarly orthodoxy. Any Plato scholar will find plenty to learn from it.

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Wilfried Kühn. *Quel savoir après le scepticisme? Plotin et ses prédécesseurs sur la connaissance de soi*. Histoire des doctrines de l'antiquité classique 37. Paris: J. Vrin, 2009. Pp. 471. Paper, €50.00.

In this closely argued monograph, the author examines one chapter of Plotinus's treatise V.3 [49], titled "On the Knowing Hypostasis and That Which is Beyond." In the fifth chapter of that work, Plotinus makes the case for asserting that knowledge is primarily or essentially self-knowledge. This is certainly not a novel claim in the history of ancient philosophy, as Kühn amply demonstrates. It is a central claim in Aristotle's epistemology and the later Peripatetic tradition. What is of particular interest for the Plotinian account of knowledge as self-knowledge is that it is made in response to a skeptical argument found in Sextus Empiricus, although it is likely that it did not originate with him. That argument attempts to pose the following dilemma for any "dogmatist" who embraces self-knowledge. Either this self-knowledge is in effect one "part" of the knower knowing another "part," or else it is one "part" knowing not another "part," but rather knowing "itself." The first horn of the dilemma means that self-knowledge is not knowledge at all, since the putative knower would have to be able to show that the first "part" is representing the second part accurately. And this is something that cannot be done without the first "part" knowing the second "part," not by representing it, but by being identical with it. This leads to the second horn: if the knowing "part" just knows itself and not an object different from itself, then this knowledge will have no content. So, self-knowledge seems to be impossible. All this the author explains with great care, though he does not emphasize a point that seems to me important, namely, that Sextus, like Plotinus and like Aristotle, is assuming that knowledge, as propounded by all dogmatists, is primarily taken to be self-knowledge, in which case the skeptical attack