

ANCIENT APPROACHES TO PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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**ANCIENT APPROACHES
TO PLATO'S *REPUBLIC***

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The cover image shows a copy, in Luni marble, of the portrait of Plato made by Silanion *c.* 370 BC for the Academia in Athens. From the sacred area in Largo Argentina, 1925. Musei Capitolini, Rome.
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INTRODUCTION

ANNE SHEPPARD

The origins of this volume lie in a series of seminars on ‘The reception of Plato’s *Republic*’ held at the Institute of Classical Studies in London in 2007-08. That series was partly inspired by an ambitious dream of a possible research project tracing the reception of the *Republic* from antiquity to modern times. However, as soon as I began to think seriously about such a project, I became aware of the overwhelming complexity of the task, not only in the timespan involved but also in the range of material, since ideally such a project would cover not only reception within the western European tradition but also reception in the Byzantine world and in Arabic philosophy. The diversity of topics covered by the *Republic* itself would add further complexity. In the event the seminar series dealt primarily with the ancient reception of the *Republic*, although it included a paper on ‘Civilizing war according to Averroes’ commentary on Plato’s *Republic*’ by Maroun Aouad of the CNRS in Paris and a paper entitled ‘Plato’s American idiom: the *Republic* in democratic theory’ by Russell Bentley of the University of Southampton. Not all the papers presented at the seminar have been included in this volume since some either have been, or are to be, published elsewhere while others, including those by Maroun Aouad and Russell Bentley, were not considered suitable for publication in their present form by their authors. John Finamore’s paper on ‘Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato’s tripartite soul’ is a later addition which was not presented in the seminar series. The resulting volume, concerned only with a selection of aspects of the ancient reception of the *Republic*, has both a more limited scope and, I hope, a sharper focus than the seminar series which gave rise to it.

Reception theory emphasizes that the way we read earlier authors is coloured by our own preoccupations and ways of thinking but when we study ‘reception’ our very choice of what to study is in turn affected by the interests and concerns of our own time. Looking back now, after a short lapse of time, on 2007-08 I realize that the concentration on the reception of Plato by later ancient philosophers, both in the series and in this volume, reflects not only recent approaches to ancient philosophy in the University of London, as evidenced in two earlier *BICS* supplements, *Ancient approaches to Plato’s Timaeus* and *Aristotle and the Stoics reading Plato*,¹ but also, more broadly, the continuing expansion of interest in post-Aristotelian philosophy. Both these approaches are summed up in the comment once made to me by the late Professor R. W. Sharples that ‘ancient philosophy is all about reception’. Philosophers work within a tradition, in dialogue with earlier philosophy, and in order to understand what they have to say it is often necessary to understand that dialogue. This might suggest that the interest of papers such as those in this volume lies in the light they

¹ *Ancient approaches to Plato’s Timaeus*, ed. R. W. Sharples and A. Sheppard, *BICS Supplement* 78 (London 2003); *Aristotle and the Stoics reading Plato*, ed. V. Harte, M. M. McCabe, R. W. Sharples, and A. Sheppard, *BICS Supplement* 107 (London 2010).

shed on Aristotle, Cicero, Alcinous, Porphyry, or Proclus, rather than on Plato himself. Yet that is not the whole story: to take just one example, James Wilberding suggests that interpreting the myth of Er along the lines suggested by Porphyry can help us understand Plato's response to the problem of moral luck.²

The *Republic* ranges over a very wide range of philosophical topics, many of them also addressed in other Platonic dialogues. Moreover ancient interpreters tended to see Plato's work as a unified corpus. As a result, it can be difficult to separate the ancient reception of the *Republic* from the reception of other dialogues. If we are surprised to discover that in criticizing the doctrine of the tripartite soul Aristotle is as much concerned with the *Timaeus* as with the *Republic*,³ that Cicero regarded the *Republic* and the *Laws* as complementing one another,⁴ or that Proclus treated the discussion of music in the *Republic* in parallel with the account of cosmic music in the *Timaeus*,⁵ we should pause to consider what this tells us about the way in which we ourselves read Plato and the reasons for the significance we attach to particular dialogues.

Aristotle's engagement with the *Republic* could itself be the subject of a whole series of seminars and a whole volume of papers. John Finamore's paper in this volume reminds us that in developing a very different psychology Aristotle did not ignore Plato's division of the soul into three parts but subjected that to considerable criticism. The papers by Jed Atkins and Jonathan Powell on Cicero's response to the *Republic* reflect the current interest in Cicero's philosophical works and the growing tendency to take him seriously as a philosopher. Similarly Erik Eliasson's paper on Alcinous' *Didascalicus* bears witness to the way in which Middle Platonism is now the subject of scholarly philosophical discussion, while the papers by James Wilberding, Sebastian Moro Tornese, and myself indicate that study of Neoplatonist texts, theories, and exegesis continues to open up new perspectives within ancient philosophy.

Perhaps because of the sheer length of the *Republic* there is more evidence for ancient commentaries on portions of the dialogue than on the whole work⁶ and most of the papers in this volume deal with reactions to particular aspects of the *Republic* rather than with its overall interpretation. For that reason, like the volume on *Ancient approaches to Plato's Timaeus*, edited by R. W. Sharples and myself,⁷ the title uses the term 'approaches' rather than 'reception'.

² See Wilberding's paper in this volume, pp. 87-106, esp. pp. 101-05.

³ See John Finamore's paper in this volume, pp. 3-13.

⁴ See Jed Atkins' paper in this volume, pp. 15-34.

⁵ See Sebastian Moro Tornese's paper in this volume, pp. 117-28.

⁶ Cf. H. Dörrie† and M. Baltes, *Der Platonismus im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert nach Christus*, *Der Platonismus in der Antike* 3 (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt 1993) 201-08.

⁷ See n.1 above.