

University of Cyprus

From the Selected Works of Kyriakos N. Demetriou

Summer June 3, 2012

Review of Studies in the Reception of Plato (Ashgate, 2011)

Kyriakos N. Demetriou, *University of Cyprus*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kyriakos_demetriou/26/

Kyriakos Demetriou, *Studies in the Reception of Plato and Greek Political Thought in Victorian Britain*. Ashgate Variorum, 2011. ISBN 9781409420514.

Demetriou's essays provide a most useful and nuanced guide to the understanding of the reception and uses made of Plato, "Platonisms" and Greek History in 19th century Britain. The volume is divided into two sections: "The History of Ancient Greece" (essays I-III) and "Platonic studies" (essays IV-IX). Much of both sections are devoted to George Grote, whose monumental *History of Greece* (1846-56), ideas about Socrates and Plato, and defense of the Sophists, began a new era in Hellenic Studies. A. Momigliano celebrated Grote the historian of Greece as one who combined moral and political interest with vast learning and respect for the evidence (VI.19). Demetriou's discussion of neglected historians, such as Connop Thirwell, enhances the book's appeal. It is well known that Grote broke with the old aristocratic/oligarchic picture of Athenian democracy as "mobocracy" and presented it in a positive and progressive light. He made Athenian democracy a respectable model for contemporary liberals (I. 295-97). Thirwell, however, forms a bridge between 'partisan' and 'scientific' historiography (intro, ix). He admired the post Persian war Athenian democracy of Aeschylus and Aristides, though he criticized the later "radical" Periclean period. (Late antique "cultural conservatives", such as the emperor Julian, expressed similar opinions.) Modern scholars, Demetriou points out (intro, ix), have skipped Thirwell, thereby missing significant details of the debate (II.49-90).

The collection includes an interesting piece, both positive and negative, on the complex relationship between philhellenism, British classicists and the revolutionary emergence of Modern Greece. While feeling obligated to "sympathize... with the concerns... of the people of liberated Hellas" (III.31-32), British classicists did not view favorably the rise of Greek nationalism.

Demetriou shows the importance of the Mills, James and John Stuart, and Grote for 19th century Platonic studies in Britain. First, James Mill was seminal in the rejection of Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato. He viewed Thomas Taylor as a bad translator and a confused "mystic" who followed Proclus indiscriminately (V.16, 20). Others (in Germany as well) upheld Plato's Idealism, regarding him as an esotericist with systematic principles based in part on the "unwritten teachings" in the Academy, a problem that remains unresolved to this day (I.27 & n. 24 and VI.25). Contemporary Idealists—Jowett most notably (V.17)—saw Plato in Christian or Hegelian form. But the Utilitarians, steeped in recent scholarship, changed the terms of the debate. J.S. Mill, an important influence on Grote, reviewed his *Plato and the other companions of Socrates* (1865) (V.21), after re-reading the entire Platonic corpus in Greek to prepare for the task. Grote emphasized Plato's "negative dialectic", yet remained a teacher of his ethics and views

on citizenship. Lastly, Demetrius includes Christian thinkers who rejected Plato in order to uphold what they took to be the unique status of Christian revelation (V. 15).

Grote, although he much admired Platonic rationality, was sensitive to the authoritarian nature of Plato's political ideas and ultimately rejected them (V. 32-34). Critics thought that he was opening the way for sophistic 'individualism' and 'radicalism', but in reality his Sophists were simply the exponents and intellectual advocates of an already established liberal democracy. For Grote, Socrates was the *radical* reformer, whom Plato followed to an extent (V.35). His Plato was neither a Neoplatonist nor a religious Idealist nor a perfectionist (VI.25-36). The dialogues were on different topics and had different *skopoi*, but, most significantly, were about *elenchus* and the development of clear and logical thinking. Grote contends that the dialogues do not present a complete system; they do not offer a premeditated scheme. Significant ideas expressed in some of them often contradict those expressed in others.

Grote always thought of himself as a defender of Plato (VI.19). Demetriou considers it "problematic" and over-simplistic on the part of anti-Platonists such as Karl Popper to have taken Grote as one of their own (VI.47). He presents Grote's innovative views as the start of a new era in scholarly interpretation of the Sophists, whose liberal ideas had received a decisive blow from Plato and Aristotle (IX.7). But Grote's Utilitarianism also contributed to his positive view of Plato (VI. 21 & n. 12), understood historically rather than as a "timeless" mind. Grote adopted a 'Thrasyllan' middle position between the skeptical or negative interpretation of Plato and the positive or dogmatist one (VI.37-45).

Grote's early essay on Socrates (1820's) portrays an unattractive figure on the surface, but one who, on a deeper level, elicited affection and respect on the part of those who heard him and drew intellectual benefits from associating with him (IV. 47). Grote's 'Utilitarian Socrates' becomes the defender of Classical 19th century liberalism, based on rational individual moral conscience. His Protagorean *homo mensura* implied that each person's judgment '*is true to oneself*', and not that "every opinion of every man is true" (*pace* Plato). It proclaimed "the paramount authority of individual reason and conscience", which is the basis of philosophy as "reasoned truth" (VII 59-61).

According to Demetriou, by the end of the 19th century Jowett's idealism "was more agreeable than the logical, secularized, historical Plato of Grote" (VI. 23); i.e., the skeptical "aporetic" Socrates favored by Grote, as opposed to Plato the "Christian gentleman" idealist, who associates "the idea of the Good" with a transcendent *noetic* order. His book also includes a section on "The Debate Over Plato in Nineteenth-Century Britain" and "The Idealist Plato", a section largely devoted to Muirhead's "Platonic Tradition on Anglo-Saxon Philosophy": primarily under

the influence of Hegel, British Idealists understood "Platonism" as a position strongly opposed to empiricism and in favor of individualism; indeed, it attempted to reject all forms of materialism and naturalism; (VIII.80). E. Barker reconceived Plato as the basis for a new synthesis of English liberalism and socialism (VIII.81). The "organic" idea of a community that dialectically *both* endows the individual with worth and rights, but also must guarantee those same rights, thereby replaces the Utilitarians' mechanistic society in which the public good comprises the sum total of individual goods. D. Ritchie claimed that "*the Socialistic ideal of the state must still be Plato's ideal . . . all work according to their talents and receive according to their needs*".

In the 1930's Muirhead saw Hegelian/Platonic Idealism as a return to the principles of Plato's "Vision of the Good". By then, however, Idealism had weakened. Joad, for instance, thought that the Idealist State tended to subordinate the individual to its absolute authority. The ugly face of Fascism delivered the final blow when the State became a "Platonic dystopia". Fascists proudly claimed Plato as a forebear: "*the Republic was the original charter of Fascism*" (K. Hildebrandt). "Plato the totalitarian" had emerged (VIII. 99-101).

This volume provides an excellent overview of Plato and the Greeks in Victorian Britain, with close attention to detail, especially in light of the still prevalent preponderance of clichés about Plato and Platonism. Perhaps the only serious drawback is the frequent repetition of similar material in different articles. But this is a quibble, for a certain amount of repetition in articles published in several journals at different times is inevitable. This is a most useful collection.

Jay Bregman
University of Maine
Jay_Bregman@umit.maine.edu