

**Mark Anderson's *Plato and Nietzsche: Their
Philosophical Art***

(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)

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In a note from 1875, Nietzsche states, 'I must confess that Socrates is so close to me that I am almost always fighting a battle with him.'¹ This confession highlights the enormous impact of the Platonic dialogues on Nietzsche's thought. In his book, *Plato and Nietzsche: Their Philosophical Art*, Mark Anderson claims to diverge from the enormous scholarship that exists on the philosophy of these thinkers and present something new and refreshing by providing an examination of the Platonic and Nietzschean ideas that 'can be joined in dialogue or debate' (Preface). Anderson attempts to achieve this goal by arguing that Plato and Nietzsche are 'thinker-artists' (11) - that is, that they are 'alike in being thinkers and artists simultaneously' (46). The title itself is derived from the idea of being both a philosopher *and* an artist, rather than it being an attempt by the author to suggest that there is, or was, a form of *techne* called 'philosophical art' employed by these thinkers. Unfortunately, the book does not appear to present a unifying argument for this thesis. It can best be described as an ambitious collection of short discussions on various philosophical themes in the works of Nietzsche and Plato, such as 'art, reason, ontology, epistemology, and ethics' (9).

¹ Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) 6 [3], p. 209.

These discussions take place under broad chapter headings, with sometimes very little connecting the individual sections in a chapter.

My initial judgement is that the book is well researched in terms of primary sources, minor bibliographical errors aside.² It displays both a love for and familiarity with the key concepts and the two philosophers themselves. Anderson distinguishes between the historical, literary, and Platonic Socrates early on, and discusses the intricacies of attributing any idea in Plato's works to Plato himself (13-15). While this will be familiar to any scholar working in the field, establishing the slippery nature of Socrates is important for the casual reader who may not have encountered this distinction before or understood the importance of it. Anderson's background in Classics helps paint a well-rounded picture of Greek culture and society in some of the discussions of Plato, most noticeably in the short section 'Kalokagatha' (119-120) in Chapter 4, 'Noble and Good'. This section explores the etymology and relevance of the term 'kalokagatha', a portmanteau of *kalos* and *agathos*, or noble and good, a term used in reference to the aristocratic youth.³ Anderson deftly identifies its use in Platonic ethics in the Symposium and Republic. Much of the book is written with clarity and is enjoyable to read. However, it is difficult to construct a sustained critical engagement with a book that has neither a sustained nor critical argument to present. Due to this, the rest of the review will address some of the book's specific flaws.

In regards to the form, many sections of the book dissolve into pure exposition without making specific arguments. For instance, the section 'Forms' (51-60) from Chapter 2, 'Being', reads like a generalist introduction to Plato. The specialist will be bored with such a broad retelling of basic tenets of Platonic philosophy. The exegetical work, whilst written in compelling clarity, will alienate scholars looking for an argument to contend with; the heavier parts of the section will drive away the layman. Another instance of this is the section 'Historical

² The publication of Greg Whitlock's translation of Nietzsche's lectures, '*The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*', is erroneously listed as 1995. This is, in fact, the publication date of part 2, volume 4, of *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, the critical German text upon which Whitlock's translation is based. The correct date for Whitlock's book is 2001.

³ Cf. Herodotus 1.30.

Background' (91-100) in Chapter 3, 'Becoming'. The section explains a history of sceptical philosophical positions, from those of the ancient Greeks through to early modern philosophers such as Descartes, Montaigne, and Kant. The aim of the section is to produce a historical context for Nietzsche's views on reality and truth. 'It is a history of more than two thousand years,' the author states, 'but I shall strive for brevity by covering only the essentials.' (91) The problem is both the lack of brevity – the section continues for nearly ten pages – and that there is no substantial connection made between these ten pages of historical background and Nietzsche's work. The section appears irrelevant, and again the sense of audience is confused.⁴

The discussion of the Platonic view that tragedy is the furthest from reality (35), while worth mentioning as an interesting section of the book, could have benefitted from being directly contrasted to a Nietzschean view of tragedy. In fact, one issue is the lack of sustained and direct comparison between Plato and Nietzsche of the kind one would expect from a book focused on these two philosophers.

The book is broadly historical, broadly exegetical (perhaps to a fault), and, in some places, broadly *biographical*. Whilst I would readily agree with Long's formulation⁵ of the close link, for some philosophers, between life and thought, some of the biographical points made by Anderson are at best irrelevant and at worst imaginary. On 160-161, in a discussion of the tension between written and oral philosophy in the dialogues, Anderson makes ahistorical concessions for the sake of a dreamy passage about Plato sitting around writing at his desk and teaching in the Academy. He states, 'We have no evidence that Plato

⁴ Anderson himself appears confused as to who his audience is – in the Preface, he states, 'think of this book as a scholarly work not restricted to scholars.'

⁵ Made of the Hellenistic philosophers, but truly applicable to Nietzsche – that 'there is a tendency [...] to ignore biography, on the grounds that the philosophical historian should restrict attention to the formal analysis of moral concepts. In the case of philosophers in the Socratic tradition, life and thought are too closely related for such restriction to be defensible.' Long, *The Socratic Tradition: Diogenes, Crates, and Hellenistic Ethics*. In: Robert Bracht Branham, Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.), p. 42.

taught in the Academy, but I am willing to allow that he did', and the result is that the passage comes off as disingenuous.⁶ The whole section seems to be drifting towards an equally imaginary comparison with Nietzsche, as we see on 162; 'This is the image of Plato I wish to take from his activities as a writer. It is an image he has in common with Nietzsche.'

The flow of the text is often interrupted by dreamy conjecture on the author's part, such as in Chapter 5, 'Plato as a Creative Writer'. On 153, he conducts a 'thought experiment' concerning Axiothea, a female disciple of Plato. Axiothea is said to have found Plato's *Republic* so thought-provoking that she left her home to dedicate herself to philosophy under the guise of a man. Anderson conducts his 'thought experiment' by asking the reader to imagine that it was really the *Phaedrus* that impelled Axiothea to pursue a life of philosophy. The result is a confused mishmash of history and imagination – it is not entirely clear why it is not conducted with the *Republic*, as to be accurate to the ancient anecdote, other than Anderson's preference for the *Phaedrus*' 'creative, poetic qualities' – which comes across as question-begging in the construction of the 'thought experiment' itself when one looks at his results.

Another issue is when Anderson makes arguments based solely in his personal opinion, such as his dismissal of Nietzsche's doctrine of the *Will to Power* on 91; 'There are those who make much of the "doctrine" of will to power, but to my mind Nietzsche is not at his best when writing about this subject'. This statement is made at the end of an extended discussion that does not lend itself to such a personal conclusion without further justification, nor does it provide any clue of how to interpret the quotation marks surrounding 'doctrine'.

The more concerning scholarly flaws are the following. There are some sections containing questionable interpretations of Plato and Nietzsche's philosophy, such as the attribution to Nietzsche of an idea of

⁶ I would appeal to Geuss here, when he states that 'accounts of the ancient ought to strive to avoid anachronism at any cost.' Raymond Geuss, 'Culture as Ideal and as Boundary', *Arion*, 16.1 (2008), 133-154 (p. 135).

enduring selfhood on 90. Such a claim warrants more discussion than is allowed, and is, in fact, directly contradicted by a section of *Human, All too Human* that Anderson quotes on 5.⁷ Furthermore, the lack of reference to the literature from the broad field of Nietzsche studies on this subject lets the discussion down. Another example of the discussion being let down by a lack of reference to the literature appears on 14, where Anderson makes a dismissive claim about Xenophon. '[I]t is standard practice to dismiss or diminish Xenophon's Socratic works on the ground that the man was just too simple, too shallow, to comprehend a mind as restless and original as Socrates', (14) states Anderson. When the endnote at the end of this bold statement is followed to 186, we find not a reference to back up this claim that dismissing Xenophon is 'standard practice', but a quote from Nietzsche made in admiration of Xenophon's works. Finally, the author's assertion in the introduction that he makes no extended claims using Nietzsche's unpublished texts⁸ is thrown out of the window by 81-85, where an entire section on Nietzsche, Heraclitus, and the theme of Becoming is constructed almost entirely from the unpublished lectures, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, and unpublished book draft, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*.

In conclusion, I think that this book is best suited to a reader largely unfamiliar with the works of Plato and Nietzsche, due to the lengths that Anderson goes to in both explaining and contextualising many of the most important themes in their works. Much of the book would make a good introductory secondary text for students. However, between the lack of unifying argument and the other problems as outlined above, the scholar may not find this work as useful.

⁷ '[Nietzsche] suggests [...] to resist "treating ourselves as fixed, stable, *single* individuals" (HH 618).' *Plato and Nietzsche*, p. 5.

⁸ 'I should point out that I do not base any significant claims exclusively on Nietzsche's notes.' *Plato and Nietzsche*, p. 8.