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Terence Irwin's Reading of Plato

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Terence Irwin's recent work on Plato, particularly his *Plato's Moral Theory (PMT)*, has received wide notice and acclaim. We are told by Malcolm Schofield that Irwin has produced "what is in some ways the most important and instructive book about Plato for a generation."¹ C. C. W. Taylor claims that *PMT* "will be an essential point of reference for anyone interested in Plato, in ancient ethics, or more widely, in ancient society and civilization."² And Gregory Vlastos states, "I have never had more valuable help from a critic."³

Perhaps equally remarkable as the positive reception accorded to Irwin by his distinguished colleagues in academe is the fact that his is one of the few works on Plato to have been brought to the attention of the wider reading public. *PMT* has been reviewed in the *New York Review of Books* (by M. F. Burnyeat) and in the *TLS* (by Gregory Vlastos).⁴ This is noteworthy because it reveals a perception held by the intellectual community to the effect that Terence Irwin is now taken to be emblematic of twentieth-century Platonism. Even if Burnyeat and Vlastos (among others) have found much that is wrong in detail with *PMT*, they have done so only in the context of high praise for its scholarship, intentions, and interpretive method, and this makes *PMT* an important work indeed.⁵

In this chapter I join several of Irwin's critics and examine some of his more controversial claims. I will do so, however, by situating these

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particular issues within a larger context—namely, a critique of Irwin's general interpretive strategy and method of reading Plato. I will argue that Irwin misreads a number of critical passages and does so because he accepts a faulty set of hermeneutical principles. Schofield described Irwin's project by saying that *PMT* "applies the precise analytic techniques of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy to the Platonic corpus on a much more extensive scale than we have seen done before." It is just this application that will here be called into question.⁶ Contrary to the impression given by Irwin, as well as by reviewers such as Vlastos and Burnyeat, there are other ways of reading Plato that produce plausible results. These not only disagree with *PMT* in detail, but take an entirely different orientation to the text. Irwin has other (potential) critics, such as Strauss, Rosen, Gadamer, and Klein (none of whom, nor their many students, is mentioned in his otherwise massive bibliography), who would challenge him on the most basic question of how to read the dialogues. This chapter will argue that *PMT's* account of Plato is inadequate because it does not address, and in fact cannot refute, critics such as these.

I

The following principles, roughly stated, are implicit in Irwin's interpretive strategy:

1. Plato's thought underwent significant transformations as he matured. His work can be divided into an early, "Socratic" period, and a middle, "Platonic" one. (*PMT* does not address the later dialogues.)
2. The interpreter should articulate the pivotal transitions of this development and outline the chronological development of the philosophical content of the dialogues.
3. In both periods philosophical content is equivalent to theoretical doctrine, which is divisible into various disciplines (ethical theory, epistemology, and so on). The core of Plato's thinking can be formulated into a series of positions (assertions), buttressed by logical argumentation.
4. The interpreter should isolate and analyze the individual arguments that constitute each discipline.
5. The context that surrounds such arguments, be it dramatic, rhetorical, mythic, or humorous, should be dismissed in the search for correct analysis of isolated arguments.
6. If inconsistencies or anomalies are found among positions extracted from different dialogues, these are to be resolved by appealing to Plato's "development." As a result, the relevant whole or object of the interpretation is the corpus itself (or a large segment of it), and

not individual dialogues. Even further, it is the entirety of Plato's putative development that is the concern of the interpreter.

7. An essential criterion of a successful developmental account is its coherence.

Principle 1 is so widely accepted that Irwin sees no reason to comment on it. Perhaps he is simply relying on the defense of it provided by others. Since the dialogues contain many apparently contradictory claims, and since they can be grouped on stylometric grounds as well as by argumentative and dramatic structure, principle 1 has been taken for granted among commentators for much of this century.⁷ Irwin's unique contribution within this tradition is his claim that even in the earliest phase a positive moral theory can be attributed to Socrates. Most developmental accounts consider the initial stages of Plato's thought to have been "negative" in character—that is, the early dialogues have been thought to be elenctic, refutative, or aporetic. In contrast, Irwin argues that the foundations of a positive moral doctrine can be discovered in Socrates' use of the elenchus and that Socrates had an actual moral theory, "a coherent set of mutually supporting principles for understanding the virtues and moral choice" (p. 94).⁸

It should be stated at the outset that Irwin is unclear to whom he refers when he uses the name "Socrates." As Klosko puts it, "Irwin's Socrates is a curious figure. His relationship to the historical Socrates is never discussed and the reader takes him to be the Socrates of the early dialogues. Yet Irwin cites Aristotle without compunction, without explanation (e.g., pp. 40, 42, 87). The relationship of Plato to his Socrates is never discussed. Are we to take Plato as ascribing to every sentence Socrates utters?"⁹ I share Klosko's discomfort on this critical hermeneutical point. It will be seen below that it is altogether unclear whose moral theory is under consideration in *PMT*.

Irwin is thorough in his adherence to principles 3, 4, and 5. He is committed to articulating the logical structure of Plato's moral theory; he isolates individual arguments to such an extent that he is able to number his paragraphs decimally; his account is so context-free that it has virtually nothing to say about the dramatic structure or the characters of the dialogues, and is composed almost exclusively of the analysis of arguments.¹⁰ His use of principle 6, particularly in treating the *Protagoras*, is ingenious, but problematic, and will be discussed below.

Irwin comments on his general approach in his Introduction:

The following chapters are meant to be an exposition of Plato's views. I cite textual evidence as fully as I can, to show that I am discussing some views he really holds. But I do not claim that the arguments for or against a particular view, or the consequences I draw from it, are always to be found in Plato, or even that he would accept them if he were asked. This way of "reading into" the text is hard to avoid in discussing any philosopher, if we want to raise the most interesting questions about him, and

to discuss him critically, instead of merely reporting what he says. With Plato it is essential. (p. 3)

There are immediate problems with this. First, how does Irwin know what views Plato really held? Plato never wrote treatises in which he explicitly set forth his ideas, nor did he appear as a speaker in any of his dialogues. Socrates is the main character in the works with which *PMT* is concerned, but as Klosko noted, we cannot assume that all his utterances are identical to Plato's views. Exactly how one gains access to Plato's thought is a difficult question, but one that is completely ignored by Irwin. Principles 1 to 7 above all assume that the interpreter can discover who Plato is and how his thinking evolved, but this is an assumption made intrinsically problematic by the dialogue form itself. Irwin does not address the troublesome hermeneutical question of how the reader disentangles the complex dramas that are the dialogues in order to discover their author's true intentions. This is because his primary concern, as stated in his introduction, is not with a thorough exposition of the text but with extracting an interesting moral theory from the text. This he has surely succeeded in doing, but is the result genuinely Platonic? Irwin is ambiguous. When is he reading into the dialogues, and when is he not? The reader of *PMT* is not told. A related question is, what does Irwin mean by "interesting"? It is neither obvious nor necessary that philosophers (including Plato) be exclusively interested in the kind of logical analysis Irwin practices. Unless one can show otherwise, the varieties of philosophical discourse are many and are not restricted to the analysis of formal arguments or, in this case, the construction of moral theories. Irwin continues:

What I say about Plato will sometimes sound excessively "charitable," in so far as I sometimes discount flaws or obscurities in his arguments, or in his defences of his claim; and in general I try to discuss those parts of his doctrine which I think are more plausible in more detail than the parts I think less plausible. (p. 3)

In order to construct his account Irwin analyzes in detail only those portions of the text he finds "plausible." But what is the standard by which he measures plausibility? When is a doctrine likely to be acceptable to Irwin? Apparently, it is when it can be formulated and then analyzed by the "precise techniques of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy." In other words, if a passage contains, or can be reformulated to contain, the kind of formal argumentation that contributes to moral theory as Irwin understands it, it will be included in *PMT*. If it does not, it is ignored. This is a procedure that will prove successful only if Plato envisioned moral theory of the same type as does Irwin. But to ask again what I take to be

the central question: how can we determine what views Plato really held? In a preliminary fashion, I would answer as follows: we must read the text as comprehensively as possible and do so with a minimum number of preconceptions about what it might contain. In contrast, Irwin discounts from the outset large portions of the text because they do not measure up to his standard of philosophical plausibility. But did Plato hold to the same standard? *PMT* is not equipped to answer this question. Despite an appearance of comprehensiveness it is but a partial treatment of the dialogues, since it concentrates only on what its author believes to be philosophically significant.

As mentioned before, Irwin is thorough in his adherence to principle 5. In the search for Platonic theory, "we must sometimes try to free moral doctrines from their distorting context" (p. 3). But when does a context distort? Is it when Plato mistakenly takes an issue in ontology to be one in ethics? Or is it when an ironical or humorous moment infects the purity of logical argumentation? The success of *PMT* depends on its being able to separate fairly and accurately relevant from irrelevant textual material. Presumably Irwin would employ the same standard for this separation as the one he would use to measure plausibility—susceptibility to philosophical analysis. But the same problem arises, for how does Irwin know that such a standard is actually appropriate for a reading of the dialogues? He assumes without argument that much of the text Plato wrote distorts or obscures what is philosophically relevant. What justifies such an assumption? Irwin cannot rely on principle 3, which comprises (the outline of) a conception of philosophy, to support principle 5, for if he dismisses context because he believes his task to be that of discovering theoretical content he begs the question: the context may well call into doubt the very identification of philosophy with such content. Similarly, he cannot use 5 to justify 3, for that would be a method of reconstructing the text after a preconceived notion of philosophy.

These objections become particularly sharp if *PMT* is read in the light of the commentators alluded to above. For example, according to Strauss, "one cannot take seriously enough the law of logographic necessity. Nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs."¹¹ In other words, there is no such thing as a distorting context in the Platonic dialogues. Every bit of detail that describes the characters, every example a speaker uses to illustrate his point, all the jokes, need to be taken into consideration when the reader attempts to understand the philosophical import of the dialogues. This is not to say that Plato was a god who unerringly fitted each word into its appropriate slot. Nor does it suggest that the analysis of, for example, the dramatic context will of itself result in a complete philosophical interpretation. Indeed, following Strauss's dictum may never yield a systematic or clearly

defined Platonic doctrine. But why should the reader assume that such a doctrine was what Plato intended to be elicited from his writings (as Irwin does in principle 3)? To quote Tigerstedt, "how can we ever be quite sure that the difficulties which oppose any systematization of Plato are not intentional?"¹²

Strauss's hermeneutical principle may itself be accused of being an assumption about how to read the dialogues. This is no doubt true, but it is one that insists we take Plato seriously as a thinker who knew what he was doing and wrote self-consciously. As a result, following Strauss's advice leads to what may be termed "hermeneutical prudence." It forces us to minimize our preconceptions and furnishes us with a method to avoid imposing our views upon the text. As such, it provides us with the best hope for understanding the author as he wanted to be understood, a step that is certainly prior to any criticism of that author.¹³

Perhaps Irwin would answer these objections by arguing that his interpretive strategy is justified by the coherent account it elicits from the text (principle 7). If, in other words, he can construct a consistent description of Plato's theoretical development, then the principles used to reach that description have been vindicated. Burnyeat rightly called *PMT*, "a developmental story of extraordinary coherence."¹⁴ But is the story true, or is it a myth? Strauss too generates a coherent account, yet his results are quite different from Irwin's. Irwin might strenuously object to Strauss's interpretation of the *Republic*, Rosen's reading of the *Sophist*, Klein's *Meno*, or Hyland's *Charmides*.¹⁵ He might accuse these commentaries of being overly literary since they scrutinize all the small details of the dialogues' dramatic context. Nevertheless, they are internally coherent. Each of these works concentrates on a single dialogue and makes no appeal to Plato's chronological development.¹⁶ Each insists upon a contextual reading of all argumentation. As Strauss again puts it, one must "read the speeches of all Platonic characters in light of the deeds. The deeds are in the first place the setting and the actions of the individual dialogue: on what kind of men does Socrates act with his speeches? What is the age, the character, the abilities, the position in society, and the appearance of each?"¹⁷ All of these are questions in which Irwin takes no interest. He has not, however, demonstrated that they deserve to be ignored.

None of this is intended to deny the value of logical analysis. Rather, it is to insist that the dialogues are complex wholes that include not only serious argumentation, but dramatic confrontation, rhetorical interplay, and irony. It is impossible to predict in advance when a given speech will be more or less characterized by one of these factors. There is, for example, no algorithm to determine under what circumstances Plato intended Socrates to be speaking ironically. As a result, the commentator, in order to avoid ascribing his own views to Plato, must read the dialogues as individual

works, as the fictions they are, and as texts whose every dimension may modify the meaning of the arguments they contain.

If commentaries such as Strauss's are in fact coherent, how does one adjudicate a dispute between their results and Irwin's? Clearly a standard other than coherence must be invoked, and this I suggest may be called "the principle of quantity." The nod must be given to that interpretation that incorporates more of the text as it is written into its account. The interpretation that recognizes the law of logographic necessity and is not predisposed to dismiss large segments of the text because they appear philosophically implausible will read the dialogues more openly and comprehensively than the one that does not. It will include detailed examinations of characters, settings, digressions, and myths. As a result, it will be more tentative in tone than *PMT*, whose author regularly speaks with confidence of Socrates' doctrines and theories. Finally, such an interpretation may well terminate in questions rather than in doctrines (in contrast to principle 3 above), and so will not contain the kind of theoretical results that Irwin finds most interesting. This is not, however, to say that it is any less philosophical than *PMT*. From Irwin's point of view it may be less plausible, but in fact it may also be more Platonic.

II

In what follows I shall illustrate my general criticism with one particular issue, namely, *PMT*'s treatment of the "craft analogy" (CA). The CA is pivotal to Irwin's developmental story. He claims that Socrates "argues that virtue is simply craft-knowledge" (p. 7). (I have already mentioned the troubling ambiguity of Irwin's use of the name "Socrates." Presumably it here refers to the younger Plato.) Irwin believes that when Socrates uses the CA in his discussions, as he does regularly, Plato intends it to be read as a conceptual outline of a theoretical project. For example, in the *Apology* Socrates describes his conversation with Callias. If Callias' two sons were colts or calves, he would hire a horse trainer or a farmer as an "overseer" (*epistates*; 20a8) to make them excellent in their appropriate virtue. Callias' sons, however, are men. Who, then, is knowledgeable about the human and political virtue (20b4-5) appropriate to them? Callias says that Evenus of Paros, a sophist, has this *techne* (20c1). Socrates' irony makes it certain that he thinks Evenus has no such knowledge. In addition, he claims he himself does not possess it. Thus, the analogy is left as follows: as the horse trainer is to the virtue of colts, so X is to the virtue appropriate to human beings. If *hippikē*, the *techne* of horse training, is substituted for the horse trainer, X will refer to a kind of knowledge.¹⁸

Variations of this analogy are used throughout the dialogues. Irwin's

essential point is that the younger Plato believed that the X, moral knowledge, could be supplied and was strictly analogous to a craft. This becomes the basis of the moral theory he ascribes to Socrates. Such a thesis, which I would call the "theoretical reading of the CA," brings with it problematic consequences. For example, according to Irwin the kind of knowledge illustrated by the first term in the analogy is productive in nature.¹⁹ A craft, such as carpentry, issues in a product distinct from itself, namely, houses. The quality of a carpenter's skill and the value of the knowledge he possesses are measured only by the houses he makes. Since Irwin believes the analogy is strict, the knowledge that is virtue must be productive as well. Therefore, its value is instrumental since its worth derives only from the good (happiness) that it is able to produce. Such a reading stands at odds with the more traditional belief that for Plato virtue is a good valued in and of itself. Vlastos has strongly disagreed with Irwin on this point and their debate over it is recorded in a fascinating exchange of letters in *TLS*.²⁰

Irwin's entire argument hinges on the role he gives to the CA. This is made quite clear by his reading of the *Protagoras*. He claims that although the earliest dialogues contain the position that "happiness is a determinate end to which virtue prescribes instrumental means" (p. 84), they did not make clear what this end is. Such a lack is remedied by the hedonism introduced by Socrates after 351b: "Hedonism is Socrates' own view, intended like the rest of the *Protagoras* to support the positions assumed without defence in the Socratic dialogues. Hedonism explains the rather indefinite talk of the final good, provides a clear subject matter for the craft of virtue" (p. 103).

I alluded to this above when mentioning the sixth of the hermeneutical principles operative in *PMT*. The hedonism of the *Protagoras* has long troubled commentators, for it is "not in keeping with the general temper or method of Socratic ethics,"²¹ and it contradicts Socrates' denial of the same position in other dialogues. Irwin argues that in order to make sense as a working ethical theory, the CA requires a determinate end, a final good, to function as the object of virtue as craft. "And pleasure is a plausible candidate for the final good" (p. 108). The word *plausible* is striking here. Irwin believes that since he can extract from the *Protagoras* a thesis that logically coheres with the other theses he has outlined, he has demonstrated Plato's true intention. The *metretike* techné (356d4) described by Socrates is, for Irwin, a serious theoretical proposal: "virtue is the craft of measuring pleasures and pain" (p. 109).

Irwin's proposal for synthesizing the *Protagoras* with the earlier dialogues is elegant, economical, and, simply as a moral theory, interesting. But is it Platonic? As Vlastos has noted, a majority of commentators have read this passage not as one that espouses Socrates' own view but as an

ad hominem and a reductio. The "homo" to whom the argument is being addressed has been variously described as the "average man" (Taylor), the "many" (Sullivan), or Protagoras himself (Grube).²² My own suggestion is that the primary audience of Socrates' remarks is young Hippocrates, the character for whose benefit the entire debate with Protagoras is taking place and whom I would label a "protohedonist."²³ None of these proposals can be pursued here; the point is that they all (especially Grube's and my own) seek to find internal or dramatic grounds from which to explain the introduction of hedonism, which, when coming from Socrates, is surely anomalous. All consider this passage to be in some measure rhetorical or ironic. Irwin, on the other hand, does not discuss any of the dramatic components of the dialogue. He is concerned solely with the analysis of arguments and the charting of Plato's theoretical development. His position altogether depends on Plato's having perceived a deficiency in his earlier work in need of correction: "The *Protagoras*, and especially the hedonism . . . offers solutions to central problems in Socratic ethics; and this is one reason to find the hedonism theory attractive" (p. 108).

In other words, Irwin argues that because the passage introducing hedonism can be formulated so as to form a coherent account of a developing ethical theory, hedonism can be attributed to Plato as a doctrine sincerely held at a stage of his career. There is no way of apodictically proving this false. It is, however, an argument that appeals to a psychological transformation that took place twenty-five hundred years ago. Furthermore, Plato's changes of mind, were, according to *PMT*, somewhat erratic. (Irwin states that "the earlier dialogues . . . neither endorsed nor rejected hedonism" [p. 103], whereas "the *Gorgias* rejects it" [p. 116].) Most important is the fact Plato left behind no *Nachlass* in which he described his own development and that the dialogues themselves offer no commentary on their author's evolution. As a result, Irwin's argument is entirely speculative. His analysis is painstaking, and his results coherent, but there is little evidence to show that they are genuinely Platonic. The kinds of interpretations mentioned above, which rely on internal (or textual) grounds alone for their account, must surely be preferred. They are, one might say, more empirical than that provided in *PMT*, for they account for more of the "data"—the text—that can be observed.

It is clear that *PMT*'s reading of the *Protagoras* depends on its account of the CA in earlier dialogues. How does Irwin marshal evidence in support of his interpretation, his theoretical reading, of the CA in these dialogues? Space permits discussion of only one example: *Charmides* 165c4–e2.²⁴ Irwin believes that this passage is evidence for the following statement: "In the *Charmides* he [Socrates] argues that temperance is not modesty; he does not ask if it is wise modesty, but considers what kind of craft it must be. . . . he must assume it is no more than a craft" (p. 70). This is

a peculiar interpretation of the passage, for the definition here under consideration is no longer modesty, but Critias' "knowing oneself" (165b2). To this Socrates asks, "for if temperance is a knowing something [*gignoskein ti*] obviously it must be some episteme and of something. Or is this not so?" (165c3-5). The "is this not so" (*ē ou*) may well be important, as Hyland believes,²⁵ for it leaves open the possibility that Socrates himself does not believe that the knowledge that is temperance is explicable via the model of epistemai such as medicine and house building. Critias rejects this potentially fruitful option and proceeds on the basis of the CA. This is what causes his downfall, since an object analogous to health or houses cannot be located for "self-knowledge." Indeed, much of the remainder of the dialogue explores the aporiai that ensue if one explicates temperance through the CA. As Klosko puts it, "Exactly what the *Charmides* established is not clear, but it seems to damage the CA more than support it."²⁶

If the *Charmides* does damage the CA, why and how is it being used? Critias is a man who needs to be refuted. As historical figures, both he and Charmides were infamous as intemperate villains. From the outset, then, this dialogue is permeated by a profound irony. Much like Meno, Critias' arrogance and thoughtlessness parallel his political viciousness.²⁷ Thus, there is a need to defeat him in public argument in order to inform the audience (and the readers of the dialogue) where, in Plato's estimation, this man went wrong. The CA provides a useful tool for doing this. It forces Critias to formulate his knowledge claim in the most unambiguous terms available—those belonging to the typical *technai*. Once so formulated, Socrates can demand that Critias' definition be explicated as clearly as medicine. By here employing *techne* as a model of knowledge, Socrates brings about the downfall of the definition.

It is clear that in some sense Socrates adopts *techne* as the operative model of knowledge in this passage. But in what sense does it operate? As I have mentioned, the *Charmides* is a profoundly ironic work, and I am suggesting that the CA as it occurs in this dialogue is part of its irony. Critias is neither a reflective nor a moral man. Consequently, it is unlikely that he has spent much time wondering about the nature of moral knowledge. The conception of knowledge he adopts is that belonging to the ordinary, prephilosophical world, namely, *techne*. The refutation proceeds on the basis of Critias' conception of knowledge. In other words, Socrates adopts the standpoint of his interlocutor in order to demonstrate its weakness. He does so, not to articulate a moral theory, but to refute Critias and instruct his listeners. The refutation leaves open the question of the nature of moral knowledge, a question that Plato invites the more philosophically inclined among his audience to explore. Such, at least, would be the outline of an interpretation that takes into account the text as it is written.²⁸

Irwin is convinced that the only interesting and philosophically plausible results of the early dialogues are axioms or theorems of an ethical doctrine based upon a theoretical reading of the CA. He has ignored important facets of the dialogues and so greatly narrowed his scope. As a result, this portion of *PMT*, although coherent, is not a genuine or comprehensive commentary on Plato, but a sometimes fascinating muthos generated by tenaciously weaving together and then expanding a series of propositions suggested by various speeches in the dialogues. But this is not exposition of the text, and so *PMT* has the wrong title. Irwin's book articulates not Plato's moral theory but Irwin's theory about what Plato's moral theory should have been. I certainly agree that ancient texts, like modern ones, often merit criticism. But if the dialogues are not read faithfully *as dialogues*, they cannot be accurately understood, and any criticism aimed at them will be premature and lack force.