

A review by the supervisor of PhD candidate Stephen Oppong Peprah

Stephen Oppong's main focus is on ancient philosophy, especially on classical political philosophy and theory, which is also connected to the problems of metaphysics and epistemology. This focus and interest stem from his graduate studies and double major in political philosophy and classics at the University of Ghana. His special interest in Plato (and Plato's *Republic*) was manifested in several articles published in the following journals: *Plato Journal*, *EIRENE*, *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia*, etc.¹ These articles became the basis of his PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Philosophy of the University of Hradec Králové under the title *Justification of Political Authority and the Political Position of the Non-Philosophic Citizen in Plato's Republic*. The ideas elaborated in the thesis have been presented by Stephen Oppong at many international conferences and meetings. They found supporters and earned acclaim but they also raised controversies among the anonymous reviewers in journals. We may say that this accompanies every new and fresh insight. But all those factors contributed to the further elaboration and precision of Stephen Oppong's conclusions.²

The main achievement of Stephen Oppong lies, in my opinion, in his critical assessment of the so-called metaphysical thesis regarding both the incompetence of the citizens and the competence of the guardians in Plato's *Republic*. That has been a powerful interpretative paradigm for many years and it can be traced back to the following scholars: G. Vlastos, K. R. Popper, J. Gould, and C. C. W. Taylor. According to these scholars, the ordinary citizens in Plato's *Republic* are, in contrast to the philosophers, excluded from participation in politics because of their lack of knowledge, which especially revolves around the idea of Good and the knowledge of forms. As Oppong says, "the defenders of the metaphysical justification are also committed to the view that metaphysical ἐπιστήμη is a sufficient condition for ruling, implying that the philosophers will need no other epistemic competence to rule". In Oppong's view such an approach leads to inauspicious ethical and political implications which amount to the characterisation of Plato's thought as paternalistic or totalitarian. Against that traditional 'liberal' interpretation, Oppong offers a naturalistic thesis which makes use of the second book of Plato's *Republic*. Oppong argues that the "realisability of the eudaimonistic goals of both the individual and Kallipolis supervene upon the cooperative interactions between the rulers and the ruled, qua significant partners, relative to their natural aptitude and epistemic competencies" (p. 4). He shows that the natural aptitude and capacity of each citizen and class manifest the ways in which non-philosophic citizens are epistemically competent and contribute to the well-being of the society. As a result friendship among the citizens and harmony in the city arise because the citizens see the worth and contributions of each other. By this Oppong also rejects Popper's famous statement that individuals are totally

¹ S. Oppong Peprah, *Reinvestigating the Political Position of the Citizen in Plato's Republic*, *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* vol. 14.4 (2019), 23-43; *The Epistemic Competence of Plato's Philosopher-Rulers*, *Eirene. Studia Graeca et Latina* 57 (2021), 119-147; *Re-examining the Compulsion Problem in Plato's Republic*, *Plato Journal* 22 (2021), 177-195.

² For the sake of accuracy and completeness I must mention the latest shift in Stephen Oppong's interest to the issues of friendship in the political commonwealth. That happened, besides other things, under the influence of Professor James Warren in Cambridge during Stephen's Brian Berkeley Scholarship and the completion of his Master's Degree in Classics at the University of Cambridge.

subordinated to the collective goals and they are only worthless cogs in the machinery of the state.

Stephen Oppong is thus one of the scholars who have contributed recently to greater precision in our reading of Plato and to the revision of a long-lived paradigm. Recently Sara Diaco (*Socrates' First City: Pleonexia and the Thought Experiment*, *Apeiron* 54.4. 2021, 473-491) argued in a similar naturalistic way which could support Oppong's thesis. She identified two principles which operate in Kallipolis: a) mutual needs and dependency – the individuals are not self-sufficient and need to live together (*Rep.*369b-d), b) differences in aptitude and capacities (*Rep.* 370a-b). These principles support the thoughts about both individual and collective happiness which directly contradict the liberal claims relying on the so-called metaphysical thesis.

Regarding the epistemic and cognitive competence of the guardians as well as non-philosophers, Oppong's thesis must be read against the background of further work, e.g. J. Moss, *Plato's Epistemology: Being and Seeming*, Oxford 2021; N. Smith, *Summoning Knowledge in Plato's Republic*, Oxford 2019; A. Payne, *The Teleology of Action in Plato's Republic*, Oxford 2017, pp. 35-225.

A critique of the metaphysical approach which argues that philosophical knowledge implies political knowledge and competence was thoroughly conducted by I. Vasiliou (*Aiming at Virtue in Plato*, pp. 212-282), which I miss in the bibliography, although another influential contribution by Vasiliou can be found there.

So far I have (legitimately) praised the PhD candidate for his contribution but for the sake of balance I should also mention the weak points to which Oppong should pay attention in the future. The first is the less elaborated methodology and strict adherence to the close reading and analytical approach. I think that he would benefit from a historical contextualising of Plato's work (a critical discussion about the values and operations of Athenian democracy, e.g. Ober, Balot, Monoson), and further from a dialogical or dramatic reading of Plato (e.g. Nightingale) or in general from the methodological discussions of Klagge-Smith, Tigersted, Wieland.

To conclude, I strongly recommend Stephen Oppong's thesis for defence and I am looking forward to hearing an interesting discussion between the members of the committee and Stephen Oppong Peparah.

Hradec Králové

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