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Review of *Plato's Counterfeit Sophists* by Håkan Tell

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Thus, to sum up, this book may be interesting for anyone revelling in the Straussian deconstruction of a text into smallest intertextual hints and paradoxes, and may, at the same time, be an interesting read for motivated school-teachers wanting to demonstrate something like ‘the political actuality of Socrates’, who simply endeavoured to defend ‘philosophy’, were it to cost him his life, so that ‘we, who know him only through books, have reason for admiration and gratitude’ (183), as run the final words of the book. A scholar, however, looking for an innovative, up-to-date analysis of the *Apology*, solidly based on modern literature and ancient sources, will be somewhat perturbed by the book’s obvious scientific shortcomings.

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TELL (H.) **Plato’s Counterfeit Sophists** (Hellenic Studies 44). Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. viii + 177. £18.95. 9780674055919.
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Plato’s Counterfeit Sophists undertakes two main tasks: to expose Plato’s portrayal of the sophists as distorted and to reintegrate the sophists into the Greek wisdom tradition (7), that is, to show that their practices were consistent with their historical predecessors. The book contains an introduction, six chapters and a brief methodological appendix. In the introduction, Tell outlines six characteristics of sophistic ‘otherness’, resulting from Plato’s misleading portrayal of the sophists as a homogenous group ‘alien’ to the Greek wisdom tradition (6). The sophists are said (a) to constitute a distinctive group labelled ‘sophists’; (b) to charge fees for instruction; (c) to travel extensively; (d) to be primarily concerned with rhetoric; (e) to endorse extreme relativism; (f) to have developed in response to Athenian social forces. Tell does not give equal consideration to each criterion; he treats (a)–(c) in chapters one, two and four, disregards (d) and (e), and deals with (f) in passing over the course of chapters four and five.

Chapter one, ‘The many and conflicting meanings of σοφιστής’, argues that the term, σοφιστής, was contested in antiquity, especially by Plato and Isocrates, and that to accept Plato’s judgment that the term, with its pejorative implications, be applied to a distinct group, namely

Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus and others, is to ‘take sides in an ideologically driven battle over legitimacy’ (22). In chapter two, ‘Wisdom for sale?’, Tell claims that the accusation that an intellectual charged fees in exchange for wisdom was a widespread strategy of invective and that we should therefore be suspicious of Plato’s ‘polemical and disparaging portrayal’ of the sophists as extracting payment from their students (53).

Chapter three, ‘*Sophoi* and concord’, marks a departure from the previous material, in that it neither takes its starting-point from the criteria of sophistic distinctiveness laid out in the introduction nor seems to involve any disagreement with Plato; indeed, in the later chapters, Tell relies extensively on evidence from Plato to support his positions. Tell maintains that sophistic reflections on political concord, or *homonoia*, are consistent with and can be traced back to earlier thinkers in the Greek wisdom tradition, despite the fact that the term itself is a late fifth-century coinage. In chapter four, ‘Itinerant *sophoi*’, Tell asserts that the extensive travels of the sophists were in no way unique to them, that there existed a strong and traditional ‘association between travel and wisdom’, and that the travels of wise men were made possible by institutional mechanisms of aristocratic guest-friendship (93). Further, Tell makes the case that Athens was not the ‘permanent residence’ of the sophists and that sophists did not spend particularly much time there (97). In chapter five, ‘Sages at the games’, Tell contends that the Panhellenic centres, like Olympia, served as traditional meeting places for Greek intellectuals who came to exchange ideas and to put on displays of wisdom for a mass audience. Chapter six, ‘Competition in wisdom’, claims that the agonistic practices of the sophists were not a sophistic invention but were rather consistent with those in the Greek wisdom tradition.

Plato’s Counterfeit Sophists fits in with recent literature aimed at rehabilitating sophistic rhetoric and argumentation or sophistic theory. However, rhetoricians and philosophers, not to mention Plato scholars, may be largely frustrated by this book. There is hardly any serious discussion of substantive sophistic claims or arguments, and Tell’s insistence that Plato omits from his dialogues ‘competing accounts’ of philosophy and ‘characterize[s] the sophists as an intellectually homogenous group’ (6) seems misleading and tendentious. In numerous dialogues, the legitimacy of the Socratic account of philosophy is

pitted against various alternative conceptions of wisdom (for example in *Cratylus*, *Gorgias*, *Republic* I, *Philebus*, *Ion*, etc.). Further, if one considers the wildly differing portrayals of the eponymous sophists in *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor* and *Euthydemus*, the search for a definition of ‘sophist’ in the *Sophist*, the clear distinctions he draws out amongst Protagoras, Hippias and Prodicus in the *Protagoras* and the long analysis of Protagorean relativism in the *Theaetetus*, it is hard to see how Plato could be accused of portraying the sophists as monolithic, or of not taking them seriously.

To the extent that *Plato's Counterfeit Sophists* presents a negative judgment on Plato's portrayal of the sophists, it is, despite its provocative title, unsuccessful. However, the title is somewhat misleading, since Tell devotes considerably more space to the book's positive aim of reintegrating the sophists into the Greek wisdom tradition. In this task, Tell is much more effective and persuasive. Classicists and historians interested in the historical practices of the sophists will find Tell's book engaging, though he admits that, due to the gaps in the historical record, some of his reflections ‘establish conceptual connections’ which do ‘not necessarily reflect historical reality’ (152). The later chapters, examining a large quantity of sources, provide a compelling, if speculative, historical reconstruction of sophistic practices and fill a needed gap in the literature.

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BERGES (S.) *Plato on Virtue and the Law*.

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As a welcome counterweight to the tendency among contemporary moral philosophers to suppose that the ethics of virtue is an Aristotelian enterprise, Berges rightly claims a place for Plato within that tradition.

Chapter 1 sets the discussion in the context of debates within contemporary virtue ethics: in contrast to the ‘agent-focused’ theory of Aristotle (on which the virtuous agent is a measure of action, capable of recognizing virtue-independent values and reasons to act), Plato has a hard-core ‘agent-based’ theory (on which the rightness or wrongness of an action is entirely a function of the

virtue of the agent who performs it). To rebut the charge that agent-based theories cannot provide an account of political morality, Berges proposes that the rich vein of Platonic material on the relation between virtue and law succeeds in developing a defensible ‘virtue jurisprudence’. Chapters 2–7 address questions about law and virtue that arise in *Crito*, *Menexenus*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Statesman* and *Laws*, loosely connected as responses to two sorts of problems that a jurisprudence of virtue might face: a tension between the inherent particularism of virtue ethics on the one hand and the generality of law on the other, and a worry that a virtue-theoretic approach to law will be objectionably paternalistic. Along the way, a number of other objections to virtue ethics are addressed (for example the currently popular invocation of ‘situationalist’ social psychology to challenge the assumption that virtues have any genuine influence over behaviour, as well as scepticism about the unity of the virtues that is affirmed in most ancient accounts). A final chapter applies the virtue jurisprudences that emerges from the earlier discussion to the evaluation of modern democratic institutions.

Central to Berges' defence of Plato is her contention that the virtue of concern to Plato involves wisdom, in particular, the sort of wisdom cultivated by philosophical dialogue. Thus cultivating citizens' virtue involves nurturing their capacity for rational reflection, rather than habituating them to mindless obedience. A recurring theme is that Plato, for all his criticisms of democracy, does not adhere to an inherently antidemocratic and authoritarian view of law. His view is a developing one, and it is in the *Statesman*, we are told, that Plato successfully weds the virtue-theoretic account of legal judgment to a strong (but not unreasonable) principle of respect for law. In the *Laws*, we are told, there is a new concern for the autonomy of the citizens, expressed in the requirement that statutes have persuasive preambles. Here Berges' proposal that different preambles have different intended audiences and might themselves be revised over time (132–38) injects a useful alternative into the currently well-worn debate about whether the persuasion supplied by those preambles is ‘rational’ or ‘rhetorical’. Furthermore, Berges argues, concerns about the paternalism or authoritarianism of the laws in that dialogue are to be laid at the door of elements in Plato's view inessential to the aims of virtue jurisprudence – for example the invocation of the