

ethical theory is pushed to the last chapter. While this may be a clever way to protect students from getting ensnarled too early on in the tedium of theory, one wonders what the quality of ensuring classroom discussions would be if Munson's chapters are taken in strict chronological order. Even so, this is a daring anthology. For example, it contains a discussion (in Part V: "Challenges") on the politics of "women's health" issues, including the possible neglect of men's healthcare needs in the United States. There is even a case entitled "prostate cancer and fairness."

The third anthology is *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases* (Oxford University Press, 2009), by Lewis Vaughn. Unlike Munson—but like the other three texts mentioned here—Vaughn does explicate in his opening chapters both foundational ethical theories and guidelines on moral reasoning." Even so, he pays scant attention to the impact of religion on the values conflicts frequently raging at the center of bioethical inquiry. Nor does he devote much attention to the challenging bioethical questions associated with life threatening, global environmental problems such as climate change, toxic waste, water pollution, public sanitation, third world poverty. Ideally, one would like to see some involvement in these topics in a comprehensive bioethics reader.

In sum, Pierce and Randels have produced a serviceable, engaging, and clear-headed volume. It masterfully introduces students to a wide range of topics in a systematic and welcoming way. Indeed, *Contemporary Bioethics* is one of those challenging and exciting textbooks that could easily become the centerpiece of any course dealing with contemporary bioethical issues from a mainly health sciences, environmental, and public health perspective. In my view, its historical narratives, interfacing case studies, timely articles, and connecting commentaries will prove useful and enlightening to undergraduates and their teachers alike.

*Paul Carrick, Department of Philosophy, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg PA 17325; pcarrick@gettysburg.edu*

---

### **A Plato Primer**

J. D. G. Evans

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010, 176 pp., ISBN: 9780801476839 (pbk.), \$18.95

---

### **YANCY HUGHES DOMINICK**

J. D. G. Evans takes on an impressive project in his *A Plato Primer*. There is a lot to like about this volume, and I am confident that it would be valuable both in advanced courses on Plato and for instructors teaching Plato at any level.

Evans sets out to introduce his reader "to the main theses, concepts and arguments in Plato's philosophy" (vii), and the focus is decidedly on the arguments. Indeed, Evans begins the first chapter with the assertion that of

the many topics Plato touches on, only some “are in any sense philosophical. . . . It is certainly worth reading Plato’s works as he wrote them, so that you can savour the appetizing surrounds in which he wraps his arguments. But it is the arguments that count” (1). In other words, this book provides a helpful—and laudably thorough—account of some of the most intriguing and influential arguments in Plato’s works. Readers inclined to a broader understanding of philosophy will likely find Evans frustrating, but those who would agree that the arguments are what counts will find the volume illuminating and thought-provoking.

The book is organized thematically, with chapters focusing on knowledge; reality; dialectic; value; causality and change; and politics, art, and the soul. The final chapter discusses some of the impact that Plato has had on later thinkers, from Neoplatonists to Oxford analytic philosophers. Each chapter contains a bibliography for further reading; a single bibliography at the end of the book brings all of those together.

Evans begins with the *Republic*, which seems like just the right thing, since that text has an indisputably central place in Plato’s work. The *Republic* treats values as objectively real, and treats rational inquiry into those values as the most important project for anyone interested in the good life. Evans argues that these ideas form the core of Plato’s thought, and the following chapters take up various aspects of these fundamental ideas.

After the first chapter, Evans brings many dialogues together as a way of highlighting Plato’s commitment to certain central claims and questions. The chapter on knowledge takes up the *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, and *Theaetetus*, for example; the value chapter discusses the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Symposium*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*.

I especially appreciate two features of Evans’s approach: first, he makes a convincing case for seeing Plato’s work as unified around the theme of rational inquiry into objectively real values, despite the many differences of style, language, and dramatic context. Second, Evans takes readers through some of the thornier and more obscure passages in Plato’s later work, and shows that even these passages relate back to this central theme. Few general works on Plato discuss the second half of the *Parmenides*, which features a difficult dialectical exercise focused on deducing the consequences of a hypothesis and its denial: Evans not only mentions this text, but also shows its relation to the ongoing Platonic project of “conceptual clarification” (115). Plato’s late works are difficult and intimidating, and Evans deserves praise for making them appear at least a little more approachable—and for making them seem worth the effort.

Evans also offers a brief overview of Plato’s life and writing career, which students should appreciate (although it does make the perhaps minor but unfortunate mistake of claiming that the Stephanus edition of Plato, which is used for uniform citation, contains columns a-e on its pages and numbers within the columns (ix); in fact, these letters refer to sections within a single column, and the numbers refer to the Oxford Classical Texts editions). Students and

instructors both, then, should find *A Plato Primer* a useful introduction to Plato's thought in general and to particular arguments within those works.

Despite the book's many virtues, I have a few misgivings about its present form. Not all of the citations are quite right (Evans places the argument that relativism is self-refuting at *Theaetetus* 182, when it is actually found at 171, for example [see p. 40]), and not all arguments are cited quite as thoroughly as they might be (the discussion of the dialectical exercise at the end of the *Parmenides* is initially said merely to be in the "second part" of the book).

Again, in the chapter on dialectic, Evans argues that certain tensions exist in Plato's works, such as the claim that reality is unchanging, which is then attacked in the *Sophist*. Evans makes an excellent point here, and the *Sophist* example works quite well. He also claims, however, that when Socrates in the *Republic* says that the perfect city cannot exist on earth, the claim stands "in sharp contrast to Plato's interest in its realization, which is expressed elsewhere in the *Republic*" (78). It would certainly be helpful if Evans could cite at least one case of such expression.

Speaking of Plato's interest raises another worry: Evans argues against the practice of attributing the views in the texts to particular characters, saying that there "is no reason to think that anything in Plato's works is anything other than what he has thought up" (4). I'm not entirely convinced by that claim, but in any case Evans does not even hold this line, and sometimes within one page will credit certain claims in a particular dialogue to Socrates and others to Plato (as at pp. 96 and 105, for example).

My final worry concerns the audience of this book. As I said above, this seems best aimed at professors, and also at advanced undergraduates or graduate students taking a class on Plato: it would be a useful aid for instructors, but it is too wide-ranging to be of much help for students in an introductory class or in a survey course on Ancient Greek thought, and it's not making the sort of extended arguments that a Ph.D. candidate might seek out. But exactly how advanced should these students be? In chapter 1, Evans says that Plato seems to endorse an "objectivist realist epistemology" (11). The reader, it seems, should know what this phrase entails. Chapter 3, however, begins with an extended explanation of realism, anti-realism, and idealism (45–46). That discussion is certainly helpful, but I wonder why Evans waits thirty pages to explain his terminology.

Although the book gives rise to worries like the above, I remain confident that it would be a valuable addition to an upper-level course on Plato, and a useful aid for instructors. Evans demonstrates a deep continuity in Plato's thought, which consistently associates the best life with rational inquiry into objectively real values. More importantly, Evans presents the reader with a thoughtful discussion that manages to distill thousands of pages of Plato into an accessible 150 pages while maintaining an admirable attention to the details of the arguments.