

Samuel Scolnicov, 2018. Plato's method of hypothesis in the Middle dialogues, edited by Harold Tarrant, with a foreword by Hanna Scolnicov. Baden-Baden: Academia Verlag. 253pp.

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“This volume presents the Cambridge doctoral dissertation by Samuel Scolnicov, submitted as a graduate student of King’s College. The original title pages gives the submission date of September 1973, and the degree was awarded the following year”. (p. 7). The supervisors were Dr. Peck, Prof. Keith Guthrie (unofficial), Prof. Bernard Williams and Prof. Geoffrey Lloyd.

It may seem odd to publish a thesis submitted almost fifty years ago, but the editor Harold Tarrant explains why: “When conversing about Plato, Samuel Scolnicov (1941-2014) not infrequently mentioned doctoral thesis, and I suspect that I asked him more than once what the topic was. From his earlier essays on he had referred to it (a list of Samuel Scolnicov’s publications is to be found from p. 238 to 249 of this book), and he published articles devoted to the hypothetical method in *Kant-Studien* (1975) and *Methexis* (1992). He still remained committed to its principal claims in his treatment of *Republic* V-VII (1988); and his book on the *Parmenides* (2003), which was a natural dialogue to tackle as a sequel to the present work, reiterates many of its findings (2003). However, he nowhere returned to the issues with the same thoroughness and scholarly acumen that is demonstrated in the present pages. When I finally read the thesis in Cambridge University Library I felt that here was the key of much else that he had published on Plato, a work that showed his fundamental commitment to Plato – to a Plato who was importantly different from Aristotle, not just Aristotle’s more problematic precursor”. (p. 10). Harold Tarrant is right. Even if after the submission of this thesis, a lot of papers have been published on *ὑπόθεσις*, *δόξα*, *ἐπιστήμη*, the line, the cave etc., Samuel Scolnicov’s work is still relevant.

At the beginning of his work, Samuel Scolnicov gives credit to the Marburg neo-kantians, and in particular to H. Cohen 1878, P. Natorp

1903 and N. Hartmann 1965, for having stressed the importance of Plato's hypothetical method. "For them, Plato's hypothesis was the idea as objectivized principle of thought, whose function was to make possible scientific reasoning". (p. 39). One can disagree with these scholars on the definition of the idea as "objectivized principle of thought", but one must agree with its function.

In addition, it is usually assumed that the hypothetical method described in Plato is connected to the form of mathematical reasoning later called *analysis* by mathematicians. This is not false, but the method has been understood differently by different commentators. "According to the traditional view of analysis, the method consisted in 'hypothesing the proposition to be proved and deducing the consequences from that proposition, until you have reached a consequence which you knew independently to be true or to be false. You could then, if the consequence was a true one, use it as the premise of a proof of your *demonstrand*; and if it was a false one, you could use its contradictory as a disproof of the proposition you had hoped to establish". (Robinson 1953, 121). According to this interpretation accepted by Heath 1921 and Wedberg 1955, analysis is a method of deduction in both directions: from the premises to the *demonstrand* as well as from the *demonstrand* to its premises. As a consequence, "*reductio ad absurdum* is a special case of analysis: a supposed premise known as false is reached, and the *demonstrand* is proved false starting from the contradictory of the supposed premise". (p. 46)

But if, in Plato, the idea, as a hypothesis, is not on the same metaphysical level as sensible things participating in it, these sensible things being but the images of a unique model, it does mean that analysis is not a deduction, but an intuition, the divination of the premises su-

pporting a given conclusion. This is what is explained in the next three chapters, one on the *Meno* and the two on the *Phaedo*.

The account of learning offered by Socrates in the *Meno* is mythical, but "[b]y clothing it in a mythical robe Plato seems to be stressing the non-deductive aspect of this account". (p. 83). There are disagreements between scholars on this point. *Meno* is the first dialogue in which the method of division is mentioned, but this method is only sketched, in view of the nature the main character Meno. In the *Phaedo*, however, Plato gives the method of division a broader basis. In this dialogue, Plato indeed seems more interested in the foundation of the doctrine of the ideas than in the existence of the soul. "The *nature* of the soul is argued mainly from its function as knowing agent and is thus, in a restricted sense, dependent on the existence of ideas as objects of knowledge. It would seem then that, at least according to the line of argument taken in the *Phaedo*, the ὑποθέσεις αἰ πρώται would be the ideas themselves. And the call for re-examination of the first hypotheses could be the linking rope of the ἀνυπόθετος ἀρχή in the *Republic*." (p. 119)

As a matter of fact, the core of the book is the next three chapters on the *Republic*. Samuel Scolnicov first claims that the inquiry into the foundations of knowledge in the soul and the city is hardly distinguishable from an inquiry into justice in the soul and in the city. He then assumes that there is an identity, and not only an analogy, of *genê* between the city and the soul, and that justice consists in maintaining the proper arrangement of both, that is, their natural good order: "Wisdom as the excellence of reason is knowledge (επιστήμη), and knowledge is distinct from opinion. This distinction implies, in its turn, an ontological distinction between ideas and sensibles. The whole chain of hypotheses culminates in the unhypothetical

idea of the Good, which is the absolutely sufficient basis for all hypotheses”. (p. 148). The distinction between knowledge and opinion is based on the difference of their objects, ideas on one hand, and on the other hand sensibles which are the appearances of the ideas, these appearances being what they are because they participated in the ideas.

Hence this conclusion: “It seems then that it is not accurate to say that *doxa* in the *Republic* is the apprehension of the sensible world as such. Rather it is the apprehension of the characters in the sensible world which are in fact but a result of participation in the ideas, not as such, but as if they were the absolute and true, because only, characters F. G. ... Opinion is thus inadequate apprehension of the sensible world”. (p. 159)

Then Samuel Scolnicov wants to establish the difference between mathematical deductive proof and dialectical analysis claimed in chapter 1. This difference depends on the distinction between *doxa* and *epistêmê* consists in being able to provide a *logos*. But for the dialectician the only adequate *logos* is the one which does not need a *logos*, because the unhypothetical principle is at the same time principle of knowledge and of reality. That is the lesson of the Divided Line, which leads to a critique of Robinson’s interpretation of Plato’s hypothetical method (see p. 196).

In addition, the most interesting conclusion concerns the status of the objects of mathematics. These are not intermediaries, as in Aristotle’s view: “But Plato’s conception is different: the particular is a reflection, a pure representation of the idea in the spatial medium: ‘it has being’ from the idea. The particular is thus purely relational, not being in itself anything (rather than ‘not existing in itself’), but being completely dependent upon the idea for its being a so-and-so”. (p. 203). This helps

us to read the very difficult passage of *Letter vii* (342a7-c4), and to exclude Wedberg’s interpretation of Plato’s theory of ideas: ideas are not attributes or classes, and their relation to particulars is not one of imperfect exemplification.

The last chapter is conclusive: “The method of hypothesis does not intend to *prove* anything. It only purports to offer support for a proposition which is accepted at first (by *ὁμολογία*) on grounds that may be irrelevant to the process of argumentation. Strictly speaking, no proposition in Plato can be proved: it can be either refuted by *elenchus* or supported by analysis. Strict demonstration would require deduction from premises of which we have absolute knowledge. But, as Protagoras stressed, any premise can be challenged. And in as much as it is open to challenge and persuasion, there is no knowledge of it, but mere opinion. The only premise that cannot be challenged is the unhypothetical principle. But no proof can start from the unhypothetical principle given as an axiom”. (p. 209). As a consequence: “It seems, then, that the only possible demonstration that would not be mere *homologia* would be a demonstration from an unhypothetical principle which is consequent upon the analysis which led to this principle. This means, in effect, that no problem can be adequately solved in a purely axiomatic, deductive way; any adequate solution or proof is dependent on the preceding analysis, and loses its value as knowledge if dissociated from it”. (p. 210).

The work ends with Appendix I: On being and truth ; and Appendix 2 : The upward path. In the former, Samuel Scolnicov lists different definitions of truth in Plato, to conclude that in the middle dialogues Plato’s logical procedures cannot be rigidly connected with propositional calculus. And in the second, he claims, against Robinson, that the upward path in the *Republic* is the hypothetical method used in the *Phaedo*.

At first sight, a book that provides an account of polemics about Plato's hypothetical method before 1970 seems out of date. But even if this is true of many papers and books, the problems remain the same, and Samuel Scolnicov's interpretation of the relevant dialogues and passages remains up to date, namely, that Plato's argumentative procedure cannot be reduced to propositional calculus, because it depends on a metaphysics according to which sensible particulars are but images of ideas leading to an unhypothetical principle. This short book, clear and well-structured, remains of topical interest

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