



Plato

**Review of books by
G. M. A. Grube and Vladimir Solovev**

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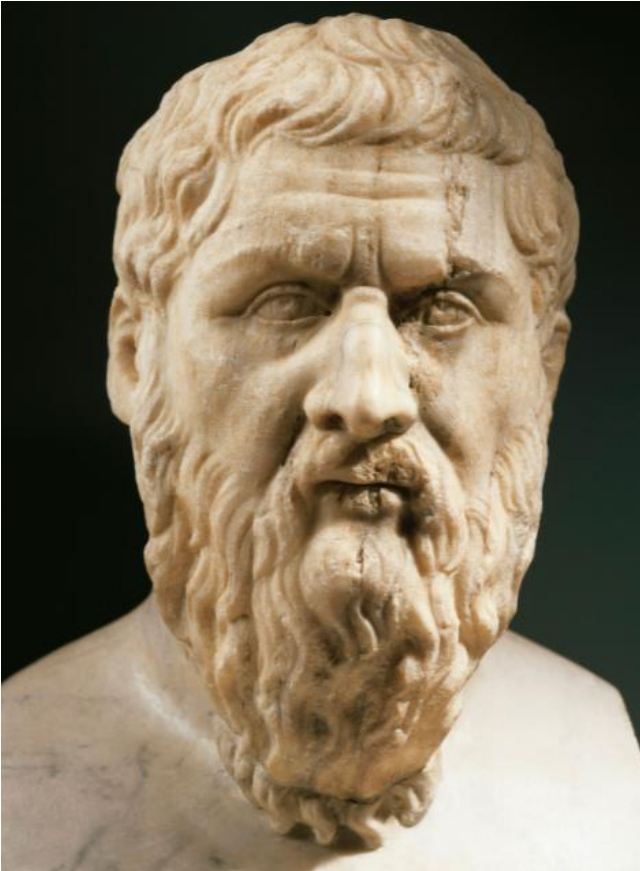
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Review of G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (London, 1935: Methuen), and Vladimir Solovyev, *Plato*, trans. Richard Gill, with a note on Solovev by Janko Lavrin (London, [1935]: Stanley Nott), *London Mercury* 33 (1935–6), 452–3



IN THE PREFACE of his book Professor Grube justly observes that the number of English books devoted to the philosophy of Plato is exceedingly small. This, in a country in which the Platonic

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dialogues have been more widely and more assiduously read than anywhere in the world, at any rate since the Renaissance, is most peculiar. And yet they are not all self-explanatory: they are remote from us in time and in character; they presuppose a form of life at which we look with the eyes of strangers; they are in need, therefore, of long and careful interpretation to rescue them from being translated, altogether too easily, into the contemporary terms of each succeeding generation. So jejune is the available supply that we grasp avidly at anything that is offered us, from the wholly uninspired but solid and useful compilation laboriously pieced together by Professor Grube, to Solovev's short essay, which begins as a passionate and single-minded defence of Socrates and ends as an analysis and indictment of the life of his greatest disciple.

The tragedy of Plato's life, Solovev says, like Hamlet's, begins and ends with a great catastrophe. Socrates made himself obnoxious to the enemies of reason, to those of the left no less than to those of the right, both to the conservatives who consciously appeal against reason to tradition, and to the sophists and all the bored or disillusioned who appeal against it to their emotions or passing interest: an alliance on which every reactionary movement is ultimately based. Whereas his father's murder plunges Hamlet into a purely personal abyss, for Plato the death of Socrates fuses the personal into the universal problem: How can goodness and integrity survive in a chaotic and aimless world?

Plato at least begins to approach the real solution: his final failure is the more discreditable in that he deliberately rejects the true path which he begins to reveal in the doctrine of Eros, only to leave it undeveloped, in order to appeal to the more facile remedy of social reform. What solution is this, asks Solovev with indignation, which preserves the most repulsive elements of the old order – slavery, for example, or the duty to fight the barbarian – which contains no progressive principle which would bring it to life, nothing to lead humanity forward from the stage which it has reached? The *Republic* is conceived in imitation of the Spartan

constitution, which, whatever its past, by that time had visibly failed, a dead copy of an obsolete order. No attempt is made to diagnose the real needs of the particular human beings, alive at that particular moment of history – only somehow to impose on them from outside a form of life which Plato found attractive. Solovev was a Christian thinker, but these might be the words of Engels or Plekhanov, impatiently dismantling some foolish utopian Frenchman.

The *Laws* was written by Plato in extreme old age, and must be regarded as his last contribution to the subject. It is, if anything, still more inhuman and terrifying, in that it is colder and more calculating. Did its author remember Socrates when he enacted death as the price of questioning the accepted beliefs and traditions of the new society, or the execution of slaves on trivial pretexts? It is difficult to resist the conclusion that posterity, seduced by his divine genius as a writer and thinker, has treated Plato over-indulgently; that even if Mr Russell does him some injustice in reading the *Republic* to find the sources of Fascism (can he have overlooked the fact that the sole purpose of the whole is to create conditions ideal for the study of mathematics?), yet it is true and should be [453] stressed that in his solution of the social problem he betrayed the legacy of his master in essentials, he tampered with the right to freedom of enquiry for which Socrates died, he stands to Socrates as Hegel to Kant and Rousseau, he attempts to arrest a progressive doctrine, to immobilise it.

Of all this Professor Grube is happily unaware: his honest task is done when he has collected Plato's views as expressed in various dialogues on the subjects of Ideas, pleasure, Eros, the soul, the Gods, art, education and statecraft, and reported these in a digestible form to the untutored reader. His narrative is broken up by long quotations, and the resultant patchwork is neither very readable nor very illuminating; nor do the dialogues, highly individual works of art which live by their inner intellectual and emotional coherence, survive dismemberment and redistribution. But as a collection of materials the book is genuinely useful,

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and the author, having promised to expound Plato's views undoctored, keeps his word scrupulously. But the work which lingers in the memory is not this long and reputable book, but the remarkable essay by Vladimir Solovev.

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Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 2 March 2022