

“The Philosopher’s Task:” Plutarch and Nietzsche on Plato’s Sicilian Episode

Plato made no less than three attempts to transplant himself and his philosophical teaching to political regimes in Syracuse. Why was he so persistent? And what is to be gleaned about Plato’s philosophical and political intentions from his time there? Taking its bearings from two of the more famous recantations of the events, those of Plutarch and Friedrich Nietzsche, this paper critically reassesses Nietzsche’s claim that Plato attempted to do “what Mohammed did for the Arabs” (*Daybreak* 496). Against interpretations of the Platonic dialogues (and Platonic philosophy more generally) which distance the philosopher’s rational and contemplative function from political life, or which stress the incommensurability of philosophy and politics as such, or of theory and practice as such, I argue that both Nietzsche and Plutarch learn from Plato in a major way to arrive at their respective understandings of what philosophy is. They first agree with the Platonic insight that philosophy, properly understood, drives to make a substantial intervention in politics, but diverge on the moral-political ends of philosophy and on what is meant by “philosophic rule.” In the *Life of Dion*, Plutarch can be said to moderate Plato’s political drive into a kind of political education where the ruler refines or guides the excess passion of tyrannical rule without succumbing to it. But Nietzsche, believing that Plato’s failure was contingent on a series of historical accidents rather than a necessary consequence of the entry of philosophy into political life, affirms and radicalizes Plato (and reverses Plutarch) to order culture and found civilizations according to philosophic vision.

Works Cited

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