

Reading Plato with Charmadas (Cic. *De Or.* 1.45-47)

Evidence for the reading of Plato in the New Academy is sparse, and our understanding of how sceptical Academics interpreted Plato is limited (Glucker 1978: 31–64; Barnes 1991; Annas 1992; Tarrant 2000). Concerning Arcesilaus' interpretation of Plato, Crassus in his history of the schism between oratory and philosophy notes how Arcesilaus found *akatalepsia* (the view that, according to infallibilist criteria of knowledge, nothing is known) in various dialogues of Plato and other Socratic works (Cic. *De Or.* 3.67). Frequent accusations that Arcesilaus foisted his own view on philosophical predecessors in order to gain from their authority confirm, at least, that Arcesilaus upheld sceptical readings of Plato (Plut. *Col.* 1121f-1122a; Cic. *Luc.* 15). Those charitable to the Academy, both ancient and contemporary (e.g. Cic. *Luc.* 74; Cooper 2004), have reconstructed responsible sceptical readings of Plato, such that the Academic's aim in reading Plato is not to take advantage of its founder's authority.

Cicero's depiction of when Crassus read *Gorgias* with the Academic Charmadas in 110BCE (*De Or.* 1.45-47) is all the more interesting given this paucity of evidence. Even if entirely fabricated, the account is authored by a self-professed Academic and, therefore, merits analysis for the Academy's view about reading Plato. Against the competing interpretations of Lévy (2005), Höhle (2008), and, most recently, Altman (2016), I defend the position of Dörrie (1987) that Charmadas read Plato sceptically. I argue that only a reading which makes a distinction between Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece and Plato as the author, where Socrates is dogmatic while the author is aporetic, makes proper sense of Crassus' judgment that he both disagreed with Plato and admired him for his rhetorical skill. My argument turns on how Crassus admires Plato as *summus orator* (*De Or.* 1.47). Prior readers have taken this phrase to refer to a perfect orator, but this reading ruins the consistency of Crassus' own view. I propose *summus*

orator refers not to an ideal orator, but to a non-normative yet talented one (sc. a “top” orator). The result is that Plato the author undercuts any reason for taking Socrates’ doctrines as irrefutable, or even more persuasive, than his interlocutors.

It may be objected to my argument that Charmadas was a mitigated (i.e. holding tentative philosophical beliefs), not a radical, sceptic (Brittain 2001: 213–14), and so we would not expect him to promote a radically sceptical reading of *Gorgias*. In response, I unsettle our presuppositions about Charmadas’ scepticism, by revisiting our best evidence for it: Cicero’s depiction of Antonius’ account of when he heard Charmadas argue against rhetoricians nearly a decade after Crassus’ story takes place (Cic. *De Or.* 1.84–93). In order for this passage to provide evidence of Charmadas’ mitigated scepticism, the passage must refer to the stated conclusions of Charmadas’ arguments. In contrast, I argue the passage provides only Antonius’ interpretation of Charmadas’ view, followed by a formulation of his own view. It is thus left open for Charmadas to not have any philosophical beliefs hiding behind his *contra* arguments, and so to remain a radical sceptic. If my argument is persuasive, we make some further progress towards an understanding of sceptical readings of Plato.

Bibliography

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