



---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Plato Rediscovered: Human Value and Social Order. by T. K. Seung

Review by: George Klosko

Source: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), pp. 444-445

Published by: American Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2952383>

Accessed: 16-09-2018 22:22 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*American Political Science Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Political Science Review*

women for granted as the subject of feminist discourse and politics, Scott argues that feminist agency is itself profoundly paradoxical: "To the extent that it acted for 'women,' feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept *and* to refuse 'sexual difference'—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history" (pp. 3–4).

*Only Paradoxes to Offer*, a phrase Scott borrows from Olympe de Gouges, offers a model for theoretically informed gender history, urges an historical approach to feminist theory, and continues to plead for the usefulness of poststructuralist theory inside the discipline of history (*Gender and the Politics of History*, 1988). Thus, Scott rejects teleological history and faults what she terms the "typical approach to the history of feminism" derived from nineteenth-century feminists for its naively fashioned story of cumulative progress (p. 1). In addition, she criticizes biographical approaches for fortifying "the notion that agency is an expression of autonomous individual will, rather than the effect of a historically defined process which forms subjects" (pp. 15–6). Despite the focus on four individuals, this is a book about the discursive practices—epistemologies, institutions, and actions—that produce feminist political subjectivity or agency "even when it is forbidden or denied" (p. 16). Without attempting a comprehensive survey of French feminism, this book contributes a probing intellectual history of the central questions in modern feminist thought which will also add much to contemporary feminist inquiry.

Scott foregrounds Olympe de Gouges's reliance on the concept of imagination in relation to Enlightenment debates over the possibilities and dangers posed by the imagination to rational social order; as well as imagination's role in shaping new meanings of masculinity and femininity in the eighteenth century. She links Gouges's demands for sexual equality and female citizenship to her impassioned appeals to the active imagination, and she shows how her posture offered ammunition to Jacobin male critics of women's active citizenship. As Gouges emerges as more than a simple proponent of rationalist individualism, so Jean Deroin is not merely a "difference" feminist. Scott suggests that in arguing for complementarity of the sexes, claiming politics as the domain of women and equating the household and the state, Deroin went beyond claims for simple parity. Scott links Deroin's outlook to Second Republic notions of rights and duties and arguments for the right to work. Deroin's efforts to expose the "lie" of a republic that refused political rights to women were continued by Third Republic feminist Hubertine Auclert. Within the context of competing republican and socialist perspectives on the social division of labor, and its relationship to politics, Scott charts Auclert's defense of women's rights as part of a broader appeal to democratic or popular sovereignty. Finally, she examines Madeleine Pelletier's turn away from the discourse of "the social," but not socialism, toward a radical individualist perspective. Scott addresses Pelletier's ambivalence to sexuality and her strong defense of birth control, her defense of mass democracy, and her worries about massified individuals.

As Scott freely admits, her own thinking has taken shape within a particular discursive context and will be open to revision. She offers a persuasive account of the discursive underpinnings of gender exclusion in a central ambivalence within the philosophy of individualism: "The universal individual who exercised the political rights of 'man' was at once abstract and concrete; difference from a woman (whether a matter of desire or reproductive function) secured both his typicality *and* the boundaries of his individuality" (p. 10). Whereas abstraction serves as the basis for inclusion (equal-

ity and universality), it can be and was used as a standard for exclusion insofar as some persons were defined as nonindividuals, lacking the necessary traits by which one establishes individuality in the first place. Gender was one of several criteria by which whole categories of persons were established as different, inferior, and lacking in the rights accorded to the free individual. Like Simone de Beauvoir, Scott rightly observes that sexual difference has operated in a hierarchical and nonreversible manner. Whereas the female is "the sex," "the other" to the abstract but masculine individual, he is never the woman's other. Nor do women escape from these dilemmas: By calling attention to their own contradictory exclusions from universalist ideology, women displayed their own "self-contradictoriness," the "disturbing spectacle presented by paradox" (p. 11). Stated otherwise, by acting in public women risked making a "spectacle" of themselves. As with the dilemmas posed by equality feminism, Scott exposes the self-contradictory positing of gender difference as a way of eliminating its very basis. Her aim is not to resolve but to demonstrate the contradictory alternatives imposed by modern gendered political subjectivity.

**Plato Rediscovered: Human Value and Social Order.** By T. K. Seung. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996. 394p. \$64.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

George Klosko, *University of Virginia*

This is not a work of conventional Classical scholarship. T. K. Seung decries Plato scholars for not taking pride in the "power and truth of Plato's philosophy" (p. 302). Their "pedantic . . . logical analysis and textual exegesis" have succeeded only in consigning Plato's works to "the mausoleum of obsolete classical texts" (pp. 301–2). Throughout the book, Seung attempts dramatically new accounts of central aspects of Plato's thought. In the final chapter, "Platonic Legacies," he defends the truth of Plato's teaching.

Though Seung describes his main concern in explicating Plato as political philosophy (p. ix), he devotes little attention to Plato's moral and political views per se, as opposed to their ontological underpinnings. He discusses twenty-two separate dialogues of "the Platonic Archipelago" (p. xiv), working out a consistent account of the development of central themes in Plato's metaphysical and epistemological views and their implications for political theory.

In important respects, Seung's account is familiar. He traces the movement from the early Socratic dialogues to the great works of Plato's middle period—the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*—which introduce the theory of forms, which undergirds Plato's political theory in the *Republic*. At this point, Plato enters a self-critical phase, renouncing the excesses of his previous theory of forms, especially in the *Parmenides*, and replacing it with a trimmed down account, to which Seung refers as the "bedrock" version, in comparison to the "skyscraper" version in the middle works. The bedrock version retreats from the metaphysical extravagance of self-predicating, exemplar forms. Forsaking the erotic mysticism of the middle works, Plato pays more attention to the phenomenal world. The new political theory of the *Laws* is deeply rooted in Greek history and political institutions, in contrast to the metaphysically grounded ideal city of the *Republic*.

Although Plato scholars are a notoriously contentious lot, many would find little with which to disagree in the foregoing account. But on this frame Seung hangs an original interpretation of the second stage of the evolution of Plato's thought—the "hidden half" of Plato's philosophy (p. 291).

While the movement from the early Socratic dialogues to the middle works has been exhaustively studied and the connections among moral, psychological, and metaphysical themes well marked, works such as the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus*, and *Parmenides* are furiously difficult. Scholars who have addressed them have had relatively little interest in Plato's political theory, while students of the latter have done relatively little work on this forbidding material. Seung, who is a professor of philosophy as well as government (and law), tackles the daunting task of synthesis. Briefly, he regards the traditional opinion that several of Plato's works, including late works, are *aporetic* or inconclusive as "gigantic misreadings" (p. 205). He extracts from the *Theaetetus* (normally viewed as *aporetic*) new epistemological views, which are combined with new semantic views drawn from the forbidding dialectical exercise in the *Parmenides* and new ontological views from the *Sophist*. Pythagorean themes from the *Philebus* and *Timaeus* are incorporated into this new theory, at the heart of which Seung locates Platonic "intuition" and "construction." According to Seung, "Platonic construction is the construction of proper measures" (p. 231). The science of proper measures is discussed in the *Statesman* and provides the underpinning for the mathematical elements of the ideal city presented in the *Laws* (esp. pp. 229–31).

One must be impressed by Seung's accomplishment in this dazzling synthesis—although I will defer on the question of exactly how plausible specific components are to specialists in Plato's metaphysics. It is clear, however, that Seung's case is weakened by his high-handed approach. He clearly forces portions of his discussion, proceeding on an abstract level, avoiding the messy details of Plato's texts—and how these have been interpreted by previous scholars—dipping into aspects of the dialogues that support his view but never systematically dealing with those that do not. Aspects of his presentation are cavalier, such as discussion of what appear to be "skyscraper" forms in the *Timaeus*, which go against his theory (pp. 237–8), the account of forms in the *Laws* (pp. 231–2), or the nature of the city-soul analogy in the *Republic* (pp. 251–2).

Throughout the book, Seung presents a plethora of original interpretations, whether relevant to his overall argument or not. Some ideas are highly suggestive, for example, that the idyllic natural setting of the *Phaedrus* signifies Plato's coming to terms with the natural world (p. 131). Other interpretations work less well, such as frequent comparisons between Socrates and Odysseus, Seung's explanation of why the discussion in the *Timaeus* is a continuation of that in the *Republic* (pp. 271–2), or the far-fetched claim that *Theaetetus* is a mask for Plato himself, an hypothesis that Seung pursues at length (pp. 275–82).

It is not easy to identify the audience for whom Seung's discussion of Plato is intended. The most interesting portions of the book are too difficult for most students of Plato, while specialists in the ontology of the late dialogues will be frustrated by Seung's refusal to argue out the details of his interpretation. Accordingly, in spite of its often glittering intellectuality, *Plato Rediscovered* would have benefitted from a narrower, sharper focus and greater attention to defending its provocative account of the development of Plato's thought.

Seung's main argument for the validity of Plato's normative position is, briefly, that it is the only alternative to "relativism and nihilism" (p. 294). Seung runs through a range of other possible alternatives in a few pages and finds them all wanting, as all collapse into either relativism or Platonism. There are two significant problems with his dis-

cussion, which I will mention briefly. First, the dichotomy, Platonism or nihilism, is not a convincing argument. Seung is far too dismissive of the alternatives, including the mainstream of contemporary moral philosophy, which is brushed aside. Perhaps he would respond that defensible alternative views, such as those of Rawls and his followers, are actually forms of Platonism in disguise. This raises the second point. The "Platonism" Seung affirms in the final chapter is extremely modest. He identifies any "belief in the existence of standards and principles that transcend all positive normative systems" as Platonism (p. 293). Exactly what constitutes an objectively grounded normative standard remains obscure—as does the nature of the intuition through which such standards are apprehended. But however we construe these matters, it is unclear what this minimal Platonism has to do with the substantive philosophy expressed in Plato's dialogues, toward the explication of which Seung devotes so much effort. Despite his affirmation of the truth of Plato's principles, the relation these bear to the complex philosophical system expressed in the Platonic archipelago is never explained.

**The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community.** By Susan Meld Shell. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. 483p. \$65.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Steven M. DeLue, *Miami University*

Susan Shell explains what she views as Kant's "novel definition of the world," and she demonstrates how his life's work is an "elucidation" of this definition, informing Kant's entire philosophy (p. 2). Shell provides very useful discussions of Kant's views of Leibniz, nature, Swedenborg, history, gender roles, and Rousseau. Her spectacular chapter on Kant's hypochondria is a significant contribution to Kant studies.

Shell's description of Kant's definition of the world begins with a very good discussion of Kant's understanding of humankind's relationship to nature. This relationship is important because it demonstrates a conflict, central to Kant's world view, between the inner world of human consciousness and the outer world of nature. Nature is defined in terms of activities of "unceasing creation," to use Kant's words (p. 58), in which new forms of life replace older forms that have been destroyed by nature's devastating moments of force. Everything that exists in nature must die, but death does not stop nature from advancing because nature is always at work, in Kant's words, "repairing . . . the loss with profit" (p. 57).

It is natural to ask what significance human life has in this vortex marked by the inevitability of the death of all things which come into existence. After all, humankind, to quote Kant, seeks "community . . . with the immortal being" (p. 59), and this fact suggests the need to find a basis for establishing human life's significance amid what appears as a heartless nature. Humankind satisfies this need through its unique capacity to define its own purposes in life. With this freedom, humankind creates culture and thereby gives birth to beauty and morality. Each of these dimensions manifests humankind's intention to make use of nature to support truly human ends. Through these efforts, humankind avoids, as Shell says, "a permanent rupture" with nature and instead recognizes that, as the "final end" of nature, human beings are both "nature's child and nature's master" (pp. 258–9).

The finest achievement of culture is a form of community in which individuals uphold the moral law and treat one another as an "absolute end" or, in other terms, not "as a means only" (p. 149). For Kant, comprehending what makes