What Do We Think We’re Doing?

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ABSTRACT

I suggest that there are no universally applicable principles (in the strong sense) for the study of Plato's philosophy. Different students of Plato have different objects of interest (e.g. what the individual Plato ultimately thought vs what emerges from thinking about his texts) that can make different ways of proceeding appropriate. For me the dialogues are the main object of study; I think they are best approached by interpreting literary elements and obviously philosophical content as working together. The paper includes illustrations of how parts of my picture of the developing theory of forms emerge from this type of engagement.

Keywords: testimony, literary elements, dialogue form, theory of forms.

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My title question brings out two points that are key for my observations. One is that how we proceed in our interpretative activity depends largely on what we take the purpose of that activity to be. And I’ve used plural forms in my question not because I think I can speak for everybody but precisely because I expect people will immediately react by thinking that I cannot – and no more can anyone else. ‘We’ can legitimately have diverse aims and methods and so different ways of interpreting Plato, and in this way different projects can sometimes be compatible with or even complementary to each other.

The umbrella theme question set by Prof. Gerson for our workshop was: ‘What in your opinion are the appropriate or correct principles for the study of Plato’s philosophy?’ One reading of ‘principles’ yields a very strong sense, in which we come by principles in some special way (different from that whereby we obtain our other results in the domain they govern), the principles are inviolate, and everything else must proceed from them. Principles in this strong sense would be things one must start from or bring to the rest of one’s work; not to do so – violating the principles – would be incorrect or misguided. So to read our question with ‘principles’ understood this way suggests that, while we may have different views about what they are, at most one view of the matter can be correct.

My title—‘What Do We Think We’re Doing?’—opens the way for me to mention that I at least don’t think of myself as working from principles in this very strong sense. This is, I think, ultimately connected with the circumstance that I think we—or at least the total class of people who work on Plato—have different goals that make different ways of proceeding reasonable. This makes the present assemblage very collegial for me—it’s interesting to compare