

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Plato's Caves: The Liberating Sting of Cultural Diversity. By Rebecca LeMoine. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 288p. \$74.00 cloth.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/787121z3>

Journal

Perspectives on Politics, 18(3)

ISSN

1537-5927

Author

Keum, Tae-Yeoun

Publication Date

2020-09-01

DOI

10.1017/s153759272000198x

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Plato's Caves: The Liberating Sting of Cultural Diversity. By Rebecca LeMoine. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 276p. \$74.00 cloth.

Tae-Yeoun Keum, *University of Oxford and University of California, Santa Barbara*

Plato's dialogues tend to be read against a predominantly Athenian backdrop. After all, his central protagonist, Socrates, is rarely depicted venturing outside Athens, and his rendering of the trial and death of his teacher is widely understood as a searing indictment of contemporary Athenian political practice. Yet foreign characters and references abound in Plato's work – from the Chalcedonian sophist Thrasymachus in the *Republic*; to the Egyptian myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus*; to the Cretan setting of the *Laws*, where, much like the setup to a joke, a Cretan, a Spartan, and an Athenian “Stranger” are walking toward a cave sacred to Zeus, the god of foreigners.

What would it mean to take these references seriously? This is the endeavor undertaken by Rebecca LeMoine in her admirable book, *Plato's Caves: The Liberating Sting of Cultural Diversity*. The project proves to be extremely fertile: once one starts looking, Plato's corpus teems everywhere with foreign people, places, and things. When we examine them carefully, *Plato's Caves* suggests, we recover a more complete understanding of Plato's views on cultural diversity.

Plato, according to LeMoine, is an advocate of cultural diversity. This is because encounters with different cultures have the effect of what Lemoine calls a “liberating sting.” If Socrates once defended his philosophical project as the work of a gadfly stinging awake the

drowsy horse of Athenian society, foreigners can find themselves filling a similar role. Much like a philosophical encounter with Socrates, interactions with foreigners can help expose the internal contradictions in one's system of beliefs, which often reflect the beliefs that are taken for granted in one's culture.

Plato's Caves stresses that reconstructing Plato's defense of cultural diversity is all the more timely because extant portraits of a xenophobic Plato – including Karl Popper's infamous depiction of the original architect of “the closed society” – are ripe for appropriation by white nationalists and Eurocentric movements. Plato's views, furthermore, constitute a novel supplement to existing arguments for cultural diversity. Taking her cue from Plato's critique of democracy as a regime especially vulnerable to tyranny, LeMoine suggests that democratic citizens today can look to cultural diversity as a resource that can help temper democracy's “knee-jerk reaction” to infringements on individual freedoms, which often leads democracies to undermine their own values (243). The provocation of foreign cultures, for Plato, cultivates in citizens a “better disposition or attitude toward knowledge.” A disposition grounded in epistemic humility – one that better equips citizens to “pause and reflect” – is what *Plato's Caves* identifies with Socratic wisdom (245-6).

One way of summing up the many contributions of this book is to describe it as a rich and suggestive effort to draw out the role of culture in Plato's political thought. A guiding metaphor that frames the book is borrowed from Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The cave, on LeMoine's reading, represents the *polis*; and being steeped unreflectively in one's own culture is akin to the predicament of the prisoner in the allegory. *Plato's Caves* devotes a chapter to making a convincing – if at times belabored – case for reading the Allegory of the Cave, not only as an illustration of Plato's epistemology and metaphysics, but also as a study of political culture and upbringing. This lesson could just as easily be applied to what

theorists ordinarily take to be the scope of Plato's philosophy and its political relevance. If Plato has, in recent years, been a valuable source of insight on topics in politics ranging from citizenship to democracy, *Plato's Caves* reminds us that we also yet have much to learn from him as a theorist of culture.

LeMoine is an especially engaging guide to the multicultural world evoked in four Platonic dialogues: the *Republic*, *Menexenus*, *Laws* and *Phaedrus*. We learn, for instance, about the fascinating political history of the festival at Piraeus that forms the backdrop to the *Republic*; the detail that Thrasymachus was a diplomat who prominently spoke out against Athenian imperialism; and the finer aspects of Athenian foreign policy and changes in its citizenship laws in 5th century BCE. Chasing down the significance of these passing details makes for a rewarding journey, even if the connections that LeMoine extracts from them do not always land.

Necessarily baked into the project of applying such scrutiny to Plato's foreign references is a methodological commitment to reading in "dramatic context" (32). On the approach adopted throughout *Plato's Caves*, every choice on Plato's part to allude to a foreign place or saying, or to cast a non-Athenian character as the mouthpiece for a particular view, has to be taken as both deliberate and significant. One consequence of this approach is that *Plato's Caves* often ends up focusing on how surface claims in Plato's text are complicated by their context – be it the foreign status of a character voicing a xenophobic claim, or the foreign setting in which a trio of city planners are discussing the merits of closing their city to outside influences.

More often than not, such complications end up yielding an ironic reading of some of the central arguments of the dialogue in question. Recalling the famously ironic lenses through which Strauss and his disciplines read Plato, LeMoine recasts the *Republic*, for

instance, not as a blueprint for an ideal city, but as a “thought experiment designed to help his interlocutors understand the nature of their souls” (94). The interpretations in *Plato’s Caves* accordingly invite some familiar risks – like that of going too far in disavowing the claims of the arguments in favor of stressing the ironic effect. They can also lead to some repetitive conclusions – like the importance of self-knowledge and criticism, qualities so often valorized in “zetetic” portraits of Plato’s philosophy.

There are other ways in which the project seems to be constrained by the limits built into its approach. Notwithstanding the book’s suggestion that foreigners in Plato’s dialogues consistently play the part of a catalyst to critical reflection on one’s culture, it isn’t always clear how they go about doing so. At times, *Plato’s Caves* treats Plato’s foreign characters as products of their places of origin, even if they have spent long periods of their life in Athens. But it also grants that certain foreigners can perform “assimilated” roles, as when the metics Cephalus and Polemarchus appear in the *Republic* to propose definitions of justice that reflect traditional Athenian values (99-101). Such complications also point to a more fundamental question at the heart of the study. One of the justifications for placing so much weight on passing allusions to foreignness in Plato’s work is that, when we reconstruct the significance they would have held for his immediate audiences, we can better understand his intent. It does not necessarily follow, however, that Plato always intended for the salience of these details to lie in the fact of their foreignness.

Nonetheless in pushing the project to its limits, *Plato’s Caves* offers us a remarkably coherent and compelling vision of what a Platonic theory of cultural diversity would consist in. We might think of LeMoine’s book as doing the provocative work of the gadfly celebrated in its pages, promoting us to remember that there is still much in the thought of this familiar philosopher that remains to be better understood.

