

## Philosophers in knots over Dr Tomin's Plato thesis

By R Barry O'Brien

A LEADING scholar responded yesterday to complaints by Dr Julius Tomin, the Czech dissident philosopher, that he cannot get his controversial work on Plato published in Britain.

"He holds that the Phaedrus is Plato's first dialogue, which is contrary to the beliefs of pretty well all scholars in the field in this century," said Dr David Sedley, editor of *Classical Quarterly*, and director of studies in classics at Christ's College, Cambridge.

"He is extremely ingenious in his use of arguments, but he has not yet made out the kind of case that people are going to be able to take seriously."

Dr Tomin, a hero for British academics when he defied the Czech authorities by holding "underground" philosophy seminars in Prague in the 1970s, has ruffled academic feathers since coming to Britain in 1980 by challenging current views on Plato's philosophical development.

Despite the support he enjoyed as a dissident, he has failed to gain an academic post in Britain, and is living on £67-a-week supplementary benefit while continuing his work at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Papers submitted by Dr Tomin to the *Classical Quarterly* had all been related to one view he had particularly strong views about, said Dr Sedley.

### 'Blinkered views'

"I know Dr Tomin feels that his views are misunderstood and that this is a terribly important thesis that scholars are simply blind to, but we have not turned these articles down because we disagree with his conclusion, but because we didn't think that the arguments were strong enough

to publish in their present form."

If Dr Tomin were right, it would affect a great deal of Platonic scholarship.

"I think people just have a great difficulty in seeing how it can be right," he said. "It means he is asking people to give up nearly everything else they believe about Plato's development, but he is not telling us enough about why we should give up all these other views."

"Obviously what I am saying will sound as blinkered to him as he sounds to me, but that is the nature of the debate at the moment, I am afraid."

Dr Sedley said he had urged Dr Tomin to write a book. "In my view it is no good trying to ask people to revise their view on this particular bit of Plato's work without rethinking the whole of Plato's development."

Dr Tomin, who has based his research on the original Greek texts, disregarding modern commentaries, had obviously laboured under a great deal of difficulty in his early life while working in Czechoslovakia, said Dr Sedley.

"I believe I am right in saying he did not have access to all the work of 20th-century Platonic scholarship. It was only when he moved to England that he discovered that this view he held wasn't the conventional view."

### Scholarly disagreement

"He was simply picking up what Platonists of antiquity thought about the order of Plato's work, and assumed it to be true. His way of reading Plato has become so much set around this particular view, that I think he feels an extraordinarily strong commitment to preserving it."

"But from our point of view we see this as a very old-fashioned view which was shared long ago and, to most of us, does not seem to have these great merits."

"It is a scholarly disagreement and I think he should try and present his views if he can, but there is no obligation on journals to accept articles for publication."

Dr Tomin had much to contribute to Platonic scholarship. "He has published articles on Aristophanes, on Xenophon and so on. There is a great deal he could be doing if he did not have this total obsession with one thesis which nobody else agrees with."

The Czech philosopher's latest thesis is now with *Classical Quarterly* awaiting a decision. "I am not in a position to say whether we will accept it or not. We are waiting to hear the referee's report," said Dr Sedley.

Dr Tomin agreed that his thesis had put him into conflict with many academics because Socrates had to be taken much more seriously as a philosopher if the Phaedrus had been written during his lifetime as Plato's first dialogue, as the ancient life of Plato by Diogenes Laertius suggested.

He had been criticised for not reading modern works on Plato, but added: "I didn't go to the Greek to be pushed around by secondary literature."

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to publish in their present form."