

Trials of reason: Plato and the crafting of philosophy

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Book Review of David Wolfsdorf's *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

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David Wolfsdorf's *Trials of Reason* is an ambitious book that argues for the claim that the drama and argument of the dialogues can be integrated, rather than separated, if understood in light of Plato's presentation of philosophy as a practice and motivation. While Wolfsdorf asserts that, too often, debates about the "dramatic" as opposed to "argumentative" approaches to the dialogues pit these schools of thought against one another, the two approaches can be reconciled if one understands the dialogues to be dramatization of philosophy as a "motivation." This motivation is grounded in reason; however, Plato as author also dramatizes the ways in which the ideal practice of philosophy often falls short of full realization, for example, because of his interlocutor's distorted desires. Wolfsdorf argues that the dialogues ought not be understood as expressions of the *results* of a philosophical argument; instead they are constitutive of philosophy or even metaphilosophy. That is, since a large part of philosophy is the motivation to live a certain way and to seek a certain kind of truth, the dialogues not only attempt to justify not only specific ways that philosophy epistemically analyzes *particular* problems; they also act as justifications and defenses of the process or activity of philosophy itself.

In Platonic scholarship there has often been a divide between those interpreters who take the dialogues to be expressions of Plato's own philosophical claims, and to understand Socrates' arguments in particular as expressions of those views. These commentators focus on either the content of Socrates' claims as forming a distinctive

Platonic and/or Socratic dogma (depending on the context and dating of the dialogue) or on a distinctive method that he undertakes. For example, Gregory Vlastos is well known for his contributions to a conversation about the role of consistency of belief and the refutation of inconsistency in the Socratic elenchus.¹ Other scholars have understood the form of the dialogue itself or the nature of Socrates' dialogical interaction with his partners in conversation to be crucial in making an interpretation of the arguments, such that the arguments are understood contextually rather than as an assertion of particular Platonic claims. On this view, Socratic questions and dialogue are interpreted according to the specifics of dramatic context, character, use of literary devices, and often a strong differentiation between how Socrates' questions function with his interlocutor, and how the discussion functions with its own audience, its readers.² While such a division in reality is not absolute division, as many commentators will engage in both types of analysis of the extent, differences in emphasis remain. Wolfsdorf to some extent bridges

¹ For a collection of some of Vlastos' most influential work, see Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). For other notable examples see Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford University Press, 1996); John Cooper, *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton, 1998); Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995); David Melling, *Understanding Plato* (Oxford 1998); and C.D.C Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's Republic* (Hackett Press, 2006).

² See, for example, Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character*; Francisco Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Northwestern University Press, 1998); Gordon *Turning Towards Philosophy*; Griswold (ed.) *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (Routledge, NY, 1988); McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Michelini, *Plato as Author: The Rhetoric of Philosophy* (Boston: Brill, 2003); Press (ed.) *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 1993); Roochnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's Republic* (Cornell University Press, 2003); and Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

the gap between these two approaches, in his linking the drama and the opinions of specific characters to a larger understanding of Platonic doctrine.

Admirably, Wolfsdorf explores a wide range of the dialogues, fourteen most often considered “early” among those who take a chronological approach to ordering the dialogues. He examines what he terms “ α -structures,” a dramatic structure in which the arguments of the dialogue lead a reader from conventional or traditional beliefs to novel Platonic beliefs (p.15). That is, dialogues begin with conventional beliefs stemming from a common doxastic base, and by means of these doxastic beliefs engage the reader in a deeper examination of a problem such as courage and the need for philosophy itself. In general, Platonic dialogues lead the reader away from conventional beliefs and their means of justification, and toward unconventional ideas that are philosophically justified.

Wolfsdorf’s chapters follow this outline of his understanding of philosophy as practiced in the dialogues: from desire to knowledge, to method, and finally *aporia*. Chapter one begins with laying out the groundwork for Wolfsdorf's project, by introducing his understanding of the discursive nature of knowledge and its relation to practice. Wolfsdorf explores the political nature of the dialogues and the significance of philosophy as a political activity, especially as Platonic philosophy provided a critique of the democratic process of the Athenian city-state. He also takes up the importance of the opposition between the philosophical and anti-philosophical in the dialogues as indicative of a deep political concern with not only abstract ideas about the excellence of philosophy, but also the concrete political characters and situations of the day. Here we also find the beginnings of the articulation of the argument that the dialogues are doxastic

in their foundation, but seek to move the audience from the realm of common, democratic opinion to that of a Platonic understanding.

Chapter two offers an account of desire, in which Wolfsdorf defends the view that Plato presents a subjectivist concept of desire. While some authors have pointed out the apparent contradictions between the *Meno* and the *Gorgias* on this point, chapter two lays out a careful analysis of how desire might consistently be understood as subjective. While the *Gorgias* claims that “everyone desires what is in fact good,” Wolfsdorf argues that such a claim is being stipulated as a “dialectical expedient” (41). That is, this argument exists as a specific response to Polus’ belief that the orator is powerful. The *Protagoras* and *Meno* support the subjectivist account of desire, and the *Gorgias*’ apparently non-subjectivist account is not intended to articulate a Platonic view, but only used as a response to Polus’ claims, stipulated in order to show Polus the problems in his own views. For this reason, the dialogues can be understood more generally to promote a subjectivist account of desire. Wolfsdorf also looks at the *Lysis* and argues that it adds a further element to a Platonic account of desire: a conception of friendship (*philia*) based upon belonging rather than likeness or similarity. Such *philia* is characteristic not only of human beings, but also of the cosmos at large (p. 60).

Wolfsdorf powerfully demonstrates the centrality of desire to a Platonic conception of philosophy. While Platonic scholars engaged in writing more from the “dramatic” tradition have for many years argued for the centrality of *eros* to Plato’s concept of philosophy, it is refreshing to see Wolfsdorf, clearly a more analytically minded thinker, argue for the importance of desire as central to philosophical practice. In particular, Wolfsdorf’s claim near the end of the chapter that Socrates’ practice is

characterized by a genuine “love of humanity,” loving people not only for actual, but even only potential, excellence offers new ground for exploration (p. 82). The centrality of Socrates’ love of others in the dialogues has not been sufficiently explored, and is inseparable from his practice as a philosopher. Wolfsdorf leaves this as a tangential point, but might consider picking it up in future work.

After analyzing Plato’s concept of desire, the book turns to the topic of knowledge in chapter three. Wolfsdorf demonstrates that Plato consistently sets forth excellence as knowledge, arguing that such excellence is wholly epistemic in nature and a unified whole. Wolfsdorf explores especially the *Protagoras* as a dialogue in which the unity of virtues becomes key to understanding the nature of excellence. This knowledge is technical in nature, and as a *techne* is also a power (*dunamis*) to effect better rather than worse actions; analysis of the *Republic I* and *Charmides* here especially sets forth the sense in which knowledge is a *dunamis*. For Plato, definitional knowledge is the heart of excellence (the *Euthyphro*’s emphasis on definition of holiness is paradigmatic here). Wolfsdorf sees the early dialogues as developing not so much particular claims about virtues—such as piety, or even the good or knowledge itself—but rather the very idea that excellence is found in definitional knowledge. But no one actually possesses adequate definitional knowledge of the virtues in these early dialogues—not even Socrates himself.

Wolfsdorf’s requirement as to what constitutes a distinctively “Platonic” belief is subtle, but remains problematic at times. His claim is that an argument is Platonic if these conditions are met: “The context of the argument indicates that the characters are making a sincere alethic effort; conclusions of such arguments are more worthy of belief than

unreasoned views; the argument involves the rejection of conventional views; the conclusion of the argument itself is unconventional” (p. 27). At first glance, these seem like helpful standards in providing specificity as to what is, no doubt, often an intuitive judgment on the part of an interpreter as to why one belief in a dialogical conflict is “Platonic” while another is not. For example, these standards help us to make sense of why Socrates sometimes adheres to claims like the good is pleasure (e.g., in the *Protagoras*), and at other points in the dialogues rejects these same claims (e.g. in the *Gorgias*). However, Wolfsdorf’s criterion that a belief is Platonic if it is unconventional (or anti-conventional) begs the question as to what makes an argument “Platonic.” Why must we assume that Plato rejects all conventional beliefs raised in the dialogues, and only argues for those views that are ultimately opposed to convention?

For example, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles criticizes Socrates for being apolitical and incapable of protecting himself from those who might bring him to trial; Socrates rejects Callicles’ claim that such political knowledge holds value for him as a means of self-protection. Instead, Socrates seems interested in a politics that might seem like “bitter medicine” to those more accustomed to sweet dainties (464d). But why not leave open the possibility that Plato recognized a possible deficiency in a Socratic approach that sets aside rhetorical “sweetening” all too readily? Perhaps Plato wishes his readers to consider both the difficulties inherent in unexamined doxastic beliefs—such as the claim that persuasion is power—and also some *unconventional* views—such as the *Republic*’s contentious claim that philosophers should be kings. It seems that evaluating the merit of problems with either conventional or unconventional beliefs must take place on a case-

by-case basis. There is no easy “fix” for determining in advance what might constitute a decisively Platonic viewpoint.

Chapter four develops a concept of Platonic method and is the most significant chapter for supporting Wolfsdorf’s overall thesis. He argues, against one standard view (set forth by R. Robinson), that Plato does not shift from an elenctic or refutational method to a positive or hypothetical method. Rather, these two approaches are mostly consistent with one another. Wolfsdorf shows that there is no single elenctic method, a thesis increasingly gaining credence elsewhere (for example, in the volume edited by Gary Scott, *Does Socrates have a Method?*). Moreover, even the hypothetical method itself is often used to make a problem more tractable so as to affirm or refute it. For example, in order to explore the tricky problem as to whether excellence is knowledge, Socrates states that if it is knowledge, then it is teachable in the *Protagoras* (p. 178).

However, against the view that the hypothetical method should be understood as beginning with a tentative starting point, Wolfsdorf argues that the term *hypothesis* in pre-Platonic usages has the sense of positing a secure *arche* as the starting point of such inquiries. Such a hypothesis is then used to inquire into matters that are heretofore unknown. Wolfsdorf states that one ought not state that the hypothesis's premise is "known" by Socrates, as Socrates does not speak of it in this way; instead, a more accurate description for such knowledge would be that it is “cognitively secure” (pp. 179-180). However, “cognitively secure,” as Wolfsdorf explains, is ultimately reduced to a view of the Forms as cognitively secure (p.194). In the end, he finds that there are no cognitively secure propositions that can ground definitional knowledge in the dialogues.

The fifth and final chapter looks with considerable care at the different notions of *aporia* that result from this lack of epistemological grounding. Both epistemological and dramatic *aporia* characterize the early dialogues. At times, the dialogues use *aporia* to point out not only our epistemological limits, but also the practical limits that follow in consequence of human imperfection and insecurity in knowledge. Plato is well aware that in many cases, the dramatic *aporia* that results in a dialogue stems from some kind of unresolved conflict between philosophy and anti-philosophy, and these intellectual conflicts, or even metaphilosophical conflicts, have practical consequences (as when the *Charmides* points to the participation of Charmides and Critias in the activity of the Thirty Tyrants). Philosophy does not easily solve these difficulties in a conversation or two; instead it is held out as a theoretical and practical ideal for which to strive (p. 239).

It is here that we see Wolfsdorf's strength and weakness as a commentator. On the one hand, his argument that the dramatic *aporia* is often intended to highlight a conflict between philosophy and anti-philosophy is compelling and well argued. On the other hand, Socrates himself is not engaged in the practice of trying to draw anti-philosophers into a particular *method* of doing philosophy. Instead, we find Socrates' way of speaking never quite reducible to a single method but instead focused on the particular characters and persons with whom he is in dialogue; that is, Socrates' approach is much more attentive to *kairos* than a carefully worked out series of premises and conclusions.³ Nonetheless, the book is worthy of praise for its exactitude in combating the notion that philosophy is already constituted upon secure epistemological grounds for Plato; Wolfsdorf persuasively shows that philosophy itself is a "work in progress" (p. 197).

³ See my longer argument for this thesis in McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

One final thought: Wolfsdorf explores philosophy as a motivation and practice, to be sure, but one wonders about philosophy in its practical aspects, as a way of life, beyond the discursive approach to understanding and analyzing ideas. Socrates as the philosophical hero of the dialogues is more than a questioner, after all. While he does argue that *sophia* is a more important value than other traditional Greek values such as wealth, fame, or pleasure (p.3), his understanding of *sophia*, I would argue, is not only theoretical. Socrates lived and died for practicing his commitment to taking care of other souls. Dialogues such as the *Apology* even connect his commitment to philosophy as being constitutive of his love of the *polis* and of his friends, his military service, his refusal to put particular innocent men to death without a trial, and so on. Philosophical virtue seems to include a larger practical element than is explored here, and might offer fruitful territory for Wolfsdorf's further exploration of these important metaphilosophical questions.