

ERISTIC SOCRATES

WEISS (R.) *The Socratic Paradox and its Enemies*. Pp. xii + 235. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. Cased, £22.50, US\$35. ISBN: 978-0-226-89172-9.

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Roslyn Weiss argues that Plato's Socrates is a 'fighter'. Socrates' opponents are immoralists, men who self-interestedly pursue and, by example as well as by training their students, encourage the pursuit of wealth, pleasure and power, while diminishing or wholly disregarding the well-being of others. These immoralists include 'sophists, rhetoricians, and students of rhetoricians'. Protagoras, Gorgias and his company at Callicles' house, Hippias and Meno are W.'s choice examples.

In contrast to his opponents, Socrates himself is a 'dikaiosunist'; 'his first and perhaps only consideration when acting is justice' (p. 7). W. understands this relatively uncontroversial claim in a controversial way. According to the standard view, Plato's Socrates is an intellectualist in so far as he identifies human excellence with a kind of knowledge. Hence he denies *akrasia*. He also believes that the putative parts of excellence are identical or perhaps inter-entailing. In either case, he views justice as an epistemic state. He identifies well-being with living according to excellence so conceived. He believes that every person naturally desires his own well-being; in other words, everyone is a psychological eudaimonist. Consequently, Socrates maintains that no one errs or does injustice willingly.

According to this standard account, Socrates' substantive philosophical activity assumes one or two, non-exclusive forms. Socrates engages interlocutors, who believe they possess excellence and live well, in order to expose inconsistencies in their ethical beliefs and thus undermine their cognitive security and authority. And Socrates develops arguments to persuade his interlocutors of his own ethical positions. In both cases Socrates' discursive activity is intended to encourage and enable his interlocutors to pursue philosophy and to live relatively well.

On W.'s view, the ethical and psychological views standardly attributed to Socrates are 'naïve', 'implausible' and 'bizarre' (p. 5). Socrates does indeed make such claims, and he develops corresponding arguments; but he does so not because he is committed to these positions, but because these claims and arguments, when used appropriately, that is, in particular contexts and against particular interlocutors, are effective at undermining the interlocutors' own views, thereby shaming and humiliating them. Socrates in fact is not an intellectualist; he does not believe in the unity of excellence; he does not sincerely deny *akrasia*; he believes that one may err or do injustice willingly. Indeed, his immoral interlocutors do injustice willingly. That is why they must be confronted and punished, for their immorality and their immoral influence.

The best way to avoid or correct immorality is through nurture and moral education during a person's earliest years. Thus, Socrates essentially arrives too late to rectify his interlocutors: 'by the time Socrates talks to [these] people their characters are already fairly well formed'. Indeed, 'this is true even of Socrates' younger interlocutors – Lysis, Charmides, and Hippocrates' (p. 211). Socrates is thus compelled to employ a method which is a distant second, the *elenchus*. 'Through defeating [his interlocutors] in argument he has the barest hope of affecting their character – of humbling them or even making them more gentle' (p. 213). But given that Socrates reasons against his interlocutors, using premises he does not regard as

sound and arguments he does not regard as valid, Socrates' elenchus is 'no different from sophistic eristic in method ... Socrates feels no more constrained to limit himself to sound argument than sophists do, and ... he is no less bent on victory than sophists are ... What distinguishes Socrates from sophists, then, is only that the reason he is determined to win is not for his own aggrandizement but for the improvement of the souls of his interlocutors'.¹ In short, Socratic elenchus is eristic argumentation with moral intent.

So much for the thrust of W.'s book, which one may gather from Chapters 1 and 8, the Introduction and Conclusion. The defence of this unconventional view occurs in Chapters 2 through 7, but mainly in 2 through 5, where W. focusses on the allegedly Socratic view that no one errs willingly, and its close logical relatives, and shows how and why Socrates deploys such views eristically, but with moral intent, against Protagoras, Polus and Callicles, Hippias, and Meno in *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor* and *Meno*, respectively. Chapters 6 and 7, which are more cursory, consider the operation of related ideas in *Republic* 4 and *Laws* 9, respectively.

In a review of this length it is not possible to engage with the details of W.'s readings of the relevant passages and dialogues. But since W. is ultimately presenting a broad and challenging view of Socrates, it is fitting to respond to that view with some broad considerations. Here are five.

First, Socrates often emphasises that he is not trying to refute his interlocutor. Rather, his objective is to engage his interlocutor in a cooperative pursuit of truth. For example, in *Gorgias* he tells Gorgias, 'What's my point in saying this? It's that I think you're now saying things that aren't very consistent or compatible with what you were first saying about rhetoric. So I'm afraid to pursue my examination of you, for fear that you should take me to be speaking with eagerness to win against you, rather than to have our subject become clear. For my part, I'd be pleased to continue questioning you if you're the kind of man I am; otherwise, I would drop it. And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue, and who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute' (*Grg.* 457e1–458a5; but see also *Grg.* 505e4–6, 453c1–4, 454c1–5; *R.* 1, 349a9–b2; *Chrm.* 166c7–d4; and *Prt.* 333c5–9, 348c5–d1). Such reports of Socrates' attitude in dialectical investigation tell against W.'s interpretation of the elenchus as eristic argumentation. Of course, W. may object that when Socrates describes his attitude in such terms, he is being disingenuous. But then we are entitled to ask on what basis W. is making that assessment. More on this point shortly.

Second, in various places among the so-called early dialogues, but in particular in *Republic* 1, Socrates argues for the value of justice and its conduciveness to well-being. Socrates' three arguments to this effect against Thrasymachus' condemnation of justice are widely regarded as the weakest arguments among the so-called early dialogues. At least, they are no more cogent than any of Socrates' other arguments. Why, then, should we accept these as Socrates' sincere positions, while rejecting other Socratic arguments as eristic?

Third, and more generally, W. presents us with two sets of Socratic ethical and psychological views, one disingenuous, the other authentic. On what basis do we determine that in one set of utterances Socrates is sincere, while in another he is

¹This quotation is from R. Weiss, 'When Winning is Everything: Socratic Elenchus and Euthydemian Eristic' in T.M. Robinson and Luc Brisson, edd., *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides* (Sankt Augustin, 2000), pp. 68–75.

eristic? In other words, what hermeneutic principles inform W.'s results? She does not make any explicit.

Fourth, the Socratic positions and arguments that seem to W. to be naive, implausible and bizarre were regarded as serious or authentic by Plato's contemporaries and successors. Xenophon, Antisthenes, the Megarians, Aristotle, the Cynics and the old Stoics either attributed to Socrates or themselves endorsed many of the views standardly attributed to Plato's Socrates. How can W. reconcile this fact with her denial that something resembling the standard view is correct?

Finally, consider that the arguments elsewhere in the Platonic corpus are not remarkably more cogent than or otherwise logically different from those Socrates deploys in dialogues such as *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and so on. Are we then to conclude that Plato's presentation of philosophy throughout his corpus amounts to little more than eristic argumentation, albeit with moral intent?

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SOCRATES AND NATURE

WARNEK (P.) *Descent of Socrates. Self-knowledge and Cryptic Nature in the Platonic Dialogues*. Pp. xx + 235. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005. Paper, US\$26.95 (Cased, US\$70). ISBN: 978-0-253-21816-2 (978-0-253-34677-3 hbk).

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In *Descent of Socrates* W. interprets Socrates in Plato and the involvement of this Socrates in 'nature' and in the discourses of 'nature' that come to us from ancient Greek thinkers and writers. Most notably, he reevaluates the usual characterisations of Socrates, epitomised in Plato's *Phaedo*, as a thinker who turns from investigations of natural phenomena to the rigorous examination of human thought and action, beginning with himself, with the project of 'self-knowledge'. W. thinks that the specification of 'nature' in such characterisations eclipses other ways in which something we might call nature – a 'cryptic nature', his title terms it – continues to inform and shape a Socratic legacy. He wants to retrieve a sense of this more elusive nature and to describe its importance to Socratic imperatives to philosophise.

This is an engrossing project, which thrives on real paradoxes of the Socratic activity represented in Plato, paradoxes especially prominent in twentieth-century continental interpretations of the Platonic legacy. These interpretations are sceptical of ideas of 'Platonism' abstracted from Plato's texts or from the consensuses about Plato that have developed in a history of western philosophy, including such influential views as those associated with the legacy of Gregory Vlastos or those premised on Plato's dialogues as 'mimetic' dramas more or less transparently representing philosophy as dialogue. Against this, W. claims paradoxically that 'Socrates, as a figure in the text, is not only mimed by the text, but appears already himself to be miming Platonic writing, as an effect of that writing' (p. 27). In light of this mysterious phenomenon, common-sense construals of a Plato–Socrates relation beg the question.

W. divides *Descent of Socrates* into three main parts and eight chapters, five of which centre on his responses to particular dialogues. Part 1 orients this project with respect to a kind of reception history of Socrates' turn from nature to humanity. Here

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