



TRIALS OF REASON

Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy

DAVID WOLFSDORF

Trials of Reason : Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy, David Wolfsdorf Assistant Professor of Philosophy Temple University, Oxford University Press, 2007, 019804383X, 9780198043836, 296 pages. Scholarship on Plato's dialogues persistently divides its focus between the dramatic or literary and the philosophical or argumentative dimensions of the texts. But this hermeneutic division of labor is naive, for Plato's arguments are embedded in dramatic dialogues and developed through complex, largely informal exchanges between literary characters. Consequently, it is questionable how readers can even attribute arguments and theses to the author himself. The answer to this question lies in transcending the scholarly divide and integrating the literary and philosophical dimensions of the texts. This is the task of Trials of Reason. The study focuses on a set of fourteen so-called early dialogues, beginning with a methodological framework that explains how to integrate the argumentation and the drama in these texts. Unlike most canonical philosophical works, the early dialogues do not merely express the results of the practice of philosophy. Rather, they dramatize philosophy as a kind of motivation, the desire for knowledge of goodness. They dramatize philosophy as a discursive practice, motivated by this desire and ideally governed by reason. And they dramatize the trials to which desire and reason are subject, that is, the difficulties of realizing philosophy as a form of motivation, a practice, and an epistemic achievement. In short, Trials of Reason argues that Plato's early dialogues are as much works of meta-philosophy as philosophy itself..

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The study focuses on a set of fourteen so-called early dialogues, beginning with a methodological framework that explains how to integrate the argumentation and the drama in these texts. Unlike most canonical philosophical works, the early dialogues do not merely express the results of the practice of philosophy. Rather, they dramatize philosophy as a kind of motivation, the desire for knowledge of goodness. They dramatize philosophy as a discursive practice, motivated by this desire and ideally governed by reason. And they dramatize the trials to which desire and reason are subject, that is, the difficulties of realizing philosophy as a form of motivation, a practice, and an epistemic achievement. In short, *Trials of Reason* argues that Plato's early dialogues are as much works of meta-philosophy as philosophy itself.

"Wolfsdorf's central contribution is a new method to resolve inconsistencies between statements made by Socrates within a single dialogue or within several early dialogues. The resolution of such inconsistencies is one of the greatest problems we face in unraveling the philosophy of the early dialogues, and Wolfsdorf's solution to the problem is clearly and forcefully presented." --Bryn Mawr Classical Review

"In *Trials of Reason* there is much excellent material worthy of mention that space here does not permit. The balance Wolfsdorf strikes in his writing between elementary explanation and detailed cognizance of the scholarly literature will indeed ensure that his book reaches a 'broad audience' and that his readers will come away having addressed, with close reading of the texts, the full spectrum of debate that has focused upon these fourteen dialogues."--Will Rasmussen, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews

Wolfsdorf's book is part of the recent welcome trend to combine the literary and analytical approaches to Plato's early dialogues. While Wolfsdorf positions himself early on as a critic of the analytical approach (associated above all with the late Gregory Vlastos and his students), his main debts clearly lie in that direction. Wolfsdorf's central contribution is a new method to resolve inconsistencies between statements made by Socrates within a single dialogue or within several early dialogues. The resolution of such inconsistencies is one of the greatest problems we face in unraveling the philosophy of the early dialogues, and Wolfsdorf's solution to this problem is clearly and forcefully presented. He argues that the attempt to find a consistent Socrates, whether he be the historical Socrates or a psychologically realistic character largely of Plato's creation, is fundamentally misguided. Socrates is a tool, a puppet used by Plato in different ways at different times, usually to advance Plato's own ideas but sometimes to mouth more conventional ones. By abandoning the search for a consistent Socrates, Wolfsdorf is able to find a consistent Platonic doctrine in the early dialogues. But the dialogues are not only treatises in disguise. Rather, Plato uses the dialogue form to illustrate the conflict between philosophy and what Wolfsdorf calls "anti-philosophy", whence the trials of reason of his title.

Wolfsdorf addresses literary issues head-on in a way most unusual in the analytical tradition. But he does not very clearly develop what he means by "anti-philosophy".¹ And by robbing Socrates of his integrity as a psychologically realistic character and therefore of much of his value as an exemplar of the philosophical life, Wolfsdorf effectively disarms philosophy in its battle with its rivals. Plato's

Socrates, whether he is historical or not, has certainly led more readers to philosophy than has any other individual in the western tradition, and he has done so as much by the force of his personality and by his deeds as by the philosophical doctrines he advances. If Wolfsdorf is right, such readers have been misled.

Wolfsdorf's book opens with his list of 14 early dialogues, a rather inclusive list which includes so-called transitional dialogues like Meno and Gorgias as well as Republic 1. He uses the term "early" only as a convenience; what really unifies these dialogues is their subject matter. Wolfsdorf argues that a unified Platonic doctrine can be found to span these dialogues. Apparent discrepancies are due to momentary concessions to conventional beliefs, while an apparently major advance (the method of hypothesis in the Meno) has been misunderstood, and does not reflect a substantial development in Plato's thought.

Inconsistencies within a dialogue are usually due to something Wolfsdorf calls $\hat{\pm}$ -structure, a progression from conventional toward less conventional and therefore more Platonic views. Thus Socrates or another character may endorse a conventional view early in a dialogue, before the less conventional Platonic view is developed. Inconsistencies between dialogues are usually due to a similar phenomenon, concessions to what Wolfsdorf terms the "doxastic base" of the dialogues. Hence a conventional belief that is the subject of inquiry in one dialogue, where it is shown to be false, may be asserted and left unquestioned in another as a "dialectical expedient". These are clear and plausible interpretive strategies, but it is curious that Wolfsdorf does not examine the assumption that we can regularly recognize Platonic doctrine by its unconventionality. Other interpreters stress that, when we are unsure of an interpretation, we ought to opt for a more conventional one, the better to avoid anachronism.² While Wolfsdorf is aware of the danger of anachronism (and he attacks analytic scholars of Plato for introducing foreign concepts), his assumption that Plato's views will normally be unconventional would seem to leave him vulnerable to anachronism himself.

At any rate, while Wolfsdorf's Plato is not conventional, his Socrates sometimes is. And Socrates' conventionality is not mere irony. Wolfsdorf believes that if we allow for Socratic irony, "the hermeneutic enterprise will fundamentally be hamstrung" (242). Wolfsdorf relegates his argument against irony to an appendix, as he knows it will receive no warm welcome, so it is perhaps unfair of me to showcase it here. But it seems to me to be central to his attempt to dethrone Socrates.

Eironeia in Plato's day referred to dishonorable dissembling used to fool people. But while Thrasymachus and his like find Socrates guilty of this sin, moderns tend rather to characterize him as a habitual user of verbal irony. In verbal irony, unlike eironeia, the speaker intends to be understood. Now take Socrates' praise of the knowledge and good intentions of Meletus (his chief prosecutor) at the beginning of the Euthyphro. Most readers view this as obvious and rather heavy-handed irony. Wolfsdorf grants that there is dramatic irony here, on Plato's level: Plato certainly didn't think Meletus was knowledgeable. But Euthyphro doesn't see it that way, nor does Socrates correct his misunderstanding. Can't readers see it? Not unless we use evidence from outside the Euthyphro, and this Wolfsdorf does not allow. For to do so is to assume that Socrates is a realistic character with consistent views across dialogues, an assumption Wolfsdorf will not grant. And which readers would get this sort of joke, anyway? Only those already sympathetic to Socrates, readers who didn't need Platonic dialogues to turn them to philosophy in the first place. And if Socrates, when ironic, was speaking to readers rather than to his interlocutors, this itself would be a violation of realism -- the very notion that led us to mistakenly attribute irony to the character Socrates in the first place. Rather, Socrates' praise of Meletus, as of other alleged authority figures, is honestly meant; Plato uses it in order to introduce conventional views that the rest of the dialogue will undermine.

I frankly find Wolfsdorf's position perverse, but this is an example of a perverse argument that does the great service of forcing us to rethink central assumptions about how we approach our texts. Irony is certainly open to abuse, but it would seem to overstate matters, given the fertile work done on Socratic irony by Vlastos and others,³ to say that allowing for it hamstrings the interpretive enterprise. The argument that Socrates is not a realistic character is essentially circular. For the

instances of non-realism Wolfsdorf cites are normally understood to themselves be examples of Socratic irony, or as jokes Socrates is fully conscious of. And on those occasions where Socrates speaks above the heads of his interlocutors, this needn't necessarily be unrealistic. He would not be the only teacher to have made jokes unintelligible to his students, even in the absence of a knowing audience. But presumably the irony is meant to be understood by Plato's readers. As such it is indeed rather like an aside, as Wolfsdorf notes, and hence is a violation of realism. But Socrates may well be unrealistic in one respect while retaining realistic depth in others. Wolfsdorf is right to ask what sort of readers can be expected to get Socrates' irony. But to get the joke about Meletus you need not be sympathetic to Socrates: you need only have heard that he believes himself wiser than the average Athenian, something Socrates' enemies knew well enough.

Most fundamentally, a Socrates without irony, as Wolfsdorf forthrightly admits, emerges as "a remarkably naive individual, indeed, as an unrealistically naive individual relative to his hypothetical fictional history and to the discursive sophistication he demonstrates in the ensuing discussions" (256). This naive figure is ill-suited to serve as an advertisement for the philosophical life. And what do we get for reducing Socrates to such a dullard? We allow him to introduce conventional views into the dialogues. But there are many ways of introducing such views into the dialogues without using Socrates. And an introduction via verbal (Socratic) irony will serve as well one employing dramatic (Platonic) irony. Hence I see no literary case for denying Socratic irony. The only real advantage of denying irony is to simplify the analytical interpretive process. But the cost is far too high.

To Wolfsdorf's second chapter, on Platonic desire. Desire comes first because of its essential role in Plato's conception of philosophy, desire for wisdom, although Wolfsdorf does not make much of that particular desire in this chapter. He argues for a subjectivist account of Platonic desire, in which desire is always for the apparent good. Platonic desire is "object-related", i.e., the value of the desire is determined by the positive, negative, or neutral value of the object of desire; contrast a hedonist who might argue that all thirst is bad. Desire is not of likes for likes but based on deficiency; as such it is in keeping with the Platonic emphasis on the imperfection of the sensible world and the traditional Greek emphasis on human imperfection. The mysterious "first friend" of the *Lysis*, the ultimate object of desire, Wolfsdorf takes to be excellence (*arete*), the best condition of the soul, rather than well-being (*eudaimonia*), the activity that excellence allows.

Chapter three, on knowledge. Excellence is knowledge and an ethical *techne* like other *technai* in having a distinct subject matter, in its case well-being, but unlike them in being invariably beneficial. Passages in conflict with this view are dialectic expedients, momentary expressions of conventionality that are undermined elsewhere. Excellence is no mere means to well-being, but a constituent of it. But can we explain excellence and well-being non-circularly and non-vacuously? In *Republic* 6 (505b), Socrates recognizes the circularity of identifying the good as knowledge of the good, but is this problem recognized and answered in the early dialogues? Ethical hedonism would allow us to distinguish excellence as the knowledge that allows us to find pleasure, and well-being as the pleasant life. But despite appearances to the contrary in the *Protagoras*, Plato was no hedonist. The choice of pleasure as a good in the *Protagoras* was directed at the many and the sophists subservient to them. The same argument that Plato uses to show that knowledge is not overcome by pleasure could be used to show that knowledge was not overcome by other things (by fear, for example). It thus retains its value even if one drops hedonism. In the *Gorgias* (503d-506d), Plato says that form is the good aimed at by all crafts, and that such design and structure are good both for individuals and for the cosmos as a whole. So form emerges as the best candidate for the good in the early dialogues. But it is not clear, Wolfsdorf grants, that form, at least in the early dialogues, can be given a specific, non-ethical meaning so as to give Platonic ethics a firm foundation.

What is clear, according to Wolfsdorf, is that knowledge in the precise sense requires knowledge of definitions. If one cannot define a concept (excellence, say), one cannot identify instances of it or describe its properties. Socrates, however, while possessing no such ethical knowledge, often appears to claim ordinary, non-definitional ethical knowledge. But many of these claims aren't really ethical; some, for example, appear to have ethical content but are actually logical. Wolfsdorf rejects

most other cases on the grounds that when Socrates cites the strength of an argument, or strength of conviction, he is merely claiming a belief, not knowledge; knowledge requires a verb of knowing (oida, epistemai or the like). Strong arguments and strong beliefs can be overturned; knowledge cannot.

Wolfsdorf identifies only four claims to ordinary ethical knowledge in the early dialogues. The most famous ones come in the Apology. There Socrates says that, while he does not know what the afterlife holds, he does know that it is bad and disgraceful to do injustice and disobey anyone, man or god, who is better than he is (29b). But neither this claim nor similar ones at Apology 37b and 22c amounts to a claim to ethical expertise, to some specialized knowledge that would set Socrates apart from his peers, Wolfsdorf explains; it is rather a conventional enough form of yielding to authority. In context, these claims are used to highlight Socrates' unconventional claim that he knows nothing of the afterlife. Wolfsdorf's argument here is logically powerful but leaves Socrates' deeds entirely unexplained. Socrates' decision to pursue philosophy despite the risk of death has been reduced to a conventional belief outside the proper purview of philosophical interpretation.

Much of Wolfsdorf's fourth chapter, on method, is devoted to showing that Socrates' use of hypotheses in the Meno does not amount to a substantial change in Socratic methodology. For a hypothesis in ancient mathematical analysis and in the arguments of the Meno is not a conditional hypothesis in our sense -- or the sense it is given in Republic 6 -- but rather a "cognitively secure" postulate. As Wolfsdorf denies that the Socratic elenchus is fundamentally confrontational, and emphasizes that it often produces positive results, there is no good reason to contrast it with a more constructive hypothetical method. Wolfsdorf's introduction of the category of "cognitively secure" propositions now informs his attempt to determine whether Plato, in the dialogues under consideration, has an answer to the Socratic fallacy, the claim that if definitional knowledge is necessary to know anything about F we have no means of finding the definition of F in the first place. Are the premises Socrates argues from "cognitively secure"? Perhaps his metaphysical premises -- propositions about the nature of Forms -- are cognitively secure. But Socrates makes little progress in metaphysics in the early dialogues; interlocutors often repeatedly fail to learn the difference between examples and definitions, for example. And his ethical premises -- that excellence is always valuable both for the agent and for others, for example -- are controversial. So where Socrates makes most progress, in ethics, the grounds for that progress seem weak.

Which brings us to aporia and Wolfsdorf's final chapter. The sort of aporia that interests Wolfsdorf is not the epistemological aporia omnipresent in the early dialogues (at least when it comes to ethical expertise) but the dramatic aporia in which the central question raised by the dialogue is left unresolved. Wolfsdorf nicely points out that this tends to be the case when that question is essentially theoretical; Socrates is able to decide how to act in the Apology and Crito, for example, but he is unable to reach definitions of the virtues in those dialogues directed to that task. Wolfsdorf argues that Plato, unlike Socrates, had answers to most of the quandaries that tie up the interlocutors in the definitional dialogues. Plato chose to depict Socrates and his interlocutors as confused in order to illustrate "the way that conventional or commonsensical ideas tether thought and impede philosophical satisfaction" (208).

Wolfsdorf closes with a reading of the Charmides meant to illustrate his method. It is indeed a tour de force which well shows how Critias' flawed character led to a flawed argument, and it concisely demonstrates Platonic remedies for those flaws. Wolfsdorf, however, emphasizes Socrates' responsibility for the failure of the conversation, as does Socrates himself (at 175b-c). Wolfsdorf himself gives a realistic motivation for Socrates' willingness to let Critias have his way with the argument: he would otherwise have risked alienating Critias, losing his participation in the argument. There is therefore no reason to separate Socrates from Plato here, it seems to me. Wolfsdorf also notes that the seemingly dead-end discussion of knowledge of knowledge raises important philosophical questions of its own. While Wolfsdorf emphasizes the Platonic nature of these questions by comparing knowledge of knowledge to the Form of the good, their philosophical interest is clear enough even without the full apparatus of the Forms. In my book this qualifies as another dramatically realistic reason for Socrates, and not only Plato, to have allowed the conversation to stray in this direction. Wolfsdorf is certainly right to argue that the characterization of

Critias serves to show how a man more devoted to honor than wisdom can lead a conversation awry. But the resulting aporetic conversation hardly tethers thought or impedes philosophical satisfaction -- else we would not be discussing it 2500 years later. It rather goads us to attempt to solve the problems the dialogue leaves unresolved, as Wolfsdorf does so well here. And I see no good reason not to say that it is Socrates -- be he a historical figure or a realistic character invented by Plato, or some mixture of the two -- who is doing the goading.

I spoke to David Wolfsdorf on June 12, 2013 on his new book, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). He is an associate professor of philosophy at Temple University specializing in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. This new work examines the views of Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Old Stoics, and the Cyrenaics with regards to pleasure. At the end of this work, he also touches on modern treatments of pleasure in philosophy. For the ancient Greeks an understanding of pleasure was a necessary part of appreciating what constituted the "good life", an important focus of their ethical and moral theorizing. Professor Wolfsdorf's previous work includes *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and many articles in leading classics and ancient philosophy journals.

Jane Evans is Professor of Art History. Her doctorate is from the University of Pennsylvania, and her research areas are Art of Ancient Rome, Art of Ancient Greece, History of Crafts (to the Industrial Revolution). During the summer she participate in an excavation of the small Gallo-Roman town of Javols, France, under the direction of Alain Ferdieres, Universite de Tours. Temple students join Dr Evans in the work.

Vasiliki Limberis is Associate Professor of Religion. She received her doctorate from Harvard. Dr. Limberis is trained in the History of Ancient Christianity and is fascinated by the interplay of religious cultures -- pagan, Christian, Jewish -- in the first five centuries of the common era. Her teaching reflects a wide variety of themes, but invariably lands on the two most volatile centuries, the first and the fourth, when the power of the Roman state brings the most to bear on the varieties of religions in the Mediterranean. In addition, her teaching interests have expanded to include the visual arts of the period, iconography, sculptural arts, Roman painting, and mosaics. Dr. Limberis' main topic of research is the Cappadocian Fathers. She is currently researching the imbrication of "family" in Late Antiquity and Christianity.

David Wolfsdorf, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Ph.D. University of Chicago, specializes in Greek philosophy. His first book *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* was published in 2008 (OUP). He has published many articles on Greek philosophy with a particular focus on Plato. His second book, *Pleasure in Ancient Philosophy* (CUP, 2012), examines pleasure in ancient philosophy from pre-Platonic figures through Plato, Aristotle, Epicureans, Cyrenaics, to the Old Stoics

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numerous articles on Socrates.

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