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LATO'S
SOCRATES
AS
EDUCATOR



GARY ALAN SCOTT

Plato's
Socrates
as Educator

SUNY Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Anthony Preus, Editor

Plato's Socrates as Educator

Gary Alan Scott

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For my parents,
Leila and Harold,
with love and appreciation.

Socrates From this point of view do you see any salvation that will suffer the born philosopher to abide in the pursuit and persevere to the end? Consider it in the light of what we said before. We agreed that quickness in learning, memory, courage, and magnificence were the traits of this nature.

Adeimantus Yes.

Then even as a boy among boys such a one will take the lead in all things, especially if the nature of his body matches the soul.

How could he fail to do so? he said.

His kinsmen and fellow citizens, then, will desire, I presume, to make use of him when he is older for their own affairs.

Of course.

Then they will fawn upon him with petitions and honors, anticipating and flattering the power that will be his.

That certainly is the usual way.

How, then, do you think such a youth will behave in such conditions, especially if it happens that he belongs to a great city and is rich and wellborn therein, and thereto handsome and tall? Will his soul not be filled with unbounded ambitious hopes, and will he not think himself capable of managing the affairs of both Greeks and barbarians, and thereupon exalt himself, haughty of mien and stuffed with empty pride and void of sense?

He surely will, he said.

And if to a man in this state of mind someone gently comes and tells him what is the truth, that he has no sense and sorely needs it, and that the only way to get it is to work like a slave to win it, do you think it will be easy for him to lend an ear to the quiet voice in the midst of and in spite of these evil surroundings?

Far from it, said he.

And even supposing, said I, that owing to a fortunate disposition and his affinity for the words of admonition one such youth apprehends something and is moved and drawn toward philosophy, what do we suppose will be the conduct of those who think that they are losing his service and fellowship? Is there any word or deed that they will stick at to keep him from being persuaded and to incapacitate anyone who attempts it, both by private intrigue and public prosecution in the court?

That is inevitable, he said.

Is there any possibility of such a one continuing to philosophize?

None at all, he said.

Do you see, then, said I, that we were not wrong in saying that the very qualities that make up the philosophical nature do, in fact, become, when the

environment and nurture are bad, in some sort the cause of its backsliding, and so do the so-called goods—riches and all such instrumentalities?

No, he replied, it was rightly said.

Such, my good friend, and so great as regards the noblest pursuit, is the destruction and corruption of the most excellent nature, which is rare enough in any case, as we affirm. And it is from men of this type that those spring who do the greatest harm to communities and individuals, and the greatest good when the stream chances to be turned into that channel, but a small nature never does anything great to a man or a city.

Plato, *Republic*, Book VI (494a–495b; Shorey trans.)

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List of Abbreviations

PLATO'S DIALOGUES

<i>Alc. I</i>	<i>Alcibiades I (or Major)</i>
<i>Alc. II</i>	<i>Alcibiades II (or Minor)</i>
<i>Ap.</i>	<i>Apology of Socrates</i>
<i>Charm.</i>	<i>Charmides</i>
<i>Crit.</i>	<i>Critias</i>
<i>Cri.</i>	<i>Crito</i>
<i>Euthyd.</i>	<i>Euthydemus</i>
<i>Euthyp.</i>	<i>Euthyphro</i>
<i>Grg.</i>	<i>Gorgias</i>
<i>Hi. Ma.</i>	<i>Hippias Major</i>
<i>Hi. Mi.</i>	<i>Hippias Minor</i>
<i>La.</i>	<i>Laches</i>
<i>Lys.</i>	<i>Lysis</i>
<i>Men.</i>	<i>Menexenus</i>
<i>Parm.</i>	<i>Parmenides</i>
<i>Phd.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phdr.</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Statesman</i>
<i>Prot.</i>	<i>Protagoras</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Republic</i>
<i>Soph.</i>	<i>Sophist</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Thet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>

WORKS BY ARISTOTLE

<i>Eud. Eth.</i>	<i>The Eudemian Ethics</i>
<i>Nic. Eth.</i>	<i>The Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politics</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetoric</i>

Introduction

Despite his ceaseless efforts to purge his fellow citizens of their unfounded opinions and bring them to care for what he believes are the most important things, Plato's Socrates rarely seems to succeed in his pedagogical, or "psychagogical," project with the characters he encounters in the dialogues.¹ More often than not, his target interlocutors leave their conversations with the philosopher wholly unchanged by the experience, hence it is doubtful whether, in Plato's depiction of him, this divinely appointed physician of the soul could ever be judged to have had a measurable, lasting effect on another person. If some kind of noticeable turnaround in a character's way of life is the standard by which one is to assess Socrates' ultimate effect on those with whom he converses, it could be argued that this great gadfly never succeeds in improving any of his would-be pupils in the conversations that Plato dramatizes.² In fact, it might be concluded from evidence about the later careers of historical characters such as Charmides and Alcibiades that more young men were made worse than made better by this philosopher's counsel.³

Indeed, it remains one of the enduring enigmas surrounding Plato's characterization of Socrates, that the Socrates who speaks and acts in these dialogues is so much less successful—as either a teacher or a student of the characters he meets—than the historical Socrates appears to have been with the people *he* encountered. After all, the historical Socrates could have claimed at least to have engendered the careers of Plato, Xenophon, and several other writers of Socratic conversations whose works have not survived, to have given rise to a number of what would later be called Socratic schools, and to have constituted enough of a political threat to cause himself to be put to death by

the city that he spent his life trying to serve. What is more, Plato's literary Socrates fails to turn souls toward a life of philosophical self-examination, despite being far better outfitted with argumentation—to say nothing of the arsenal of other, extraargumentative devices with which he is equipped as a result of Plato's decision to present his philosophy in dramatic dialogue form, and especially as a result of his decision to write the *kind* of dialogues he writes—than any flesh-and-blood philosopher could have been. And Plato's Socrates experiences with his targets only the faintest hint of the success in the drama of the dialogues that this same Socrates has had on their audiences for nearly 2,400 years.

Recognizing the peculiar disparity between this literary character and the historical Socrates, one is immediately faced with a set of interrelated questions: Why does Plato choose to portray his Socrates as so dramatically less successful than the historical Socrates may be presumed to have been? Did he mean for his audience to regard his Socrates as a complete failure in his ordained roles as gadfly and midwife in the dialogues? If not, in what sense, and to what degree, does Plato think his Socrates succeeds in benefitting or improving others, something he has the philosopher criticize Pericles (and others) for failing to do? How would his Socrates improve the young, and what will be his new kind of educational strategy, or *paideusis*? In what sense does Plato think Socrates is engaged in teaching, and in what sense is the philosopher just not supposed to be viewed as a teacher? The audience of these dialogues also cannot help but wonder to what extent Socrates is genuinely optimistic that he will learn from his interlocutors, and to what extent the philosopher is just trying to draw out his more reticent conversation partners. And further, one wonders, to what degree is failure in the argumentation and dramatic action of the dialogues necessary as a way for Plato to succeed on another level with his own audience?

Many recent interpreters have stressed the need to take seriously the dramatic dialogue form in which Plato presents his philosophy, arguing that its form is inseparable from the content of Platonic philosophy and from Plato's conception of how philosophy, in general, should be practiced. That Plato's dialogues create and show as much as they *assert* necessitates that we strive to grasp a dialogue's meaning on several levels.⁴ In addition to working simultaneously on discursive and dramatic levels, a specific conversation between Socrates and an interlocutor may have at least three distinct audiences, and what is said and done in the primary conversation may therefore need to work in as many as four different senses at once:

1. between Socrates and his target interlocutor;
2. between these primary interlocutors and any third parties gathered and "listening in";

3. between the primary conversation (in ‘real time’) and anyone who might hear about the conversation or hear it rehearsed, or who might be rehearsing it themselves later;
4. between Plato and his audience.

The *Symposium* furnishes an illustrative example. When Socrates cross-examines Agathon after the latter has delivered his rhetorical *tour de force*, the primary conversation is occurring between Socrates and Agathon. Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Aristodemus would all be examples of third parties, in sense #2. Apollodorus, as our narrator, is rehearsing (for the second time in a few days) the framed dialogue, related to him by Aristodemus. Both Apollodorus and Aristodemus then, along with their future auditors, would be third parties as meant in sense #3. Anyone who ever heard Plato’s *Symposium* read or performed, or who read it themselves, would be the audience in sense #4. Now in several dialogues Socrates is alone with his interlocutor. In such cases, the dialogue only needs to work in sense #1 and sense #4, but all of the dialogues involve at least these two levels. This book will be primarily concerned with what happens on the first level, on the level of the dramatic action and the arguments presented therein. The goal of this focus, however, shall be to determine how what happens on the level of the dramatic action is supposed to be construed and judged by Plato’s audience.

In an attempt to locate signs of the philosopher’s success with a targeted character within the drama of the dialogues, I endeavored to find examples in which Socrates achieves some positive outcome in his role as pedagogue or psychagogue to others. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether he purports to be, Socrates is not greatly successful with his targets. He plainly achieves more satisfactory results in his role as teacher with Meno’s slave boy than he does with Meno himself, even though the latter is the philosopher’s main concern in the dialogue bearing his name. Like Euthyphro and others, Meno proves to be unteachable, because he never acknowledges that he has anything to learn, and this conceit of wisdom bars him from learning from the philosopher. With other highly combative interlocutors—such as Callicles and Polus—Plato’s audience will not even have its hopes aroused for the character’s psychic improvement. Callicles cannot maintain the pretense of being amicably disposed toward Socrates as long as he clings to his desire to win the argument at all costs. He must either drop the veil of friendliness or abandon the attempt to dominate Socrates.⁵ Toward some promising characters—Glaucón, Adeimantus, Simmias, and Cebes, for instance—Socrates does not directly aim his well-honed arrows, for he does not really engage these characters in one of his patented psychic examinations. And since examining their lives directly is not his main objective, encounters such as these furnish

scanty evidence concerning the philosopher's overall effect on his target interlocutors.⁶

Moreover, while there is surely a group of followers—including Apollodorus, Aristodemus, and perhaps Hippocrates—portrayed as self-anointed disciples, Plato is surely not holding out these characters as laudable examples of the effectiveness of Socrates' educational methods.⁷ Such characters seem to imitate only the philosopher's superficial mannerisms and eclectic idiosyncrasies, and they appear dedicated to the hortative aspect of his practice, to the exclusion of its other dimensions. As one commentator writes of Apollodorus, "He lacks only the placard with the message 'The day of judgment is at hand.'"⁸ The zeal displayed by such disciple types provides no evidence either of Socrates' beneficial effect on others, and Plato seems to have therefore disqualified this class of characters from receiving more sustained or more substantive attention from the philosopher.

This book is a study of two exceptional cases, *Lysis* and *Alcibiades*, characters who are featured in dialogues belonging to a special class of conversation in which Socrates *does* enjoy some degree of success in bringing about a dramatic turnaround in his target. In each of the dialogues in this group—*Lysis*, *Alcibiades I*, and *Charmides*—the ugly, old philosopher sets out as the pursuing lover of a beautiful young man, only to end up as the beloved object of the youth's adoration by the end of the conversation. Perhaps more than in any other type of dialogue, these "erotic" conversations demonstrate how literary and rhetorical tools are used to augment, enact, or complicate Socrates' arguments in his cross-examinations of unsuspecting characters. What is more, these few dialogues exhibiting the erotic reversal dramatize Socrates' first encounters with the most vulnerable interlocutors he engages anywhere in the Platonic corpus; and before these youths, Plato has Socrates unveil the full arsenal of weapons at his disposal. So these cases afford us perhaps the best glimpse of Socratic education in practice, for in them the target interlocutors receive a dramatic lesson from Socrates.

The initial approach to these young men will be seen to involve a seductive arousal and a powerful chastening aimed at desires specific to each of them. To arouse and chasten them, Plato fashions for Socrates a strategy constructed around a whole cornucopia of dramatic and rhetorical devices: from irony and hyperbole to Socrates' sometimes outrageous sounding claims; from the philosopher's uncanny ability to assess an interlocutor's character to the *ad hominem* challenges to that character; from his citations of the poets to his own opportunistic introductions of myths and stories; and from his use of narrative to his attribution of ideas to dreams, oracles, and divination. Plato's strategy in these few extraordinary dialogues appears designed to show Socrates "seducing" these young men as a way of galvanizing them into taking an active role

in their own self-improvement. Socrates attempts to disclose to these ambitious youths an aperture to their own freedom. Therefore, these dramatic portrayals of his approach have the further effect of exemplifying a rare, positive outcome of an encounter with Socrates.

The way in which Plato has the wily philosopher approach these ambitious, aristocratic, beautiful, and promising young men is at once interesting and problematic: interesting because Socrates deploys a distinctive kind of Eros to accomplish the striking role reversal with these boys, and problematic because some of the tactics he uses to complete his extraordinary seduction of them are at least questionable. These are curiously—but by no means incidentally—erotic conversations, with interlocutors who would seem to fulfill all of the prerequisites to serve as good subjects for Socrates' philosophical approach: they are nobly born and gifted, well-educated, handsome, and seemingly teachable youths when Socrates first encounters them. And they have not yet had to commit themselves to a particular way of life, although each one aspires to a position of power and authority. Socrates encounters them at just the right time for his approach to have a chance of succeeding. And last, each is suddenly smitten with Socrates in the course of his initial conversation with him. In this way, these dialogues show how normally passive and conceited youths could be transformed into active (and sometimes quite aggressive) pursuers of Socrates. If his educational approach was ever going to be successful in improving a target interlocutor in some discernible way, then the dialogues exhibiting the erotic reversal between Socrates and a beautiful boy—*Lysis*, *Alcibiades I*, and *Charmides*—seemed like the best places to look for evidence of that success.

In other cases, the main characters lack one of the essential traits for teachability, or else something clouds the reader's view of Socrates' effect on them. Some characters are recalcitrant or incorrigible; others, such as Laches, Nicias, and Crito, are old or not beautiful, and thus Socrates' conversations with them lack the vital, erotic subtext exhibited by the dialogues studied here.⁹ Even if he had been successful with them, Socrates' improvement of people who were already some kind of expert or presumed expert (in the arts, for example, or in rhetoric or mathematics) or of people who were already older and set in their ways would not be so easy to detect. In contrast, his young partners in these erotic conversations are ambitious aristocrats, well-educated heirs to political office in the city. They all aspire to become rulers, and they are therefore likely to be drawn to the Sophists, those itinerant teachers of rhetoric and practitioners of eristic disputation who are criticized by Socrates and cast by Plato as the irresponsible intellectuals of the day. The philosopher's approach to these young, promising men presents them with an alternative path to knowledge and excellence (*aretê*) at a most opportune time.