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**[Review of the Book Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry: Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement, by M. Marshall]**

Chad Wiener  
Old Dominion University, [cwiener@odu.edu](mailto:cwiener@odu.edu)

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*Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry: Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement.* Mason Marshall. New York: Routledge, 2020, Vii + 234 pp. (Index). \$52 pbk, \$174 hbk. ISBN: 9780367636326

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Plato's use of protreptic is a worthy area of study that is possibly under-developed and in need of more scholarly investigation. Mason Marshall attempts to fill this need in his work *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry*. He admits that his concern is both Plato scholarship and practical matters (5). The former is addressed, but how well is unclear. The latter, as I argue below, is not addressed clearly at all. The practical concerns seem to be persuasion and, as the book subtitle suggests, in respect to students in a classroom setting (or maybe outside of it as well). Marshall near the end of Chapter 1 proposes a theory of protreptic, which would be derived from case studies (and maybe something else, but nothing else is stated, except maybe common sense beliefs he appeals to earlier in the chapter). This would involve determining the most promising strategies. He uses Plato's dialogues since they are just as good as any other case study, maybe even better because they are narratives (26).

Marshall starts with the need for protreptic (1.1) rather than any theory concerning protreptic. He then provides both a top-down and bottom-up strategy in Ch. 1 and 2, respectively. These strategies are supposed to give the reader tools to read and analyze a dialogue by Plato as well as employ protreptic on one's own. He immediately jumps into Socrates's conversation with Euthyphro to exemplify the top-down strategy. The idea is that we start with an end, here self-examination, and work down to see what strategy would be most successful to convert or turn their interlocutor. From this we can judge whether Plato (or anyone else) employs the most successful strategy. The other analysis, the bottom-up strategy, which gets a more thorough discussion, works in the opposite way. One analyzes what means are used to achieve each step, again, in respect to the end. Here Marshall pays more attention to the interlocutor's character and what might influence their turn to self-examination. There is more insight here into Plato's thinking than in the first chapter.



He ends the book applying these two strategies to four cases, Thrasymachus, Meno, Crito in the *Crito*, and Euthyphro. I discuss these cases and his analysis at the end.

The third and fourth chapter are apparent attempts to argue his interpretation of Plato is both legitimate and valuable. He spends almost no time legitimating or showing the value of his own interpretation, but rather he shows no interpretation can rule out others, since each suffers their own problems yet still are hard to rule out. To be direct, the chapters add nothing to his argument in this manuscript. Further, the core of the argument is unsound since Plato scholars, even if their own interpretations are questionable, can rule out some interpretations as illegitimate or not valuable. The structure of the argument is also invalid. One could accept all the arguments he gives and say his project is not valuable or legitimate. I hold that the general project of grasping Plato's protreptic to help us understand his dialogues as well as improve our own ability to get others at least to think more critically is valuable, but in respect to the views and arguments in this book I think they fall short of displaying the use and value of protreptic in Plato's philosophy.

The basic legitimacy problem of the book is that it is not clear what the project is: is it a book on the general nature of protreptic or is it an interpretation of Plato's protreptic? He presents his book as the former in the "Introduction" (1) and in Chapter 1 (8–9) and the latter both in the "Introduction" ("I propose a radically new way of studying Plato," 1) and as the core questions of Ch. 3 and 4. Regardless of which one he picks, or even if he picks both, the book does not legitimately do either. If the book is on the general nature of protreptic, he mainly discusses it as a means to self-examination. Is all protreptic concerned with self-examination? One would not know from reading this book, since the question is not even raised. Even worse, protreptic practiced in a physics class or practiced by a Buddhist would not clearly be about self-examination (unless the Buddhist counts the elimination of the self as self-examination). Both could be about a radical change that moves someone closer to truth (9), but would protreptic employed by a physics teacher or Buddhist use the top-down or bottom-up strategy? One does not know from reading the book. And we do not know if these two strategies alone exhaust protreptic or if they get at its core, since these questions are not even entertained. Finally, Marshall stresses he wants this employed in general education, yet he only discusses Plato. Understanding Plato's use of protreptic could be of use in a physics classroom or maybe teaching educational theory or even Buddhism, yet Marshall makes no attempt to extend any of his

discussion beyond Plato and his texts (not even to teaching Plato in the classroom). His book cannot be said to be legitimately about protreptic in general.

Similar problems arise if his book is about Plato's use of protreptic. Are we sure that the top-down and bottom-up structures are those Plato employed? Marshall gives no textual analysis to address this point, in fact, he simply assumes it and applies it. To be honest and fair, the top-down and bottom-up strategies would be employed by Plato. They are just the structure of deliberation: one sets an end and analyzes it until one reaches the first course of action needed to reach that end. This is the top-down strategy. But each means employed must be judged in respect to the context and the end, here, converting a specific interlocutor with a certain character to the life of self-examination by means of dialogue or question-and-answer and maybe rhetorical techniques. This would be the bottom-up strategy. But if we accept this, which I believe we should, how would we be in a better position to judge whether Plato's strategies are most successful? We may not, since what techniques to use for different characters could vary across cultures. Marshall shows no concern for this problem. Even if we ignore this problem, do we know that this was Plato's aim in writing the text, that is, to engage in the most successful strategy for that individual interlocutor? There may be good reason to think that this is one of Plato's concerns yet it may not be his primary concern. We can see this by looking at the flaws in Marshall's application of the strategies to some of the cases he presents in the fifth chapter.

The heart of his argument is putting this twofold strategy to work to analyze Plato's dialogues. Before turning to his analysis and judging its merits, we can already see two problems which Marshall claims to be addressing in his text. How does this twofold strategy work in respect to classroom mechanics in converting our students to self-examination or at least the love of truth? There is no discussion of this, only of Plato's texts. But this gets at the crux of the problem of appealing to Plato. Plato has Socrates deal with only one interlocutor at a time and usually for a sustained period, as long as the interlocutor is willingly to stay around (which is not always long, e.g., Euthyphro and Anytus). Are we supposed to model this in the classroom? Further, Socrates is always leery of doing philosophy in a large crowd. Our modern classrooms are often just that, especially any introductory course (note even 20 students would be a large crowd for Socrates and Plato). It is not clear his analysis of Plato helps the reader think carefully enough about how to convert enough of any class into those pursuing truth as its own end. Second, in respect to

Plato scholarship, how general is this protreptic strategy in Plato's works? Does it extend to all dialogues? Marshall gives us no good reason to think the *Timaeus* or the *Parmenides* are protreptic. What tools do I use then? The two texts just mentioned are hard to argue as protreptic, since they are pitched to individuals already engaged in philosophy. So, his "radically new way of studying Plato" (1) has severe limitations.

Finally, to put the question in Marshall's terms, how valuable are the two approaches in analyzing Plato's texts? He attempts to answer this directly in Chapter 5. He discusses four applications. The first is Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. He claims that we the reader are not supposed to accept Thrasymachus's refutation, since the arguments are bad. Rather, the real refutation of Thrasymachus is performative. Thrasymachus is outdone by Glaucon and Adeimantus, who achieve what Thrasymachus really wants, for Socrates to state his own views. But I do not see how this performative refutation is more acceptable or productive than the arguments against Thrasymachus. It is question-begging at best, since, as Marshall admits, Glaucon and Adeimantus claim to fight for justice. We could say that Socrates has a soft spot for justice, so Socrates caving to Glaucon and Adeimantus and not Thrasymachus just gets at Socrates's disposition and not whether justice is better than injustice. It could still be the case that injustice is better; it gets you more, just not with Socrates, who may not have much at all except arguments! Finally, against Marshall's view that we should not accept the arguments, Socrates says otherwise, claiming he thought he showed Thrasymachus that justice is better than injustice (368b).<sup>1</sup> He does not address this passage or how it is consistent with his own reading.

The second case is *Meno*. Marshall argues again that the arguments are not supposed to be what converts *Meno* but rather the protreptic is to entice him with the theory of recollection. This view is actually quite common in the literature (that is, that the theory of recollection is a ruse), but it is not clear how it is supposed to move *Meno* to self-examination. A neat idea or theory simply stated to someone that accepts it almost blindly or with bad arguments seems the exact opposite of leading someone to self-examination. How would this be consistent with self-examination? Marshall does not even raise the question. Further, there is good reason to view Socrates attempt to turn *Meno* as a failure. *Meno* comes to a horrible end in real life and nothing in the dialogue seems to improve him. It might be more valuable for the reader to think how protreptic failed *Meno* rather than to think how protreptic could be or could have been successful for *Meno*. Marshall does not entertain this idea.

The next two cases expose three limitations to Marshall's view. The next case is Crito in the *Crito*. Here, Marshall argues that the protreptic move is to get the arguments that Socrates gives in the text stuck in Crito's head so he eventually has to deal with them. But there is a legitimate question of whether the dialogue is protreptic at all. It does not have the structure of many of the early dialogues: it does not ask a what-is question and regardless of whether Socrates is ignorant of virtue or not he must decide what to do, remain in jail and die or escape. So, it cannot end in aporia. The dialogue could just be one good friend trying to make sure another good friend is in agreement with him about his death. Marshall needs an argument that the dialogue is protreptic. He does not offer one. This is the shortcoming of the book. Protreptic is definitely a deep concern for Plato and something he employs in some of the dialogues, but we need more argumentation both concerning its role in the dialogues in general and when it is important to the structure and argument of the text, e.g., the *Charmides* and the *Euthyphro*, and when it is not, e.g., *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* (since the main interlocutors are already on board to practice philosophy).

Second, Marshall seems to hold that the arguments in Plato's dialogues have little value and it is more about performative and dialogical structure. But how does that turn me or anyone to self-examination? This is exemplified best with his own analysis of leading Euthyphro to self-examination. He suggests that maybe Socrates should try to identify more with Euthyphro. But Euthyphro lacks self-knowledge and that seems to be the only kind of knowledge Socrates has, knowing that he does not know human virtue. Why would Socrates or Plato want to identify with someone lesser? They would cease to act like someone with self-knowledge and would fail to do philosophy, at least on their own terms. Socrates's method, protreptic or not, is not one of identification of the interlocutor but the opposite. Socrates and Plato try to get their interlocutor to rid themselves of the false beliefs that they identify with themselves most of all.

Finally, Marshall's whole project seems to undermine itself. He suggests (but not definitely states) that the arguments in Plato are of little value, since many of them are bad. Yet, he claims that Socrates's attempt to turn Crito is to get Crito to go over the arguments. It does not matter whether the arguments are good or bad, in one sense, but going through these arguments is likely something Plato intended. How else would we do philosophy? It is not that Plato gives us the only arguments that we can go over to do philosophy, but he seems to suggest that the ones in the

dialogues are important. Going over arguments and thinking about their strengths and weaknesses is part of the process. Socrates also holds we can be wrong, but the only thing to do is return to the beginning and go over the arguments again, as he claims near the end of the *Phaedo* (107b) and various other dialogues. Who can return to the arguments over and over again? The reader. Marshall fails to think that it is possible that the main target of protreptic is the reader, not the interlocutors (since they almost all fail), just as the main target of protreptic when we teach students is not the characters in Plato's dialogues but them, to get them to think through the arguments and hopefully return to them again to see more in the arguments and possibly begin to think critically about Plato's argument and even to examine themselves.

### Endnotes

1. Note that this is consistent with Socrates's claim that he does not know human virtue or what justice is, since all he is saying is that his arguments that justice is better than injustice are strong enough not to accept Thrasymachus's view.

### References

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Chad Wiener  
Old Dominion University