

Mason Marshall,  
(2020) *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry: Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement*. New York: Routledge

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This intriguing book on Socrates' use of protreptic aims to improve the students' learning ability and critical thinking by making them engage with Plato's dialogues in a very innovative way. The author Mason Marshall summarizes his methodology as a combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approach. By engaging in mental experiments about what are the best strategies that Socrates might use for leading the interlocutors to self-knowledge (top-down approach) and by studying them as embedded in the specific dialogical context and the interlocutors' character traits (bottom-up approach), the students can enhance their learning skills and nurture their motivation to knowledge.

The book comprises five chapters. In the first chapter, "A Top-Down Approach: Refining Protreptic Through Platonic Thought Experiments," Marshall presents its Top-Down Approach by focusing on thought experiments as tools to evaluate a argumentative strategy. He also explains why Plato's dialogues are excellent sources for developing a theory of protreptics as a pedagogical tool.

The second chapter, "A Bottom-Up Approach: Reimagining Protreptic by Examining Socrates," complements the first one with a detailed analysis of Socrates's strategies as embedded in Plato's dialogues. Marshall accurately analyzes Socrates' use of protreptics in a selection of lines from the *Euthyphro*, the *Charmides*, the *Laches*, the *Ion*, the *Philebus*, and the *Phaedrus*.

Chapters 3 and 4 assess this combined method. In chapter 3, Marshall asks if the two approaches are legitimate; in chapter 4, if they are valuable enough. By replying to

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some objections, Marshall claims that there are many interpretations of Plato's writing and we cannot discern which one is true. He is not saying that his method is the best or closest to Plato's intentions. Instead, by referring to the hermeneutical circle, he says it is as legitimate as the others because all of them rest on some assumptions. At the same time, he stresses that his method has the benefit of being very useful in the classroom. He also adds to this, in chapter 4, that his method is more valuable to the contemporary debate than conventional Plato scholarship.

The last chapter, "The Two Approaches in Action", provides some examples of the employment of the method, in particular by focusing on the dialogical interactions with some key interlocutors, such as Thrasymachus, Meno, Crito, and Euthyphro. Again, the goal of the method is not to identify Socrates' strategies but to make the students think about what would have been a better strategy with a specific interlocutor. By placing some faults in Socrates' strategies, Marshall pushes the students to find "a better strategy than Socrates'" (p. 202).

Although the book provides evidence of the author's deep competence in Plato's scholarship, its main interlocutors are the teachers who can use Plato's dialogues as pedagogical tools. This does not mean that the book is not interesting for Plato's scholars. On the contrary, it offers a perspective for appreciating the contemporary relevance of Plato's theory of education as embedded in its writings. This resonates with some critical studies that have been dedicated to the literary aspects of Plato's dialogues in the last years, including works on the dramatical and rhetorical features of his writing. To name a few, I recall the essential works of Debra Nails (*The people of Plato*, Hackett 2002), Christopher Rowe (*Plato and*

*the Art of Philosophical Writing*, CUP 2007), and Livio Rossetti (*Le dialogue socratique*, Les Belles Lettres 2011).

One of the original characters of Marshall's book is to focus on a specific feature of Plato's dialogues, the one of the protreptic, for stressing its pedagogical role, not only in the past but also today. Marshall is crystalline about his assumptions on Socrates' use of protreptics. He does not take them as a way to win the interlocutors, but he wants to improve them by leading them to self-examination (p.2). The pedagogical aim is, therefore, intrinsic to Plato's method and by offering Plato's protreptics to his students, Marshall is following this core pedagogical feature of Plato's dialogues.

In recent years, James Henderson Collins has published a book on Plato's protreptics (*Exhortations to Philosophy*, OUP 2015). This scholarly research plays a significant role in Marshall's book, but only as a ground work. Marshall is not interested in identifying the different protreptic strategies employed by Plato in the dialogues. His primary interest is to make the students capable of assessing Socrates' strategy and imagining what would have been the best strategy to use with a specific interlocutor when they find out that it is ineffective. In particular, Marshall's top-down approach aims at thinking with Plato and rewriting the argumentative plots.

I find this pedagogical aim laudable, especially if connected to democratic and civic engagement, as stressed by Marshall. However, I resist Marshall's assumption that scholars cannot identify Socrates' strategies in Plato's dialogues because they are trapped in a hermeneutical circle (chapter 3). Although there are assumptions in every textual interpretation, I think that there are interpretations that are more supported by textual evidence than others. A Plato's scholar should ground

her interpretation in the text and bring textual evidence as proofs in her arguments. Of course, there is debate between the unitarists and the contextualists, for example, but this does not mean that we are destined to the relativism of interpretations. Also, dismissing the role of conventional Plato's scholarship is quite problematic. Not only should Marshall rely on it to develop his method (as proved by the numerous footnotes with references to the secondary literature at the end of each chapter), but also because Plato's theory can play a role in contemporary debates. So, I'm afraid I have to disagree with Marshall when he claims that "if one hopes to solve problems in contemporary philosophy, taking on problems in Plato studies may be more distracting than anything else." (p. 151). The relevance of Plato's thinking to contemporary thought is evident in many research fields, from ethics to epistemology. Virtue Epistemology is a vital example of this, as I will mention in the final paragraph.

But before coming to this, I need to stress another issue about one of Marshall's assumptions about Plato's protreptics, namely that Socrates is not interested in changing other people's views. Although I am sympathetic with the Socratic studies that focus more on Socrates' method of inquiry than in his doctrinal positions (see, for example, the new edited volume, *New Perspectives on Platonic Dialectic: A Philosophy of Inquiry*, by Jens Kristian Larsen et al., Routledge 2022), I posit that disjoining protreptics from a transformation of the interlocutors' beliefs contrasts with Socrates' intellectualism. The core idea is that certain beliefs must be challenged because they lead to a vicious style of life. Socratic dialogue is a way to challenge them and transform the interlocutors' behaviors by changing their beliefs. However, I agree with Marshall that

self-examination cannot be just a matter of changing the content of the beliefs. It has to do with a change of intellectual character. In this regard, Marshall focuses on conscientiousness as taking care to focus on the strength of the evidence; judiciousness as being at pains to evaluate evidence correctly; responsiveness to evidence; thoroughness as seeking out all the relevant evidence to the issue. I found this list of character traits extremely relevant to the Virtue Epistemology program that is precisely working to identify the intellectual abilities and character traits that can warrant knowledge. Although this research program is mostly carried on in contemporary analytic and applied epistemology, Plato and Aristotle have always been considered the grandfathers of the approach. Notably, Linda Zagzebski in her *Virtues of the Mind* (CUP 1996) provides many references to Plato's epistemology and Sophie Grace Chappell's *Knowing What to Do* (OUP 2014) builds her Platonic Ethics on Plato's conceptualization of virtues.

Therefore, Marshall's book, instead of being taken as antagonist to conventional Plato scholarship, could be considered a handy source for stressing the contemporary relevance of Plato's scholarship in its various schools and approaches. The approach provided by Marshall is advantageous for approaching Plato's dialogues in a very active and engaging manner. It can be an interesting source not only for scholars in ancient philosophy but also for those virtue epistemologists who are working in applied epistemology (for instance, Jason Baehr's *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues*, HUP 2021 and his edited collection *Intellectual Virtues and Education*, Routledge 2016).

