

## Should Socrates Shame Thrasymachus? The Gap Between What a Teacher Intends and What a Student Learns

Michael S. Katz

*San Jose State University*

In my response I shall do the following: 1) summarize what Mason Marshall aims for in his paper and review his central argument; 2) raise questions about this Socratic critique and other philosophical critiques; in so doing, I shall focus on differentiating between a constructive critique and a destructive critique; I shall dramatize the potential gap between what a teacher might intend and what a student might learn; and 3) make some connections between this discussion of constructive and destructive critiques to Professor Marshall's argument. I will not offer my own critique of Professor Marshall's scholarly interpretation, since doing so lies beyond my area of expertise.

### SUMMARY OF MARSHALL'S PROJECT AND ARGUMENT

First, what is Marshall's central purpose in his essay? In a scholarly way, he considers what Socrates' strategy aims for in critiquing Thrasymachus's argument in Plato's *Republic*. Is Socrates' goal primarily to shame Thrasymachus? Or is shaming him merely a collateral effect—a "byproduct" of the critique? Secondly, how does the way in which Socrates treats Glaucon and Adeimantus more fully explain Socrates' intent to foster appropriate philosophical inquiry?

Marshall summarizes his main argument in his conclusion. He argues that Socrates "has Glaucon and Adeimantus do the very thing that Thrasymachus wants most to do and fails to do—namely force Socrates into the position of answering questions...since seeing them outpace Thrasymachus will prompt Thrasymachus to reconsider the value of inquiry and his focus on dominating other people."<sup>1</sup> One of the central issues here is not merely what Socrates may intend but whether Thrasymachus will learn what Socrates intends to teach. To consider this issue expands the problem from a mere question of the teacher's intent to the problematic dynamics of teacher-learner interactions.

## CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUES

What might distinguish a constructive philosophical critique from a destructive one. To begin with, consider any form of philosophical critique—either indirect Socratic critique or a more direct one. What is the critic’s main intent? Does the critique aim to help the person strengthen the argument? Or does it aim to demolish the argument, making it look so weak that it cannot be redeemed? In addition, does the critique make the person more confident that the overall project remains worth pursuing further? Or, does the critique aim to make the person feel so inadequate that she may be incapable of making any decent argument, thus shaming her to abandon the project altogether?

A couple of personal experiences may dramatize the critical differences between constructive and destructive philosophical criticism. First experience: upon entering doctoral work at Stanford in 1970, I attended a philosophy seminar discussion. For the previous three years, I had been teaching high school English. Moreover, I had not majored in philosophy as an undergraduate. Based on the professor’s view of my inadequate philosophical background, he had proposed that I be refused entry into the doctoral program. Early on, I made a brief argument—one the professor thought was quite stupid. He responded by mocking me quite harshly. “Katz, before you say anything quite that stupid again, I suggest you read Scheffler’s article ‘”On Slogans.’” What was the professor’s intent? And what did I learn from it? The professor clearly intended to show disrespect both for my argument (he thought it was “stupid,”) and for me as a person (one likely incapable of ever making decent arguments). I viewed this comment as destructive criticism both in its intent and effect. Most of us have witnessed similar, even more extended forms of such destructive critiques, critiques where the critic’s intent was not merely to destroy the speaker’s argument but to make the speaker feel ashamed for acting as an incompetent, a total fool, one not deserving any form of Kantian respect as an end in herself.

A second experience: years later I sent a colleague a draft of a paper analyzing the concept of “respect for students.” My colleague responded with almost eight pages of blistering criticism. At the end, he wrote, “I think your argument here is terribly weak, but why if it was so weak, did I spend so much

effort to criticize it? Simply, because I respect you as a person, I believe you take your ideas seriously, and you can definitely improve your argument when you revise this paper.”<sup>2</sup> What did my colleague intend? First, he aimed to help me improve my argument; second, he tried to show me respect both as a person and as a thinker, one capable of making decent arguments. Although he did not show me “appraisal respect” for my argument, he did reveal respect for my underlying project of mapping the logical terrain for “respect for persons.” Moreover, he showed me Kantian “owed respect” as a worthwhile person, one deserving to be treated as an end in oneself. What do these two examples dramatize about how constructive and destructive criticism differs? The first destructive critique left me certain that I was inadequate and unsure if I might ever become competent. The second example made me question the quality of my reasoning but made me feel worthwhile as a philosopher who could improve my argument and continue to value my project.

### CONNECTING PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE TO MARSHALL’S ESSAY

Distinguishing between constructive and destructive critique can be related to Marshall’s detailed hermeneutic interpretation of Socrates’ strategy. First, in examining an action, one can ask what intention underlies it. In this case, what was Socrates central intent? Marshall argues Socrates was not primarily aiming to shame Thrasymachus but to heighten the value of philosophical inquiry. Second, we can focus just as well on the effect of Socrates’ action. Does he essentially shame Thrasymachus, whether he intended to do so or not? In raising these questions, we can consider how Marshall goes about textual interpretation. Notice that he cites a wide range of critical resources, reflecting on which ones he agrees with, partially agrees with, and disagrees with. And he explains his reasons for doing so.

Marshall does not want to dismiss the effects of Socrates’ critique of Thrasymachus—the effects of destroying his argument and shaming him simultaneously. However, by showing us how Socrates treats Glaucon and Adeimantus, Marshall reveals that Socrates aims primarily to foster genuine philosophical inquiry, even if it may, as a byproduct, shame someone.

Let us briefly consider some nuanced considerations regarding shame. In my view, to “shame someone” suggests making that person feel less worthwhile as a person. In fact, “shame” seems to be the most powerful psychological and moral emotion. If one feels thoroughly shamed as a person, she may want to dig a ditch, crawl into it, and shovel dirt over herself. Shame appears to be the ultimate form of personal disrespect. On the other hand, if one is made to feel ashamed of something she has done—for example, treated another person badly, or less problematically, constructed a very poor argument—she may still be able to maintain considerable self-respect. Marshall seems to argue that while Socrates—in engaging Glaucon and Adeimantus in critical dialogue—may make them feel ashamed not to have made better arguments, he intends no disrespect for them as persons. They are clearly viewed as worthwhile persons, even if they lack insight into the subject of justice. This is how I interpret Marshall’s argument.

What is the problem of using the Socratic method or other philosophical critiques? Can we observe potential gaps between a teacher’s intentions and the effects of her actions on students? Yes, we can. Remember the Peanuts cartoon in which Linus glances at the summer vacation essay he wrote for Miss Othmar. He sees his grade—a “D.” Overcome by emotion, Linus says to his friend, “Miss Othmar thinks I am a ‘D’ person.” Clearly, Miss Othmar did not intend to make Linus feel like a “D person,” but the essay was deeply personal, and poor Linus viewed this grade as personally shameful. For Linus, the grade was more than a gap between Miss Othmar’s intent and its effect; for Linus, it was an abyss.

Marshall’s essay raises other interesting questions about how what teachers intend may differ from what students learn. For example, how might the teacher’s effect on a student being criticized differ dramatically from the effects on others witnessing it? Sarcasm dramatizes this potential gap. The person criticized may feel little shame when treated sarcastically, but other students may feel intimidated and unsafe when sarcasm appears. As a result, I have generally warned prospective teachers to avoid sarcasm.

In summary, Mason Marshall should be praised for a carefully argued essay. His essay invites us to do two very worthwhile things: 1) revisit the bril-

liance of Socratic dialogue in the Republic; and 2) reconsider how teachers affect students both by their intentions and the effects of their criticism.

---

1 Mason Marshall, "Why Does Socrates Shame Thrasymachus?," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

2 These comments were reconstructed from memory.

*Many thanks to Susan Verducci for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this response.*