

Your Socrates, My Socrates, Everyone has a Socrates

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Rob Reich's essay is both frustrating and fascinating — frustrating because it continually slides through one's hands like a slippery eel. But it proves fascinating in a number of ways, in part because of something that is unsaid and yet said. Let me begin with my story of frustration.

In a long-neglected book, actually forgotten at the moment of publication, John Herman Randall bemoans that:

Taylor's ultimate purpose, he made clear, was to show that Plato, rightly understood, proves the soundness of the Christian faith. Paul Natorp, leader of the Marburg School, wrote a big book to show that Plato was really a Neo-Kantian. Several learned works were written in the old days to prove that Plato was a Social Democrat attacking the capitalistic system. Raphael Demos, who long taught Greek philosophy at Harvard, wrote a large book, arguing that Plato was a disciple of Whitehead. Another Harvard man, John Wild, wrote one to show that Plato was a follower of St. Thomas.¹

Before Randall, Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed of Plato: "this citizen of a town in Greece is no villager nor patriot. An Englishman reads and says, 'how English!' a German: — 'how Teutonic!' an Italian: — 'how Roman and how Greek!'...Plato seems to a reader in New England an American genius."² George Grote put the problem similarly:

It is in truth scarcely possible to resolve all the diverse manifestations of the Platonic mind into one higher unity; or to predicate, about Plato as an intellectual person, anything which shall be applicable at once to the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposion*, *Philebus*, *Phaedon*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Leges*. Plato was skeptic, dogmatist, religious mystic and inquisitor, mathematician, philosopher, poet (erotic as well as satirical), rhetor, artist.³

From these passages and many others, from all that Reich quotes, we are reminded that for more than 2,000 years Plato has been interpreted in various, often conflicting, ways, some that Plato would not recognize. Thus, we can agree that Platonic scholars disagree about the meaning of various dialogues, language, ideas, metaphors, and so forth.

If Platonic scholars cannot agree, cannot get it right, we can hardly blame educational writers who are three or four times removed from the dialogues for writing about a Plato or a Socrates that ranges into even greater flights of imagination. When Reich cites Adler, Postman, Sizer, Mathews, Kohlberg, Bloom, and others, he refers to cave dwellers who justify their positions, perspectives, ideologies, by grasping whatever respected idea or admired person is available. Who seems more "respectable" than Socrates or Plato? Those who justify their perspective by turning to Plato or Socrates often do not present cogent arguments for their position; that is, they cite something buried in Plato's thought rather than arguing and justifying their own position. Why does Reich need to use a detached Socratic method that severs truth from method, and wholly relies on the logical conditions of the method? Why neglect the narrative, the literary and aesthetic aspects, of the

Socratic method? Reich should not answer these questions; for to answer them misdirects what is needed, to argue for the method and “regulative ideal” he proposes as the basis of civic education in a pluralistic society. These should be defensible, not because of our admiration of Socrates, but because they can stand on their own feet.

Thus far, in my response, I prefer to speak of Plato. Since Karl Popper called Plato an enemy of free, democratic society, writers have shied away from Plato and have heaped accolades on Socrates. Socrates became a convenient hero because Plato was not an advocate of the “open society.”⁴ However, there is an embarrassing fact that Popper forgot: Even though someone by the name of Socrates lived, all of the dialogues, the early, middle, or late dialogues, are the work of Plato. The designation “early, middle, or late” is itself subject to argument. The *Phaedo*, pace Reich, might portray Socrates’ death or how Socrates, the hero, should have died. However, the *Phaedo* primarily advances a number of Plato’s theories, a theory of soul and a self-conscious discussion of method, not theories of Socrates.

But then there are still more difficult problems. Even if one accepts that Plato is the philosophic genius, not the transcriber of Socrates’ philosophy, how should various Socratic paradoxes be interpreted? I am thinking specifically of the two interrelated ones that Reich addresses: Socratic ignorance, and whether the *elenchus* can end in truth or knowledge. How can we resolve these paradoxes? John Dewey reminds us that with intellectual progress or historical change, we “face in another direction; [and] older perplexities are unreal; considerations passed over as negligible loom up. Former problems may not have been solved, but they no longer press for solution.”⁵ What does this mean in relation to the two paradoxes that Reich describes? Eventually, these paradoxes will fade into the background, even if not resolved. In what direction can we now turn? Is there yet another Plato lurking in the wings? I would argue that much of the interpretation of the paradoxes neglects that Plato is a literary giant, and that the dialogues are not philosophic treatises, but literary masterpieces interwoven with philosophy.⁶ Ignore the metaphors, the irony, the imagery, the drama, the humor, the examples from ordinary life, and one has stripped the dialogues bare; they have become dried bones, without life. So much for my frustration while reading Reich’s essay!

But there is something more important in Reich’s paper, what I find utterly fascinating. Beneath the surface of Reich’s essay is a problem that has troubled me in recent years and one that has often puzzled philosophers and other critics. Since there are such wildly different interpretations of Plato, how do we, as scholars, judge the adequacy of any particular interpretation? More generally, how do we judge the adequacy of an interpretation of any text, whether literature, philosophy, a person’s life, some work of art, some artifact? How do we judge an interpretation of an interpretation of a historically removed text, one originally written in a different language and a translation from that language or a translation of a translation? Why should we buy into some particular interpretation? Even postmodernists accept some interpretations and reject others. If it is just a matter of how interesting the interpretation is, then any interpretation or use of Plato would do. Actually, the more

audacious, the more daring the interpretation, no matter how it strays from the original text, the more interesting and convincing it might be. But this is not how Reich chose his sources, his interpreters of Plato. Even if only intuitively, Reich, as well as other scholars, crosses the threshold of the closed gate to glimpse at the glorious Platonic texts. How we encounter these texts depends on whether we move forward to embrace them and thus become immersed in the interplay, the interrelation of ideas, language, context, and surrounding texts.⁷ If we hesitate and cling to our own paradigm or ideology, while glancing at the distant, but dazzling, text, our ideology extinguishes the text. At first, Reich seems to embark on the first course and yet, eventually seems attracted by the second path. Which of these directions will he finally take? Or will Reich take the even more difficult step, and mediate between the two paths? I for one hope to be here when he makes his decision.

1. John Herman Randall, Jr., *Plato, Dramatist of the Life of Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 16. Also, Gerald A. Press, ed., *Plato's Dialogues, New Studies and Interpretations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Plato: or, The Philosopher," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 421-22.

3. George Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Socrates*, vol. 1, 3d ed. (London: John Murray, 1875), 214.

4. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

5. John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," *Creative Intelligence* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917), 3.

6. Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

7. Though this is not an interpretation of M.M. Bakhtin, a longer version would probably owe a debt to M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).