

Patricia Fagan and John Russon, eds.
Reexamining Socrates in the Apology
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The figure of Socrates is and will remain an enigma amongst philosophers. Nowhere is this truer than in Plato's *Apology*. In *Reexamining Socrates in the Apology*, the reader is offered twelve essays rich in dramatic and philosophical content. While there is no explicit thread running throughout, there is an overall attentiveness to the total impression made by Socrates' figure, both in speech and in deed. Moreover, the volume contributes to the growing recognition that religiosity, in various capacities, informs both Socrates and Plato in an ineliminable way. The book is divided into five parts; I will focus on four representative articles.

In the opening essay, Bernard Freydberg seeks to demonstrate 'how dreams and oracles themselves bring measure to Socratic activity' (5). Despite the myriad functions of oracles, Freydberg claims that oracles did *not* command. They encouraged; they gestured; but they did not command. This seems to me to overstate the evidence. While it is true that the final decision rested with the inquirer, there was a deep conviction amongst the Greeks that to flout an oracle was tantamount to securing disaster. Indeed, some events, such as birds fighting one another, conveyed imminent danger. This is so despite the conviction that seers only communicated in cryptic language. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to note that generals and seers often formed symbiotic partnerships. In certain situations, the military seer took a more active role in the decision-making process (e.g., *History of the Peloponnesian War* 3.20.1). Nevertheless, Freydberg situates dreams alongside oracles; both could inform but not show the way. It is interesting, then, that Socrates flouts these two practices. For Socrates, dreams and oracles can have the authority of law. The Delphic oracle has compelled him to seek self-knowledge; his statement at *Phaedrus* 229e5-230a1 demonstrates that this command is of the highest order. For Freydberg, Socrates also recognizes that not every dream is pregnant with meaning, but this serves the function of underscoring the connection between dreaming and measure. Freydberg examines this affinity in the *Charmides* and the *Timaeus*. In the case of the latter dialogue, the liver is the bodily site of divination. Freydberg connects this with Prometheus, the mythical figure whose hubris led Zeus to decree that his liver would be devoured day after day. In this sense, to be human is to be susceptible to hubris. The function of dreams and oracles, then, is to encourage piety or, as Freydberg writes, 'proper measure' (13).

For Patricia Fagan, Plato uses myth in the *Apology* in order to reveal 'the role of philosophy in Socrates' life and in human life in general' (86). Fagan claims that Plato

makes understated use of myth in the *Apology* first by likening Socrates to Oedipus and then by transforming him into a seer akin to Teiresias. Fagan draws many interesting similarities between Oedipus and Socrates. First, both individuals initially attempt to circumvent the oracle. Indeed, both Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Plato's *Apology* utilize the same language: *zetesis* and *elenchus*. Both figures are also wise. Oedipus answers the riddle of the sphinx and Socrates engages in dialectical conversation wherever he can find it. Granted, Fagan rightly points out that Socrates' wisdom is self-knowledge—Socrates knows that he knows nothing. Oedipus, by contrast, is scolded by Teiresias for not knowing himself (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 366-7). Now it is not unique to Socrates or to Oedipus that both of them misinterpret the oracle. As Fagan states, 'Apollo's oracles are notoriously obscure' (91). What is unique, however, is that both Socrates and Oedipus misinterpret when they resist the oracle. Finally, both figures end up as 'devotees of Apollo who serve and protect Athens' (92). It is dramatic as well as historical fact that Oedipus was a tutelary hero in ancient Athens. And at the end of the *Apology*, Socrates makes a prophecy that his death will benefit Athens. According to Fagan, Socrates' prophecy triggers a transition. Instead of Oedipus, Socrates is now likened to Teiresias, the seer whose origin lies in the Homeric epics. Consider the people Socrates expects to meet in the afterlife. They represent a mix of Greek heroes, and Socrates intends to engage them in dialectic. In other words, he will be the same person in the afterlife as he is in this life. Similarly, in both life and death Teiresias is wisdom-filled. In death, he will still know 'who he is when no one else does' (94). Part of the motivation for this transition from tragedy to epic is that the latter enjoys Pan-Hellenic prestige. Socrates, the poet-seer, is confidently self-aware, much like Hesiod and Homer. These latter figures have access to all that is past, present, and future. This is mirrored in the structure of Socrates' three speeches in the *Apology*. This, then, demonstrates Plato's pretence, for he seeks to challenge the prestige of the epic poets. In the end, Fagan concludes that Socrates is a myth 'come alive and walking among us (we fifth-century Athenians)' (98).

Francisco Gonzalez' article on piety and goodness in Plato's *Apology* is one of the strongest contributions to the volume. The argument aims at striking a balance between the ironic and sincere interpretations of Socrates' defense. For Gonzalez, the defense is '*ironic* in the true sense of the word: neither literal nor deceptive, but ambivalent' (117). For Socrates to defend himself sincerely would be tantamount to admitting that the Athenians know piety and goodness. Yet, conversely, to be wholly ironic would presuppose that Socrates himself knows piety and goodness. Instead, Gonzalez argues that Socrates *cares* more about piety and goodness than the Athenians, and it is this caring for and seeking after that constitutes human piety and goodness. Gonzalez considers each component of Socrates' defense in light of his thesis. For instance, consider the strong language Socrates employs in his response to the Delphic Oracle. Is he attempting to refute the oracle? Or does he merely seek understanding? The tension is a palpable one given Socrates' conviction that the gods do not lie. For Gonzalez, Socrates occupies a middle ground between conventional and unconventional piety. In other words, Socratic piety necessitates questioning the divine, as it is only by

questioning that Socrates can be pious. Even though he always seeks to evaluate moral claims according to reason, Socrates retains ‘the constant recognition of the *limits* of human reason’ (134). In the final sections, Gonzalez outlines the Socratic conception of goodness, a concept regarding which he finds prevailing interpretations unsatisfying. This is so because they tend to offer only negative justification for why human goodness is the examined life. For Gonzalez, it is not only to prevent hubris or blameworthy ignorance. Rather, more positively, it is ‘*caring* for one’s goodness, where this ‘care’ involves continual examination and discussion of the good’ (141). In the final section, Gonzalez further outlines human goodness and demonstrates how this coalesces with the public sphere. It has been vehemently argued, after all, that Socrates’ conception of the good is fundamentally apolitical.

In one of the final essays, Catherine Zuckert emphasizes the dramatic continuity of Plato’s dialogues rather than the developmental hypothesis. Rather than thinking of the *Apology* as an early dialogue, she urges us to focus our attention on the fact that the *Apology* contains ‘Socrates’ public justification of his distinctive philosophical practice at the end of his life’ (210). In three stages, Zuckert offers a dramatic evolution of Socrates’ thinking. First, we have his youthful interest in natural philosophy. This gives way to the theory of forms, as evidenced in the *Parmenides*. For *Parmenides*, Socrates has not adequately confronted the question of the whole’s relationship to the parts. That Socrates fails to adequately defend himself does not mean his arguments would be fallacious (something most commentators have pointed out). Zuckert claims that to the degree that *Parmenides’* philosophy is true, there can be no basis for Socratic logos, for dialectic, for philosophy *simpliciter*. It follows, then, that *Parmenides* lacks *eros*, that is, his position fails to inspire people to care about his own questions and answers. In Socrates’ final stage, he learns about the nature of *eros*. This occurs in the *Symposium*. Zuckert rehearses Socrates’ exchange with Diotima in order to demonstrate Socrates’ coming into his own as a lover of wisdom. Socrates’ learning is not only confirmed in speech, but also in deed, as is exemplified once Alcibiades enters the conversation. Strictly speaking, in order to be virtuous, one needs to be able to inculcate virtue in others. Alcibiades is the living counter-example to the thesis that Socrates possesses virtue. Thus, for Zuckert, Socrates’ claim that he only knows erotic things (*‘ta erotika’*) finds kinship with the Socratic ignorance of the *Apology*.

The book is to be commended for its recurrent ability to draw on other sources—Homer, Xenophon, and Aristophanes—in order to illuminate the various puzzles of Socrates’ defence. To my mind, this book is necessary reading not only for specialists in ancient philosophy but for those of us who begin introductory philosophy courses with Plato’s *Apology*.

Aaron James Landry
York University