

**Sandra Peterson**

*Socrates and Philosophy in the Dialogues of Plato.*

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Peterson's book addresses a familiar puzzle in Platonic scholarship: in dialogues such as the *Apology* and *Euthyphro*, the depicted Socrates disavows wisdom and avoids advancing views of his own, focusing instead on elenctic examination of his interlocutors' positions. In dialogues such as the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, however, Socrates no longer scrutinizes the views of his interlocutors, but rather seems to advocate ambitious philosophical theses of his own. The question is, how can we explain the shift? The traditional response is to understand changes in the depicted Socrates as indicative of changes the author. We eventually find a doctrinal Socrates who no longer engages in elenchus, the view goes, because we eventually have a doctrinal Plato who no longer thinks the elenctic method is the best.

Peterson's alternative proposal is that the shift in the depicted Socrates is merely apparent: Plato's Socrates is *always* the non-doctrinal, examining Socrates, she argues. The starting point for her view is the *Apology*. Looking to Socrates' characterization of his life's activities there, Peterson identifies what Socratic 'philosophizing' consists in: it is a twofold process of exposing the life-guiding views of one's interlocutors and then subjecting them to examination. It is this kind of philosophy that Plato's Socrates always practices throughout the dialogues. Apparent differences in the depicted Socrates, she argues, are due to differences among Socrates' *interlocutors*: for some of them, he has reason to expose and test their views through elenctic questioning; for others, he has reason to expose their views through apparently confident lecturing. In the latter case, which we find in *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and in the digression of the *Theaetetus*, the interlocutors reveal what their views are by their reactions to Socrates' lectures. They, not he, are responsible for the views Socrates expresses, however, and Socrates himself does not commit himself to those views. He is merely conducting the first step of his philosophical investigation. The second step would be to *examine* the views that he has exposed. In *Phaedo* and *Republic*, he does not take that step, but the dialogues are meant to invite us, the readers, to do so ourselves.

With that invitation in mind, Peterson has a further proposal: that many of the views prominently attributed to Plato do *not* stand up to examination. In particular, Peterson examines Plato's account of the best city, the theory of Forms, the characterizations of philosophy articulated in *Theaetetus*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, and the arguments for immortality of the soul. All of these fail the test of scrutiny, she claims, and they do so in ways that are obvious. We ought to conclude, therefore, that their failure was obvious to Plato himself and that he never meant to endorse them. On Peterson's view, then, it is not just Socrates who is always non-doctrinal despite sometimes seeming otherwise; it is also *the author* who is always non-doctrinal despite sometimes seeming otherwise. Indeed, Peterson concludes that throughout his career,

Plato never drifted from his commitment to the message of the oracle in the *Apology*, as the depicted Socrates interpreted it—that the wisest of human beings are those who know that they don't know anything important, and who therefore do not suppose themselves able to teach important things to others.

Peterson's book has several things to recommend it. Her central thesis is provocative, and the view she develops is original, systematic, and thoughtfully conceived. Moreover, her discussions of key passages are full of incisive and interesting observations. Indeed, some parts of the book—including parts of Chapter 2 on the *Apology* and parts of Chapters 4 and 5 on the *Republic*—read not unlike a commentary, and as such they offer valuable insights into the texts. Other highlights of the book include Peterson's in-depth look at the characters of Glaucon and Adeimantus and her overview of the competing conceptions of philosophy that are expressed by various participants throughout Plato's dialogues.

Despite its merits, however, there are a number of substantial worries that one might have about Peterson's main arguments, just a small sample of which will be addressed here. For example, Peterson makes much of the fact that in *Republic* 2, Glaucon uses the language of the courtroom and asks Socrates to provide a *speech* in defense of justice, a request that prompts Socrates' discussion in the rest of the dialogue. The significance, Peterson argues, is that because courtroom speeches aim at *persuasion*, rather than truth, we have no reason to think that the depicted Socrates is articulating his own convictions. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that the fact that Socrates aims to persuade his interlocutors does not mean that he aims *only* to persuade them. In the *Gorgias* Socrates distinguishes two kinds of persuasion: oratory, which produces conviction without knowledge, and teaching, which produces conviction with knowledge. The critical attitude he takes toward oratory there, and that Plato takes toward it in other dialogues, should make us doubtful whether the Socrates of the *Republic* would adhere to the conventions of courtroom oratory in his response to Glaucon, and in particular, whether he would try to persuade others of views of which he himself. Moreover, there is an important difference between courtroom speeches and the 'speech' Socrates undertakes in the *Republic*: the former is recited to a mass of people, the latter is a private conversation. Socrates suggests in the *Gorgias* that persuasion through teaching is not possible for a 'large gathering' (455a). Why should we not think that *private* teaching *is* possible, however, and that that is precisely what Socrates, by engaging in the right kind of 'speech' with Glaucon and Adeimantus, is doing?

Most troubling, however, are Peterson's arguments against the philosophical views expressed by Socrates in the 'doctrinal' dialogues. To begin with, her objections often appeal to intuitions that are much more likely to be compelling to contemporary philosophers than they would have been to Plato. For example, she is repulsed by the elitism implied by the structure of the Kallipolis (91), and she finds Socrates' suggestion in the digression of the *Theaetetus* that philosophers strive to 'become like God' to be irredeemably flawed and 'the worst idea I have ever heard in philosophy' (82). Moreover, her arguments sometimes rely on uncharitable or questionable interpretations of the texts. For example, she criticizes the inclusion of a warrior class in the Kallipolis on the

grounds that the purpose of the military force is ‘to serve a population that desires soft living’ (111). Although it is true that the need for a guardian class is introduced by Glaucon’s suggestion that the city will need more land to satisfy its increasing needs, it becomes very clear in what follows in Books 2–4 that Plato conceives a much different role for the guardians in the city. Their primary purpose, it turns out, is not to fight against *external* enemies for land and luxuries, but rather to prevent *internal* faction and division in the city by enforcing the judgments and laws of the rulers. There is nothing obviously objectionable about the latter role.

A more general objection to Peterson’s approach is that, if Plato had never drifted from his commitment to the view expressed by Socrates in the *Apology*—the view that the limit of human wisdom is the awareness that one is ignorant and that one lacks the expertise necessary for teaching others—then we would expect Plato to have lived a life much like that of the depicted Socrates. Yet he did not, and several features of Plato’s biography (none of which are ever addressed by Peterson) seem straightforwardly in tension with the Socratic message of the *Apology*: Plato wrote dialogues, he founded a school, and he traveled to Sicily multiple times in an effort to establish a philosophical ruler there. All of these activities suggest an individual who had come to believe that he had more to teach than the Socrates of the *Apology* took himself to be able to teach.

Finally, Peterson’s view and her arguments suggest that we have only two options in interpreting dialogues such as *Theaetetus*, *Phaedo*, and the *Republic*: either the ‘doctrinal’ Socrates, and a Plato who was convinced of the views expressed by that Socrates, or the ‘examining’ Socrates, and a Plato who was convinced of the failure of the views expressed by that Socrates. This picture is unsatisfying, however, for it ignores a wide range of possibilities between these extremes. We might think, for example, that through the apparently doctrinal Socrates, or through the combined contributions of Socrates and his interlocutors, Plato was trying out views that he found attractive, but toward which he maintained a healthy skepticism. We might also think that Plato was not trying out the views themselves, but rather trying out arguments in favor of certain views to which he already felt deeply committed. Or, alternatively, we might simply think that the dialogues were never intended to provide an answer to the question, does the depicted Socrates believe what he is saying, or, in turn, does Plato believe what the depicted Socrates is saying? We might even think that Plato himself was not sure how to answer those questions in all cases. Peterson does not consider these possibilities.

While Peterson’s main conclusions are problematic, and the arguments she offers in support of them largely unconvincing, her point of view is unique and interesting, and it deserves consideration. Moreover, the sharp observations and commentary on the dialogues that she offers throughout the book make this a worthwhile read.

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