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Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy.
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In confronting Plato's early dialogues, one must negotiate a host of methodological and substantive puzzles. In this book Wolfsdorf successfully traverses a careful line between generality and attention to detail. The book is structured in order to reflect the Platonic conception of philosophy. It begins by analyzing our desire for ethical knowledge, progresses to a method deemed promising in ascertaining such knowledge, and concludes with the product of said method, namely a state of aporia.

The introduction consists of discussion of preliminary matters such as the dialogue form, the socio-political culture at the time, and the Socratic problem. After sketching the history of Platonic scholarship, Wolfsdorf proceeds to offer a critique of the current analytic tradition of interpretation. He identifies two deficiencies. First, there has been a tendency to inject concepts foreign to Plato and classical Athens. Second, the dramatic components of the dialogues have too often been ignored in favor of extracting arguments for logical evaluation. Wolfsdorf intends to avoid both problems.

The concept of 'a-structure' is the unifying feature of the book. This is a compositional technique utilized in the Platonic dialogues, wherein there exists 'a linear sequence or progression of beliefs and values' (15). In the case of the early dialogues, a-structure constitutes a shift from traditional Athenian views to Platonic views. For Wolfsdorf, this partly explains both the intertextual and intratextual inconsistencies of the dialogues. In other words, depending on the stage of argumentative development in a particular dialogue, Socrates may strategically adopt a certain view that is inconsistent with what he says at other stages in the same dialogue, or in another dialogue altogether. According to Wolfsdorf, Plato utilizes a-structure for protreptic reasons, that is, to encourage readers to adopt philosophy as opposed to tradition and custom.

The desire for knowledge is the focus of the second chapter. Wolfsdorf surveys four possible interpretations of the Platonic thesis that 'everyone desires the good' (31) and makes a case for the subjectivist interpretation wherein desire is predicated on the *fallible* judgment that a desideratum is good. All interpretations of this Platonic thesis depend upon four passages—*Meno* 77-8, *Protagoras* 352-7, *Lysis* 220-2, *Gorgias* 466-8—the latter of which scholars think is the most compelling evidence against the subjectivist reading. Whereas the *Meno* concludes that desiderata are judged to be good, the *Gorgias* exchange amounts to saying that desiderata are good *tout court*. Wolfsdorf's explanation of this textual anomaly hinges on the distinction between instrumental and terminal desires, specifically that 'people terminally desire good things' (47). One thus needs to keep separate the notions that someone can think a particular action is best and act accordingly, and that someone can yet act contrary to his or her terminal desire. We

are not yet out of the woods, however, for there still remains the task of explaining why wisdom, health, and wealth are treated as though they are objectively good (*Gorgias* 467). Wolfsdorf diffuses this puzzle by pointing out that health and wealth are repeatedly rejected as objective goods in other early dialogues (*Euthydemus*, *Meno*), thereby giving reasonable grounds for concluding that the premise is borrowed from conventional thinking and thus does not amount to the genuine Platonic view.

After expounding on the priority of definitional knowledge in the early dialogues, Wolfsdorf considers the sort of ethical knowledge possessed by Socrates. For Wolfsdorf, the repeated disavowals of knowledge are genuine in the sense that Socrates does not possess any *ethical* knowledge. In making his case, relevant passages usually purported to reveal Socrates' knowledge are analyzed. In some cases, the knowledge claim is simply not ethical in nature. In others, the claim is more properly a belief-claim, albeit a confident one, as opposed to a knowledge-claim. Those claims that do seem to contain ethical knowledge can be accounted for via a-structure.

The *elenchus* is the subject of the fourth chapter. Wolfsdorf argues that a comprehensive survey of the early dialogues does not permit the adversarial interpretation of the elenctic method. This interpretation, most closely associated with Vlastos, is the standard one. Rather, Wolfsdorf argues that Socrates typically assists his interlocutors. His primary concern is the veracity of the definitional candidates as offered by alleged experts, lay people, and even himself on occasion (e.g., *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*).

The introduction of the hypothetical method at *Meno* 86e1-87b2 has often been taken to be a qualitative departure from the elenctic method. Nevertheless, what the hypothetical method amounts to is still unclear. It may mean what we mean by hypothesis, namely a proposition put forward whose truth is uncertain. Wolfsdorf, on the other hand, argues that the use of hypothesis in the *Meno* is more properly understood mathematically, namely as a postulate taken to be self-evident. Such 'cognitively secure propositions' (177) are utilized to advance an inquiry judged to be intractable. In the case of the *Meno*, for example, there is a reduction from the notion that excellence is teachable to the notion that excellence is knowledge. This reduction, which Wolfsdorf claims is the distinguishing characteristic of the hypothetical method, is meant to break new ground in the original discussion. With such revisions in mind, Wolfsdorf concludes that the elenctic and the hypothetical methods, insofar as they are methods, are not incompatible, and that they are far more consistent than hitherto understood.

Cognitively secured propositions are then available as a possible answer to the Socratic paradox of definitional knowledge in the *Meno*. This introduces Wolfsdorf concept of an F-condition; it specifies 'a condition that a satisfactory definition must satisfy' (186). For instance, in the *Charmides*, one F-condition for temperance is that it is good. Yet given that modesty can be both good and bad (161a11-b2), the proposed

definition that temperance is modesty proves faulty. The question then becomes whether such F-conditions are cognitively secure. The dissent of various interlocutors proves that they are not. Wolfsdorf concludes that the early dialogues do not present us with an adequate means to acquire definitional knowledge.

In the final chapter, aporia and the tension between philosophy and anti-philosophy are discussed. The *Charmides* serves as a case study. Finally, there is a useful appendix in which Wolfsdorf examines the role of irony in the dialogues. He claims, rightly I think, that irony is excessively deployed as a catch-all to explain away recalcitrant evidence of a particular interpretation. Wolfsdorf seeks to retain the complexity of the Socratic character.

The result is a fine book for both specialists and those with a more general interest in ancient philosophy. Wolfsdorf is careful to appreciate the dramaturgical elements of the dialogues as well as the culture in which they were authored. The concept of a-structure is persuasively defended and constitutes genuine progress in dealing with textual inconsistencies. The book ought to stand alongside Charles Kahn's *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (1996) as a seminal introduction to the early dialogues.

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