SOCRATES AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE DIALOGUES OF PLATO

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates says he spent his life examining and questioning people on how best to live, while avowing that he himself knows nothing important. Elsewhere, however, for example in Plato's *Republic*, Plato's Socrates presents radical and grandiose theses. In this book Sandra Peterson offers a new hypothesis which explains the puzzle of Socrates' two contrasting manners. She argues that the apparently confident doctrinal Socrates is in fact conducting the first step of an examination: by eliciting his interlocutors' reactions, his apparently doctrinal lectures reveal what his interlocutors believe is the best way to live. She tests her hypothesis by close reading of passages in the *Theaetetus*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo*. Her provocative conclusion, that there is a single Socrates whose conception and practice of philosophy remain the same throughout the dialogues, will be of interest to a wide range of readers in ancient philosophy and classics.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521190619

First published 2011
3rd printing 2012
First paperback edition 2013

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Peterson, Sandra, 1940–
Socrates and philosophy in the dialogues of Plato / Sandra Peterson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-19061-9 (hardback)
1. Plato. Dialogues. 2. Socrates. 3. Philosophy. 1. Title.
B395.P3865 2011
184 – dc22 2010052773

ISBN 978-0-521-19061-9 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-107-66799-0 Paperback

Why is my verse so barren of new pride?[1]
So far from variation or quick change?
Why, with the time, do I not glance aside
To new-found methods and to compounds strange?
Why write I still all one, ever the same,
And keep invention in a noted weed,[2]
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth and where they did proceed?
O, know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument;
So all my best is dressing old words new,
Spending again what is already spent:
For as the sun is daily new and old,
So is my love still telling what is told.

(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 76)

[1] *pride* adornment. [2] *noted weed* familiar garment.

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the University of Minnesota for the sabbatical leave of 2005–2006 that gave me time to work on this book. For research support during 2005–2007 while I held the John M. Dolan Professorship I am grateful to Asher Waldfogel, who endowed the Professorship in honor of his undergraduate teacher at the University of Minnesota. I am also grateful for Asher's sustained interest in my project.

I am grateful to the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press for their careful reading of the manuscript. For her meticulous and insightful copy-editing I give many thanks to Barbara Docherty. I am most grateful to editor Hilary Gaskin for her attention.

The book's thesis that Plato's Socrates sometimes makes statements that reveal the thoughts of his interlocutors and do not express his own convictions first occurred to me while I was thinking about the *Phaedo* for an essay on Socrates' last words. The essay was for a conference in honor of Terry Penner on his 65th birthday. (He had been my adviser for a dissertation on Aristotle.) The inspiration of the splendid Penner Fest at the University of Wisconsin in 2001 was a starting point for my book.

Soon thereafter I became interested in the digression of the *Theaetetus*. Presenting work-in-progress for the Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy for 2004 was a most valuable experience. Presenting a revision for the John M. Dolan Memorial Conference at the University of Minnesota was also useful. Giving a paper for the Arizona Colloquium in 2005 helped me articulate my thoughts on book 2 of the *Republic*. Presenting a revision for a Sister Mona Riley lecture at St. Catherine University in St. Paul helped me to progress.

I am very grateful to the many hosts for those events, and grateful to the participants for many thought-provoking comments and energizing reactions.

When I realized that an overarching idea tied together my thoughts about the *Theaetetus* and the *Republic*, what I had written seemed to be a start on a book. I then studied the *Apology* to learn how Socrates thought of his whole life near its end. The ensuing *Apology* chapter was the most difficult part of the book to write. After I had written a chapter on conceptions of philosophy in several dialogues of Plato, I added a full chapter on the *Phaedo*.

More people than I can possibly acknowledge here have occasioned or influenced specific points in the book. The decades of students both graduate and undergraduate that worked through my questions about Plato's dialogues have my gratitude. Among them I thank especially Tom Doyle and Josh Kortbein for their responses to the first draft of the manuscript, and Christopher Moore for written comments on the entire manuscript. Many colleagues at the University of Minnesota and more widely in the profession have shown an interest that helped me. Here I will mention only Betty Belfiore, Norman Dahl, Gene Garver, and John Wallace to thank them for their questions and encouragement over the years.

I would like to record here my gratitude to schoolteachers who made possible my studies of ancient philosophy and whom I cannot now thank personally.

Donald Davidson's epistemology course that I attended as an undergraduate used the *Theaetetus* as a central text. The dialogue and Davidson's engagement with it made a lasting impression on me.

My first examples of scholars of ancient philosophy were G.E.L. Owen and John Ackrill, my teachers of Aristotle at Oxford. I continue to find surprising the consideration and time that they gave to me as a B.Phil. student. Although their massive learning could serve only as a distant beacon, they themselves were personal influences.

Ackrill was also the teacher of my first graduate class on Plato at Princeton, a seminar on the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. My second graduate class on Plato was a seminar on Plato's metaphysics taught by Gregory Vlastos. My last Plato class was on Plato's theory of forms, taught by Harold Cherniss. Vlastos had persuaded Cherniss, who had no obligation to teach, to offer the seminar. Vlastos participated in that memorable experience. I must also mention that Vlastos had given me helpful advice about my application in 1963 for graduate work in philosophy at Princeton. He gave extraordinary support and encouragement during my graduate studies and afterwards.

An even older debt is to Dr. Johanna Goetzl, my Latin teacher at San Mateo High School in California. Her generous offer to teach me ancient

Greek after school (and then her insistence on further after-school lessons in her native German) set me on the path that led to this book. I still remember the fun of our reading a lesson on participles based on a passage in Plato's *Lysis*.

I offer the book to the reader.

Abbreviations

DK	Diels, Hermann, 1882. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 vols., 9th edn., ed. Walther Krantz. Berlin; repr. 1966, Dublin
D.L.	Hicks, R.D., 1925. *Diogenes Laertius*, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. trans. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge, MA, repr. 1991
LSJ	Liddell, H.G., Scott, R., and Jones, H.S. eds., [1843] 1961. *A Greek–English Lexicon*. Oxford
OCD	Hornblower, Simon and Spawforth, Antony (eds.), 1999. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn. Oxford
SSR	Giannantoni, Gabriele (ed.), 1990. *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*. Naples
VP	*Vita Pythagorica* = Hershbell, Jackson, and Dillon, John (eds. and trans.), 1991. *Iamblichus: On the Pythagorean Way of Life. Text, Translation, and Notes*. Atlanta

Preface

The Socrates of some of Plato's dialogues is the avowedly ignorant figure of the *Apology* who knows nothing important and who gave his life to examining himself and others. In contrast, the Socrates of other dialogues such as the *Republic* and *Phaedo* gives confident lectures on topics of which the examining Socrates of the *Apology* professed ignorance. It is a long-standing puzzle why Socrates acts so differently in different dialogues.

To explain the two different manners of Socrates a current widely accepted interpretation of Plato's dialogues offers this two-part, Plato-centered, hypothesis: (i) the character Socrates of the dialogues is always Plato's device for presenting Plato's own views; and (ii) Plato had different views at different times. The Socrates who confidently lectures presents these famous four doctrines: Plato's blueprint for the best state, Plato's "Theory of Forms," Plato's view that philosophy is the knowledge of those Forms that fits the knower for the highest government stations, and Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul.

To explain Socrates' two different manners this book offers instead an interlocutor-centered hypothesis that the character Socrates, who is permanently convinced that he knows nothing great, has reason to conduct different kinds of examination with different interlocutors. With some, he is the avowedly ignorant questioner. With others, he has reason to appear to be a confident lecturer: the reaction of interlocutors to an apparently confident lecture reveals them. Revealing them is the first step of an examination of them. Throughout Plato's dialogues Socrates' philosophizing centrally involves examining.

This book discusses some putatively doctrinal passages that seem the greatest obstacles to its thesis of the constantly ignorant and examining Socrates. Details of each containing dialogue show that, appearing to instruct, Socrates is instead conducting the revelatory first step of an examination. The second step would be critical logical scrutiny of the beliefs revealed. We do not see that second step after these apparently doctrinal

passages. Nevertheless, Socrates' practice in these passages is exactly the examination that he says in the *Apology* that he continually engaged in.

The book's argument has the result – important though negative – that the dialogues it considers give the reader no reason to believe that Socrates, as depicted, held the famous four doctrines or that Plato was endorsing them through his presentation of Socrates.

Since Socrates does not critically examine the famous four putatively Platonic teachings in the dialogues it considers, the book does some examining on his behalf. The book finds that the putative teachings it considers fail critical scrutiny. Their failure gives us reason for the stronger positive result that Socrates, as depicted, and hence Plato, would in fact reject the putative teachings.