ON DEFENDING SOCRATES

James Warren

James Warren responds to Sandis's preceding article.

Constantine Sandis has done Plato the great honour of taking very seriously some very serious Platonic ideas. The cluster of thoughts aired here and there in the Platonic dialogues that we tend to bundle under the term 'The Theory of Forms', its associated epistemology and psychology and the various repercussions these all may have for political expertise are all meaty and important philosophical ideas. But it is not clear to me that the sort of defence they are being offered is in a proper Platonic spirit.

First, a note of academic and interpretative caution. Sandis takes the 'Socratic' theses he defends from a number of different Platonic works: *Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Gorgias*. (I have no idea by the way whether the historical Socrates himself defended any of these; from what we do know it seems rather implausible that he did, hence the scare quotes.) It seems to me that although these all are in some sense dealing with recognisably related ideas, there is no guarantee – and we should not assume – that they all share all of the 'Socratic' theses Sandis wishes to defend. It is far from easy, for example, to find any clear gesture in *Republic* towards the notion of recollection as found in *Phaedo* and *Meno*. The lesson is surely that Plato did not always think it necessary to offer this whole package of ideas and perhaps even thought better of some of his earlier thoughts when he came to write a later work. We should feel relaxed enough to recognise that these theses do not all stand and fall together.

There are other things one might say about any attempt to rehabilitate any Platonic conception of matters ontological and epistemological. It seems to me far from necessary to make the leap from the recognition of some common property of 'beauty' which we can identify in such diverse instances as Helen of Troy, the sunlight on a college lawn, John Coltrane's *A Love*

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Supreme and an elegant mathematical proof to the assertion that there must be some further thing, 'beauty itself', distinct from and separate from all these instances. First, there seems to me to be no reason to think that every item in this list does indeed share a common property (as Wittgenstein would have pointed out, perhaps, thinking of his own concerns that there is only a 'family resemblance' between all the items we call a 'game'). And second, even if we do feel happy with a common shared property of beauty, why go for Plato's assertion of a transcendent Form of Beauty, imperceptible, eternal, simple and unchanging? Other positions are possible and much less ontologically extravagant. Some further reasoning would be needed to tip the balance of plausibility firmly in Plato's favour: perhaps some conception of the stability and goodness of the world as a whole, some notion of the perceptible world's palpable deficiency in comparison with what timeless beauty must necessarily be, or the like.

To be sure, there are indeed thoughts like this in Plato and they are taken up and vigorously criticised by his greatest pupil, Aristotle. Indeed, various thoughts about Forms are taken up and scrutinised by Plato himself in perhaps his most surprising but laudable works, *Parmenides*. That Plato himself could write a work whose first pages contain a whole series of attacks on the very notion of Forms is to his credit as a philosopher. Whether he thought these attacks unanswerable is a vexed interpretative question, but if we are to defend his philosophy then we ought to defend it all – not just the dogmatism but also the constant insistence on the power and necessity of critical investigation, most importantly of self-critical investigation.

If Forms are granted, then various other things will follow. Once we have bought a package which includes a transcendent perfect Beauty, the cause of the many but imperfectly beautiful things we might perceive, then there will of course be an epistemological gap between those who have intellectually recognised the Forms and see the perceptible world as it in fact is – a materially-realised and changing, qualified, bundle of imperfect representations of the Forms – and those who look on the perceptible world without the proper framing within this overall ontological picture. I'm not sure this means that

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someone who does not know the Form of Beauty cannot see a beautiful painting *as* a beautiful painting. But the Socrates of the *Republic* would certainly want to say that something is amiss if we base our conceptions of beauty, goodness and the rest solely on our experience of perceptible instances. The problem is rather that the aesthete thinks that beauty is best viewed through artistic representations – that a thorough knowledge of painting qualifies him as an expert about beauty *tout court*. That, Plato's Socrates will say, is simply to mistake pale imitations (in the case of mimetic art, imitations of imitations) for the real thing. The true expert – the person we would want to rule – is the knower of Forms. It will also follow that mere persuasion in the absence of knowledge is unhelpful and often downright dangerous. Socrates' anti-democratic epistemology, combined with his radical realism about moral properties, does indeed tell us not to trust the person who tells those of us who are not philosopher-kings just what we *want* to hear; better to put our trust in the person who really knows what is good for us.

I'm not sure Plato's confident paternalism is a great deal more comforting than the fog of ill-informed rhetoric. And, as I've said, I have strong reasons to resist the more extravagant flights of Platonic metaphysics. Still, Sandis is certainly right to insist that this philosophy is *relevant*: it is relevant precisely because it invites argument and dissent and the dialogue form in which Plato chose to write is perfect for the encouragement of engaged dialogue with whatever ideas happen to be presented. Wittgenstein too, it seems to me, was a writer who wanted to encourage critical reflection, self-criticism, and the avoidance of swallowing dogma on the basis of simple authority or tradition. That is a Socratic thesis (and this time one I am happy to think we should attribute it to Socrates himself) which Socrates bequeathed to Plato and Plato gave to the whole tradition of philosophy that followed. And it is a Socratic thesis which deserves vigorous and whole-hearted defence.

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