PROVOCATEUR

Roslyn Weiss: *The Socratic Paradox and Its Enemies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 235. $35.00.)

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In her latest book, Roslyn Weiss attempts to unravel a cluster of intractable problems that emerge from the portrait of Socrates painted in Plato's *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. Conventional interpretations of the Socrates presented in these dialogues, she acknowledges, ascribe to the gadfly of Athens no less than three major paradoxes: the view that "no one does wrong willingly" (the denial of *akrasia*); the insistence that "virtue is knowledge" (intellectualism); and the principle that "all the virtues are one" (the unity of the virtues). Conventional interpretive approaches, she also acknowledges, have attempted—or not—to rescue Socrates from the confusion, naïveté, or outright error associated with these paradoxes. Either way, the long running scholarly gambit has equally required Socrates' admirers and detractors to make sense of how someone as evidently gifted as he could embrace such apparently implausible positions. After all, counterexamples to each of the paradoxes seem readily available, so that Socrates must be credited either with making truly subtle points that only careful exegesis and exacting philosophical interpretation can uncover, or else with an overly idealistic moral philosophy that strains against the limits of ordinary human experience.

Against the considerable weight of convention, Weiss proposes a revolutionary reconsideration of the meaning of the Socratic paradoxes. To speculate upon the "peculiar and idiosyncratic beliefs to which Socrates subscribes," she writes, is "already to set off on the wrong foot" (5). Instead, we must read Socrates against the backdrop of an agonistic and eristic context, one in which he fights tooth and nail against the "steady diet of spiritual poison" proffered by the sophists and rhetoricians (26). "His interest lies not in propagating novel views on human choice and decisionmaking, but in arousing, provoking, confronting, and combating those . . . who would stand in the way of justice" (2). In consequence, we cannot understand the paradoxical views he expresses unless we understand them as radical responses to a variety of troubling views in the ascendancy in Athens. Our principal question must be this: "[W]hat is it in the beliefs of others that provokes Socrates to take and often vigorously defend in Plato's dialogues the extreme and jarring positions for which he has become known?" (5).

Weiss's answer is both elegant and masterfully explanatory. Socrates' paradoxes are—no more and no less—views that run *para* (alongside or counter to) a particular, ascendant *doxa* (belief or opinion) being promulgated by one or another self-important sophist. His insistence that "no one is willingly *un*just" is designed to contest "the noxious notion that no one is willingly

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just" (12). Similarly, Socrates' claim that "virtue is knowledge" is designed to defy "the odious view that it is the vicious who are wise and skilled . . . and the virtuous who are dupes and fools" (13). And Socrates' apparent commitment to the unity of the virtues opposes "the notion, promoted in some sophistic circles, that certain virtues, specifically wisdom and courage, are characteristic of those who are superior and dominant, whereas others, specifically, justice, temperance, and piety, are to be found only among the most stupid . . . and weak" (14). Thus is it that the Socratic paradox "takes on a formidable opponent—the pervasive belief that justice is something that nobody really wants and hence something that only the weak and incompetent and unintelligent practice" (27).

While Weiss is aware that her account presents a Socrates "uncomfortably at odds with the picture to which most Plato scholars subscribe" (208), she offers a wonderfully well-argued interpretive alternative. In separate, chapter-length treatments of the six key dialogues at stake, she builds a remarkable case for rethinking the so-called paradoxes, the cumulative effect of which is persuasive. At every turn, she demonstrates a deft handling of the tried-and-true approaches, an admirable interpretive verve, a competent grasp of textual nuances, and a commonsensical insight into the moral, philosophical, political, and rhetorical context that gave us Socrates' would-be paradoxes.

By the end of the book, Weiss's readers cannot help wanting to replace the "old" Socrates of conventional interpretation with the "new" Socrates on behalf of which she argues. This new Socrates does not deny *akrasia*, does not intellectualize virtue, and does not imagine that a part of virtue guarantees the whole of virtue. Instead, his "views concerning moral psychology are . . . quite ordinary" (22). With his paradoxes he intends no dubious description of the moral life. Instead, he seeks to engage in elenctic argument that shows his interlocutors "that they cannot sustain their own views and therefore are not entitled to hold them or promulgate them" (213). Thereby, perhaps, Socrates can show up the tripe of the sophists for what it is. Even if suffering the effects of Socrates' harsh elenchus cannot succeed in reforming Protagoras, Gorgias, Polus, Callicles, Thrasymachus, and company, it, nonetheless, can show onlookers—especially the young—a better way. The way to real human happiness, Socrates believes, ardently resists injustice even though we sometimes opt for its attractions. Our flourishing requires that we cherish virtue as the way of the wise rather than that of the foolish, despite the scornful insinuations of the sophists. And if we are to be morally well-tutored, we must deny that wise and courageous persons disdain other virtues such as justice and temperance.

Notwithstanding its merits, Weiss's book has two shortcomings. First, she does not adequately allow that Socrates could have multiple ends in view with his paradoxes. If Socrates engages in eristic combat designed to shame the sophists for defaming the truth, and if his method involves sharply countering their outrageous defamations of virtue with rhetorically powerful

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countermeasures, he could all the while *also* intend to raise the philosophically puzzling paradoxes conventionally credited to him. It is unclear why Weiss's interpretation must necessarily exclude the possibility of other interpretive strata. Why not both her view and the conventional views? After all, Plato's Socrates often works at several levels and in view of different audiences. Second, whether or not Socrates finally denies *akrasia*, holds to intellectualism, and embraces the unity of the virtues, both the moral psychology and the metaphysics of the virtues that scholars have explored on conventional approaches are of philosophical import. Improbable and vexed as the conventionally regarded paradoxes may be, they present beguiling possibilities that are worthy of the attention scholars have lavished upon them. Greater recognition on Weiss's part of the philosophical merits of the interpretations she sets aside would make her efforts less jarringly at odds with "most Plato scholars."

Many scholars of Socratic philosophy, nonetheless, will wish they had written Weiss's book, or at least will wish that they long ago had read it. By treating Socrates' more puzzling claims as dramatic confrontations of the moral, political, and social upheaval wrought by the sophists, Weiss properly places Socrates within his historically contingent context. And understanding why Socrates is moved to press paradoxical claims upon his interlocutors helps us all the better to see what he means by his paradoxical claims.

–Douglas V. Henry

WHAT A MAN'S GOTTA DO

Harvey Mansfield: *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 289. $27.50.)

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Harvey Mansfield begins his new and much-awaited book: "This book is about manliness. What is that?" He thereby indicates that the reader has a philosophical book in hand. It concerns what manliness *is*, as a Platonic dialogue concerns what courage or piety is. One might say that Mansfield wishes to outline a vision of the idea of manliness as well as to discuss the degrees to which it is, or can be, incarnate in human beings. The balance of the preface is a "preview," a subtle, methodical, and methodological outline of the rest of the book. First, he says what manliness does. "It seeks and welcomes drama and prefers times of war, conflict and risk." Then, he presents the first definition. "Manliness is the next-to-last resort, before resignation and prayer." In this definition, we recognize the figure of the volunteer, familiar from an earlier book, and something related to Platonic *thymos*, the quality of the soul that enables or induces manly men, he-men, hombres, *andres* to

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