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Response to the Review Symposium on *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry: Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement*

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I am very grateful to all the reviewers. Thanks to Julian Rome for his stimulating and helpful commentary; to Avi Mintz for his incisive and fruitful questions; and to Yoshiaki Nakazawa and Mark Jonas for their trenchant and productive questions and objections. Thanks also for their generosity and exceedingly kind words. Because of space constraints, I will respond to only two of Mintz's, two of Nakazawa's, and three of Jonas' questions or concerns. I will respond to them simply in the order that reduces overlap among my replies.

Plato's protreptic

In carrying out the project proposed in the book, we would study the ways in which Plato's Socrates engages in protreptic, meaning the ways he tries to draw people into self-examination, in the sense of that term which the book specifies. Quite sensibly, Mintz asks, in effect: "Why not study *Plato's* protreptic in addition to Socrates'?," and at points Mintz may even mean: "Why not study Plato's *instead* of Socrates'?" As Mintz notes, Plato is evidently far more effective at influencing his audience than Socrates is at influencing his.

Though I agree, of course, that Plato's methods are well worth considering, analyzing them seems less constructive than studying Socrates' protreptic, as long as we are interested, as I am, less in learning about Plato than in learning how best to protrepticize people. Granted, because of how adept Plato is as an author, we can learn from him how best to shape one's writings so as to encourage self-examination. But what will we do with the knowledge we have gained once we have it? We could use it to create new writings that are like Plato's, but why do so when Plato's writings already exist? They are effective enough that, to protrepticize people whom they are suited to, we might as well just point them to Plato's dialogues themselves. And for people whom they are *not* suited to—people who lack enough patience for them or are in a hurry—we probably would have to write something

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radically different from the dialogues, different enough that they are not a good model for it, and different enough that it might never be very effective. Quite likely, to reach the second group of people, we would have to appeal to them in person, in which case, to prepare ourselves, we are better off analyzing Socrates' conversations than studying Plato's writings. It may be true, as Mintz says, that Socrates has little success. But the book maps a way to learn from his errors and, in turn, to form a theory about how to practice protreptic most effectively, a theory that might ultimately be testable by social scientists and could be applied to modern life.

Modern protreptic

The point of the book is not to develop the kind of theory I just mentioned but to make the case for taking on the task of developing it by means of Plato's dialogues. Accordingly, although the book begins that task, it does not finish it, given how much work is required. Mintz asks what the theory and its application to the modern world might look like once the process was complete. Naturally, we would not know the details until the end, but I can clarify what the goal of the process is. The goal is a theory that, to whatever extent possible, divides human beings and situations into categories and, of all the protreptic strategies that are conscionable, predicts which would be most effective for which people in which circumstances—which people practicing protreptic and which people being protrepticized. The theory in its initial stages should make predictions such as "Strategies *X*, *Y*, and *Z* are the most promising strategies that can employed by someone of type-*1* on someone of type-*2* in circumstances of type-*3*." Without question, there is a limit to how fine-grained the theory could be. Protreptic is almost surely phronetic to a large degree, meaning, in part, that there cannot be an algorithm for it and that, in order to do it well, we must rely on our judgment. But at the least, an ideal theory of protreptic would *tutor* our judgment about it and provide rough yet instructive guidance, much in the way that, say, on certain views, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean can provide rough but helpful guidance on acting virtuously. To apply the doctrine of the mean (if we can put it that way), one moves among a series of paradigm cases in a manner that commentators have described: one considers, for example, the patience that Odysseus shows, the courage that Hector shows, and the temperance that Socrates displays in specific instances. The application of the theory of protreptic would work in a similar, if more specific, way.

Plato's intentions

A substantial part of the book addresses a concern that I think Plato's readers are likely to have—namely, that engaging Plato in the way proposed in the book would be illegitimate in the classroom or in Plato scholarship, because it merely co-opts Plato's dialogues and, thus, is not actually a way of studying them. In the book, as Rome helpfully explains, I articulate that worry and then respond to it, arguing that we know too little about Plato's authorial intentions to tell whether someone is co-opting his dialogues. Nakazawa suggests that, because of how lengthy my defense of that claim is, part of my motivation for defending it might seem to be that I accept an argument of this sort:

1. We probably cannot know what Plato's intentions are.
2. If we cannot, then the only sensible way of engaging Plato is studying Socratic protreptic.
3. So we might as well study Socratic protreptic.

In case Nakazawa is right, it is good that he has led me to clarify, since I do not accept that argument. Though, for example, its first premise looks plausible to me, I stop short of endorsing it; and I reject the second premise. In the book, I make my case at such length only because I think the concern about legitimacy needs to be addressed fully, and fully addressing it is a major undertaking. Nakazawa wonders whether I overestimate how deep the concern would run among Plato's readers, but experience tells me that I do not; and the concern makes sense, after all. Plato is a beloved part of civilization; he is a figurehead for philosophy; and there is a long tradition of studying him the way students, teachers, and scholars study him now. It is understandable if conventional approaches to Plato seem sacred and exclusively correct.

Moral education

Nakazawa asks what, if anything, I think the study of Socratic protreptic can do to enhance moral education and whether, in my view, enhancing moral education is even the main purpose of theorizing about protreptic. He is right to ask, since the book addresses the topic incompletely and only briefly and indirectly. I do think the main point of studying protreptic is to improve people—both ourselves and everyone else. As I see it, to spur someone into self-examination is to make them better, since it is to leave them better equipped to live a good life. Whether we should say in every case that it is to make them *morally* better depends, in part, on how we ought to define the term 'moral'. I will give examples of the sorts of improvement I have in mind, and I will let the reader decide whether all of them count as moral improvement.

When I refer to self-examination, my thought is that someone who genuinely engages in it engages in it regularly rather than just once or on occasion, and the idea is that it is directed not only at *abstract* issues about how to live well, such as the kinds that would be addressed in academic essays, but also at questions about specific and personal situations, such as a particular disagreement with a family member or a vexing decision at school or work. As I say in the book, I also suppose that to engage in self-examination is to want the truth most of all. There are significant respects in which we can fail to want the truth that way. But there is also a sense in which everyone always wants it. For reasons explained in the book, all ordinary human beings are committed to having true beliefs and adequate reasons for their beliefs, such that to forego self-examination is to fail by their own standards. So, as long as living up to our commitments is important, to bring someone to examine themselves is to improve them. It is to improve them, even if their beliefs have no effect on their actions at all.

And if their beliefs *can* affect how they act, then there are additional ways in which protreptic can help. After all, human beings are prone to reach the wrong conclusions, not only because of how susceptible we are to cognitive biases and self-deception but also because of how much we are influenced by other people. We tend to go with the flow, sometimes,

admittedly, because we have no other option, but often just because we do not think to do otherwise. There is nothing wrong with this in itself, perhaps, but it is a problem if the people around us are in error.

Our tendency to reach the wrong conclusions matters. As a result of it, the less we want the truth and act accordingly, such as by diligently trying to reason well and be honest with ourselves, the greater the risk that we will end up with false beliefs, including false beliefs that affect how well we live. There are various sorts of false beliefs that can do that. As examples, consider the following three.

First, we can form false beliefs about what is best or most important, either in general or in specific circumstances. We can be mistaken, for example, about which in general matters more—enjoyment or achievement, prosperity or compassion, providing for our children or spending time with them. And though there is no guarantee, of course, that self-examination will save us from errors in judgment, it is our best hope.

Second, we can form false beliefs about what has happened in our interactions with other people. For example, we can misjudge whether they have wronged us or we have wronged them. In some particular case or other, I may misconstrue your actions because anger has clouded my perception of them: I may overlook something notable about the situation, some detail that should change how I view it. Or, instead of just being mistaken, I may delude myself, perhaps because I want not to recognize that I have erred. Here, too, self-examination is the best line of defense. The more we want the truth, for example, the less likely we are to deceive ourselves about it. And if we are already stuck in self-deception, the most we can do to detect it and escape it is to be as meticulous and exhaustive as possible in assessing the evidence that is available to us.

Third, and finally, we can overestimate ourselves. We can think we are knowledgeable when, in fact, we are ignorant, or that our beliefs are clearly true when, in fact, they are false or, at least, highly questionable. The antidote is to spend time in serious reflection and in conversation with others who are adept.[1] People who have done this enough are not overconfident, even if they posture at times. Even when they suspect they have a successful argument, they always hold their breath until they hear the next objection, because of how often they have been surprised before. They come to have a firm sense of how much can be said against their views and how hard they are to defend. In this respect and others, they develop intellectual humility. This is significant since there is evidence that how intellectually humble or arrogant we are affects how well we behave—for example, how benevolently, empathetically, and altruistically we act.[2]

Partly because there is, I am cautiously sympathetic to the view in Plato that the love of truth and the devotion to seeking it are what gives rise to the moral virtues.[3] I even take seriously the view, ascribable to Plato, that the search for the good life is itself the good life, to borrow a phrase. There are respectable reasons to accept that view, though I will not go into them here.[4]

[1] Ahlstrom-Vij (2013, 26–27) discusses some of the relevant research. And see Ballantyne 2019.

[2] See Hook et al. 2017; Krumrei-Mancuso 2017; Wright et al. 2017, 7–8. See also Hannon 2020 for reason to think that deliberation in democracies ("the exchange of reasons for preferring certain outcomes or believing certain facts"; 593) fosters empathetic understanding which is a moral good.

[3] The view emerges when we read *Phaedo* 68c-69d with *Republic* 485a-487a.

[4] For references and a concise summary, see Gonzalez 2000, 259–63.

Self-examination, virtue, and beliefs

I will address three of the concerns that Jonas aptly raises. The first has to do with two of the suppositions presented in the book—suppositions we adopt if we take up the project that the book proposes. One of them is that Socrates' only aim in interacting with other people is to lead them to self-examination. Jonas objects that that idea about Socrates is incorrect because Socrates aims to foster not only self-examination but also virtue, in part by instilling in people true moral beliefs. My response is that it is unimportant whether the suppositions guiding the project are correct, since the point of it is not to interpret Plato or Socrates correctly but strictly to use Plato's dialogues as a tool for learning about protreptic. To be sure, the suppositions have to be at least plausible, perhaps. But it is safe to think they are. Among other reasons, Socrates says in Plato's *Apology* that inquiry of his sort is "the greatest good" for human beings (μέγιστον ἀγαθόν: 38a). And to decide that he promotes certain beliefs, we need not hold that he deems them true. To elaborate on that point, let me turn to the second concern Jonas raises, which is a variation on the first concern.

Since he thinks I might deny that Socrates tries to shift other people's views, Jonas cautions that everyone needs to say he does—everyone including me, since I want to suppose, of course, that Socrates means to convert people to self-examination, and it might not be possible to convert them without changing what they believe. In response, I can agree that it might not be possible; what I say in the book does not imply that it is. The relevant supposition proposed in the book, the one Jonas refers to in raising the concern, is simply this:

> Socrates is, at most, only minimally interested in changing other people's views. If he tries to persuade other people of certain beliefs, it is not because he thinks these beliefs are true (though he may think they are) but only because, as he sees it, they make us more likely to philosophize—for example, he thinks that believing there are Forms gives us hope that there is knowledge to be attained (cf. *Parmenides* 135b-c), and believing the theory of recollection assures us that knowledge is attainable (cf. *Meno* 86b-c). (Marshall 2021, 2)

Even while supposing that Socrates is only minimally interested in changing others' views, we can say that he is interested to some extent; and in studying protreptic my way, we allow that maybe he is—for example, that he may want people to accept that there are Forms, that the theory of recollection is true, and that the unexamined life is not worth living. It is just that, under our supposition, he promotes those beliefs simply because convincing people of them or having them consider them is useful for the purpose of getting people to examine themselves; he does not do it for the sake of imparting truth or knowledge that he thinks he has.

What about a relatively modest belief like "People should examine themselves" or "Self-examination is important"? Doesn't Socrates try to persuade people of some belief of that sort, and doesn't he do so in order for them to have truth or knowledge that he thinks he has? Perhaps; but although I doubt this point matters, I will add that there are ways to demur even here. In adopting my supposition, for example, we can say that, rather than trying to persuade people of that belief, he means only to lead them to reflect on whether it is true. And even if we conclude that he tries to persuade people of it, we can suppose that he does so just to spark self-examination, and not for the sake of imparting truth or knowledge. If

we need to, we can view him as a kind of skeptic who, in the style of Arcesilaus or Sextus Empiricus, for example, means to pursue and promote certain ends while suspending judgment about whether they are actually worth seeking.

Here, finally, is a response to Jonas' third concern. He contends that his view—that Socrates aims to cultivate virtue in people by instilling true beliefs—is more *useful* for educators than my supposition that he only encourages self-examination. I think that, in fact, the reverse is true, even if examining oneself is only part of living virtuously and, as I believe, is not the most vital part. Let me end by indicating why.

Jonas worries that, if you lead people only to self-examination instead of also to true beliefs about how important virtue is, they might examine themselves and ultimately decide that virtue is not worth pursuing.[5] But the worry, I submit, is misguided. In educating the way I envision, you need not lead them to self-examination alone. If, for example, they doubt that moral virtue is a worthy goal, you can give them good arguments for thinking it is.[6] It is just that it is best to draw them into self-examination, too, only in part so that they are responsive to good arguments in general.

We would do well, then, to figure out how best to practice protreptic, in my sense of the term. And the way Socrates can help us the most with that task is if we suppose that engendering self-examination is his only aim. The main reason involves one of the two approaches developed in the book (the one I call bottom-up). In taking that approach, you study closely what Socrates does in the dialogues, and you analyze why he does it—not, ultimately, to interpret him correctly, as Rome nicely underscores, but to think of protreptic strategies that have not occurred to you already. In the process, you adopt the supposition mentioned just now. Almost surely, you will find certain things he does that are hard to reconcile with it. And that is for the better, as I explain in the book. To work through the problem, you will have to be particularly inventive, such that you are likely to think of protreptic strategies that you would not have considered otherwise. This is significant because, if you *changed* your supposition—if you supposed that Socrates has other aims besides the one involving self-examination—you would miss the opportunity.

An objection might be that, if you*keep* your supposition, you will miss out on seeing all that Socrates does besides protreptic. But you can adopt the supposition without operating on it all the time—whenever appropriate, you can lay it aside and later pick it back up at will—since it need not reflect what you believe. If, for example, you hold that Socrates aims to foster virtue, you can simply bracket that view while carrying out the project I propose; and in between periods in which you engage in that project, you can continue the work that Jonas and Nakazawa (2020) and others have masterfully begun in trying to determine what Socrates' *means* are of promoting virtue.

Now, the thought might be that there is more to gain from that type of work than from the kind I recommend. But then my question would be why the former sort of work is useful at all. It surely is, but what is the reason? Perhaps, for example, Socrates is the right model for leading people to virtue, such that he shows us how best to do it. But it is not clear that he

[5] Jonas talks as if virtue is justice, courage, and the like, and I will follow suit for simplicity. I realize that virtue might be, roughly, just the equipment with which one flourishes (whatever that equipment is—justice, courage, and so forth, or something else instead), in which case, perhaps, everyone always values virtue.

[6] You can do this *in addition to* protrepticizing them or even just *in* protrepticizing them. In protrepticizing them, for example, you might do it if they think that virtue is a sham and that attaining power is all that matters, caseclosed, such that all that is necessary to determine how to live well is to calculate the surest means of attaining it. You might argue forcefully to the contrary just so they will hear out the alternative views.

is—if we want to say he is, we need good arguments—partly because of how little success he can seem to have at it. (Several of his interlocutors even are named conspicuously after ancient Greeks who turned out vicious in real life, including Alcibiades, whom Mintz is right to mention.) To be sure, the poor outcomes of Socrates' efforts might be due to factors beyond his control; but this may not matter. He may still be of limited use as a model unless he has reliable success in reaching his ends.[7] For this and other reasons, it can be hard to explain what the utility is of concluding that he promotes virtue.

Of course, we could simply *suppose* that he does and evaluate whether there are better ways to do it than he has found. But then we would be doing something similar to, or even virtually the same as, the sort of work I advocate in the book. Though I prefer the suppositions articulated therein, one could replace them while sticking basically to the model of theorizing I present. It is adaptable to a wide variety of purposes, even if it is best used for determining how to nurture thoughtfulness and productive dialogue.

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[7] See Zagzebski 2017, 110 ff. for reason to think a person is, at most, only partly virtuous unless they have reliable success in reaching virtuous ends and that this is the case regardless of how hard it is to reach them. 'Reliable success' is Zagzebski's phrase. She implies, incidentally, that Socrates is at least partly virtuous; see especially 10.