

## Zitierhinweis

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MARK A. RALKOWSKI, *Plato's Trial of Athens*, Bloomsbury Studies in Ancient Philosophy, London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, x+234 pp., ISBN 978-1-4742-2724-7.

Mark A. Ralkowski has written a fine book with a straightforward, persuasive thesis. The author claims that, in addition to the *Apology of Socrates*, many of Plato's other dialogues, including the *Symposium*, *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, and the *Republic*, also serve as defenses of Socrates. While many dialogues are undoubtedly apologetic—indeed, the dialogues taken as a whole may even be so—the author rightly identifies these handful of dialogues as being particularly so. For the most part, the author of *Plato's Trial of Athens* surveys the existing literature on these dialogues and offers interesting interpretation of them in support of his primary thesis. But as the title implies, the author proceeds to make a second thesis that, while also persuasive in many ways, proves thornier. The author contends that, in addition to defending Socrates from the charges that led to his execution, Plato's dialogues take on an adversarial, prosecutorial tone. Not only is Socrates innocent of the charge of corruption, but, in fact, Plato turns the tables and accuses Socrates's accusers of being the real corrupters of the youth. Plato puts Athens on trial.

The book consists of four chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter focuses on the question of Socrates's alleged impiety, chapters two and three address the corruption charge, and the fourth chapter grapples with Plato's prosecution of Athens. The structure reveals that the author's principal interest is the Platonic response to the accusation that Socrates corrupted the youth. With respect to impiety, the author treats the political implications of the topic in fairly broad terms, drawing upon a variety of ancient sources and categorizing the contemporary scholarly positions on this question. Chapter two focuses on what must surely have been "Exhibit A" in the prosecution's corruption charge against Socrates, his relationship with Alcibiades (or at least, given Socrates's connection to the tyrant Critias, "Exhibit B"). Ralkowski argues that Plato uses Alcibiades's appearance in the *Symposium* to show that Socrates did everything he could have done to educate Alcibiades and turn him to a life of philosophy and away from politics. Here, Ralkowski also lays the groundwork for his later account of Plato's indictment of Athens, for he argues Plato shows that Alcibiades was indeed corrupted, but the real culprit was the Athenian people, not Socrates. This second chapter also contains the author's most sustained textual analysis of any particular part of any particular dialogue; I found it to be the most compelling part of the book. The third chapter of the book consists of short analyses of parts of the three other dialogues mentioned above. In the fourth chapter, the author presents what he takes to be Plato's prosecutorial project. Again, the author looks at parts of two dialogues, this time

the *Critias* and *Timaeus*. This chapter also includes an interesting digression on Isocrates. By and large, chapter four interprets the Atlantis myth as a thinly veiled attack on democratic, imperial Athens by way of comparison to a superior, albeit mythical, city.

The author displays a mastery of the secondary literature on Plato, and his bibliography is both ecumenical and exhaustive. He has read and digested the thought of many of the various schools of interpretation; he regularly cites members of the Cambridge School, Straussians, Vlastosians, and others not as easily classified (I. F. Stone's investigative journalistic book on the trial of Socrates, for example, features fairly prominently in the first chapter). Moreover, in addition to regularly situating his argument within the existing literature, the author manages selectively to draw upon the discoveries and insights of various thinkers and schools, combining what is best in each and contributing to further development in the progress of Plato studies. Indeed, the author is painstakingly thorough—over a quarter of the book consists of lengthy notes at the end of each chapter of use to those who want to follow closely the elaborate train of the subject's scholarship.

The author's sound guiding interpretive principles, which he lays out in his introduction, are worthy of note: (1) Plato does not aim for biographical or historical accuracy in the dialogues; (2) the dialogues are dramas and ought, therefore, to be read dramatically; and (3) the dialogues—at least the early and middle dialogues—form a unified whole. The result is a “unified literary and philosophical project whose goal is to depict and defend philosophy, understood as a way of life that is embodied by Socrates” (5). The second and third principles allow the author to read the drama across dialogues, not just within a given dialogue, and the author rightfully recognizes that the dialogues are dramatically linked and is thus able to draw out important teachings from the whole. Thus, for example, the author's principles of interpretation allow him to see that Plato's treatment of Alcibiades is incomplete unless one follows his appearances throughout the dialogues. While these principles have in the past been controversial, it is good to see them now becoming broadly accepted among Plato scholars.

While the book abounds with insights, there are a few issues worth raising. For one, the author fixes his interpretive efforts, above all, on the corruption charge. Insofar as this reflects his interest, and insofar as one is compelled to limit one's scope in a book, the decision is perfectly justifiable. However, since the impiety and corruption charges are related, as the author acknowledges (12, 39–42), one wonders whether one can arrive at a satisfactory account of Socrates's guilt or innocence on one charge without having fully examined the other. To be sure, the first chapter of the book discusses the political character of the impiety charge, but, while the author clearly doubts Socrates believed in the conventional gods (36), he never addresses directly the simple question raised by the charges: was Socrates guilty of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other, novel divinities (*daimonia*)? The author ultimately concludes that Plato “*doesn't respond to the impiety charge at all*” (206, emphasis in original). It would be perplexing if Plato left the impiety charge unrefuted.

Are we to take this neglect as tacit recognition on Plato's part of Socrates's guilt? And if Socrates is guilty of impiety, would that not cast a cloud of doubt on the success of Plato's defense of the connected charge of corruption? It would have been good to see the author offer a sustained investigation of Plato's account of the impiety charge in the *Apology*. It would have been equally helpful to seek out a Platonic defense of Socrates's alleged impiety in the other dialogues he correctly identifies as apologetic. For the dialogues he points to bear directly on the question of Socrates's impiety. These remarks are meant to point to my chief concern with the book: while I found the author's interpretation of the parts of dialogues he treats interesting and generally persuasive, I would very much like to have seen the author bring his interpretive powers to bear on entire dialogues. Focusing solely on a part of a dialogue runs the risk of missing how the part fits into the dramatic whole.

In fact, two of the dialogues under the author's consideration, the *Republic* and *Symposium*, address both the corruption charge and the charge of impiety. The *Symposium*, the dialogue to which the author devotes more attention than any other dialogue, and the dialogue which the author identifies as the centerpiece in Plato's exoneration of Socrates (88), bears directly on the charge of impiety. The *Symposium*, after all, is the only dialogue devoted to an account of an individual Greek god, Eros, and in that dialogue Socrates denies that Eros is a god (202c). Not only does this seem to confirm, in fairly plain terms, that Socrates did not believe in the gods of the city, but, insofar as Socrates presents an argument for why Eros could not possibly be a god, an argument that could easily be extended to other Greek gods, the dialogue seems, so to speak, to recreate the crime. Also, in the *Republic*, another dialogue the author treats, Socrates radically revises the Greek conception of the gods. He says quite plainly that the stories the Greeks hear about the gods from Homer, Hesiod and the like are not true (378c). The gods cannot get angry or do battle against one another, nor can they take on human form. Rather, the god (singular) must be good and responsible only for good things, and the god must also be simple and unchanging. Later in that dialogue, Socrates introduces his so-called theory of the forms—one could easily be forgiven for taking this novelty as introducing new and strange divinities. Last, while it is a work outside of the author's purview, Socrates flat out admits that he does not believe the traditional tales told about the gods in the *Euthyphro*, the dialogue devoted to piety (6a). Let me suggest the author does not take seriously enough the possibility that Socrates was guilty of the impiety charge, and if Socrates is guilty of that charge, there would be implications for the related corruption charge as well.

The author's second broad thesis is that Plato held the true corrupters of the youth to be the Athenian citizens (137), an argument for which he offers good textual evidence (*Rep.* 492a-b). As alluded to above, the author concentrates his attention on Alcibiades as he builds his defense of Socrates and turns to his subsequent attack on Athens. Much depends, then, on the author's interpretation of Alcibiades, whose appearance in the *Alcibiades I* and the *Symposium* is treated in some depth. Again, the author argues that Socrates tried to turn Alcibiades to the

life of philosophy and away from politics. Let me just say that I am not convinced that Socrates tried to turn the young man to a life of philosophy so much as he aimed to moderate his ambition. And while moderating political ambition may be necessary to turning a young person toward a life of philosophy, it is not sufficient to show that such was Socrates's intention. Either way, it is evident he did not succeed. But I would be curious to know what the author makes of Alcibiades's appearance in other dialogues. The author may be excused for disregarding *Alcibiades II*, since that dialogue is widely held to be inauthentic (but consider the author's remarks on page 108 regarding the relevance of the question of the authenticity of *Alcibiades I*), but Alcibiades's brief, pivotal role in the *Protagoras* seems relevant, since the author wonders what happened to Alcibiades in the years between *Alcibiades I* and *Symposium* (107). Perhaps the *Protagoras*, which appears to have occurred very shortly after *Alcibiades I* dramatically, could shed some light on the question of what happened between Socrates and Alcibiades (lest one doubt the relevance of this dialogue to the questions raised in the *Symposium*, please note the number of characters who are present for both dialogues). In his dialogue with Protagoras, Socrates admits he barely noticed Alcibiades was there. Would Socrates's indifference to Alcibiades's presence at Callias's house indicate he had already given up on the youngster? The author takes Alcibiades's self-presentation in the *Symposium* more or less at face value, and he thus concludes that Alcibiades has been rationally, but not psychologically, persuaded that he should take Socrates as his mentor and pursue the life of philosophy. But has Alcibiades revealed himself to possess the self-knowledge required to take him at his word? Perhaps Alcibiades's nature was never suited for philosophy, and perhaps this is revealed in the first conversation between the two.

In the final chapter, Ralkowski extends his argument that the Athenians were the true corruptors beyond the specific case of Alcibiades. Plato, he argues, is anti-imperialist and anti-democratic (204), and these characteristics of the Athenian regime are particularly corrosive. Had Athens not been imperial and democratic, it seems to follow, it would not have corrupted the youth. This seems to miss Plato's stinging rebuke of all cities. No regime is open to the philosophic way of life. Surely we do not hold that, say, oligarchic, isolationist Sparta was more hospitable to philosophy than Athens (Socrates's joke to that effect notwithstanding, *Protagoras* 342a and ff.). Athens was not without its faults, to be sure. But the Athens that corrupted the young also made possible a symposium where the likes of Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates could get together. It produced one of the earliest and most brilliant flashes of civilization and was the school of Greece. And while it may not have actively produced a Socrates, it more or less tolerated his way of life for seventy years.

But Ralkowski does not look to existing regimes. He argues Plato was encouraging Athenians to abandon their extreme democracy and "replace it with the ideal city of the *Republic*" (188). So, part of the trial of Athens is not merely to convict them on the charge of corruption, but to convince them to change their regime and, instead of executing philosophers, elect them as rulers. We need not rehash the worn-out debate over the possibility and desirability of the

city in speech. Instead, let me just raise the question of audience. If Plato's goal was to persuade Athens to reform its imperial ways, if his goal was to persuade Athenian citizens that their democratic regime was corrupt and that they should replace it with the highly militarized, hierarchical rule of philosophers, then it would seem strange to put such an attack and admonition in the highly impenetrable *Timaeus* and *Critias* (the traditional subtitle for the former, "On Nature," indicates it would be of interest primarily to philosophers or lovers of philosophy, i.e., those already persuaded philosophy is worthwhile). What members of the *dēmos* would read *Timaeus* and *Critias* for political guidance? Perhaps Plato's aim was not to show Athens its regime was corrupt, but rather to show later readers. This gets to the question, then, of audience. For whom is Plato writing? It would seem that Ralkowski holds that Plato wrote at least this part of his work for Athenians. I would not dispute that but would instead suggest that members of the Athenian *dēmos* were unlikely to have been Plato's primary audience.

Let me end by reiterating that this book was compelling and thought-provoking. Indeed, I learned a good deal reading it. The author has penned a fine work and he should be proud of the contribution he has made to the voluminous scholarship on Plato. While I have highlighted my disagreements with the author, or the points where I think the author could have been more clear or penetrated more deeply, I appreciate what he has accomplished here and recommend this work especially for those who are interested in beginning to view Plato's works as a coherent whole and who sense that the dialogues are in a way dramatic. I would also recommend it for those interested in studying Socrates's relationship with Alcibiades. As I indicated above, the author's principles of interpretation strike me as sound starting points; the dialogues ought to be read dialectically. And I have tried, following his suggestion, to engage his book dialectically. After all, as the author rightly notes, the best insights are often the product of dialogue.

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