

On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues. By Christopher Bruell. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 240p. \$35.00.

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Christopher Bruell offers a series of interconnected commentaries on sixteen of Plato's shorter dialogues. Selection was based on the criterion of highlighting Socrates' art of education. Modestly suggesting that his commentaries are an "introduction" to the dialogues, and that they are offered as a contribution to contemporary debates on liberal education, Bruell reveals himself a subtle exegete and makes a highly important contribution to classical scholarship. Attentive to every nuance and twist of a dialogue, he displays a discernment and irony developed only after years of painstaking reading and rereading of the dialogues. That Bruell is himself an acclaimed teacher, and that his own students have gone on to become recognized teachers, offers assurance that he is deeply conscious of the Socratic imperative to exhibit consonance between speeches and deeds. In the preface, Bruell proposes that a recovery of the wisdom of these dialogues is necessary to answer the question of what makes a life most worth living.

Socrates' trial and execution for impiety and corruption of the young induced Plato to portray him not as a corrupter, but as one who truly cared about the young Athenians who gravitated toward him. Plato invariably lingers on the effort Socrates makes to give the decency chosen by decent people its due tribute. This did not mean, however, that Socrates is not also portrayed as unsure whether virtue is teachable, whether his students have any capacity for being taught, and whether anything true can be said about the divine things toward which piety is directed.

In the context of today's preoccupation with transparency and authenticity, and the reduction of liberal education to skills or moralistic platitudes, Socratic education must inevitably appear manipulative and presumptuous. Bruell, in contrast, defends Socrates' soulcraft and offers a comprehensive appreciation of why the tactic of adapting speeches to souls is so necessary.

In a piquant aside on the viability of our own political regime, which (arguably) takes no responsibility for inculcating substantive beliefs, Bruell asks whether it should be a matter of concern to us that Socrates, who himself called many of his fellow citizens' beliefs about virtue into question, would not have been executed in our own times. Naively assuming a harmony of human desires, virtues, and laws, it may be that we are failing today to see the dangers unrestrained ambitions and longings, or timidity and indifference, can precipitate. Socratic education, Bruell demonstrates, takes these dangers seriously. It walks the thin line of recognizing the need to produce critical awareness of the laws without creating contempt for the substantive beliefs they embody.

Socrates' "errors," overstatements, use of shame or ambition, techniques of awakening consciousness of deficiency in those who confidently believe themselves to be complete—all are part of his diagnostic art to read and, where necessary, cure a soul. Nowhere is such cunning more needed than when the interlocutor has far-ranging political or philosophical ambitions and where, as Bruell's deft analysis of the *Alcibiades* shows, despite beauty and most of life's advantages, Alcibiades' genuine capacity to discharge the offices wisely is absent. Whether it is taming Theages, whose passions run to love of tyranny, or reshaping the noble exertions of Crito, whose friendship leaps too precipitously over lawfulness, Socrates weaves the woof or warp of his interlocutors' diverse

souls into a unified web. The range of interlocutors in Plato's dialogues comprise together a universe of the manifold manifestation of wisdom in different character, and a challenge to that rare individual who can bring together political rule and philosophy. Plato's depiction of Socratic education serves as a sustained defense of Socrates against the Athenian charge that he was corrupting the young.

The value of Bruell's portrait of Socrates extends beyond classical Athens and sheds light on contemporary platitudes that range from cultural relativism, legal positivism, and psychological reductionism to how to respond to the seductive appeal of sham teachers and the prolixity of those academics who lack the self-conscious, moderating reluctance to teach and open themselves to learning something from their students.

In the style of philosophical commentary, Bruell does not eschew any grand theories, but he allows each segment of a dialogue to unfold with just the mildest interpretive nudge. Nonetheless, certain larger themes do appear, and the author is quite insistent that sections of the book must be read in the right order. From the plethora of conclusions a reader is invited to reach in piecing together Bruell's own innuendos, admissions of perplexity, and ironic use of a weak argument, one in particular sticks out: the place of the divine in human affairs.

Bruell is persistently gnomic about those metaphysical ideas for which Plato is widely known: the theory of Forms, the recognition of the Good beyond being, and the immortality of the soul—experiences that other commentators argue lie at the heart of Socrates' reform of piety. One is tempted to say that at times Bruell takes nearly a choirboy's glee in exposing Socrates' impiety, or lifting the veil from piety, while being too reticent about genuine intimations of spiritual transcendence. In his commentary on the *Second Alcibiades*, Bruell focuses on how Alcibiades was persuaded not to pray to the gods lest his (unreflected) wishes be answered, but in the discussion of the *Euthyphro* he emphasizes the line of inquiry that would have piety subsumed to an intelligible form, and even justice. Appealing to the *Symposium*, Bruell suggests that for Socrates communication with the gods is limited to the daemonic and, more properly, to his own eros.

Piety does not appear as a significant virtue in Socratic education. Bruell's Socrates, it seems, can tolerate no religious transcendence not rendered into theological belief, or beliefs not ratified by reason. Although the proposal that Socrates ultimately abandons religious piety may be persuasive to individuals for whom experience of the divine must be translated into rational propositions, an equally compelling interpretation is possible. It may be that Socrates' qualifications constitute not so much an argument against the reality and transcendence of the divine, as much as they are a strike against the human presumption regarding the extent to which the divine can be absorbed into the world. Despite, or perhaps because of, the human distance from the gods, Socrates may still be contending that experiential openness to the divine is essential to the human condition, and that order in a polity is based on harmony with the divine measure.

If this option needs still to be explored, the question as to whether Bruell's book on Plato's dialogues succeeds in its ambition of providing a substantive foundation for contemporary debates in liberal education, not to say the answer to the question of what makes a life most worth living, may lead readers who do not yet feel that they have plumbed the source of the tensions and crises in liberal education and modernity to reach for an additional text—Saint Augustine's *Confessions*.