

BOOK REVIEW

Playful Philosophy and Serious Sophistry: A Reading of Plato's Euthydemus. By GEORGIA SERMAMOGLU-SOULMAIDI. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014. Pp. x + 206. Hardcover, €74.42. ISBN 978-3-11-036809-3.

Georgia Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi Soulmaidi has written an eminently thorough, responsible, engaged, instructive, and provocative study of Plato's *Euthydemus*. Her goal has been to unify an apparently rambling dialogue. Whereas one's distant memory of the dialogue might represent it as a bland homogeneity, with Socrates doing relentless linguistic battle against the pankratistico-eristic brothers, studied closer up it looks all variegated bits and sharp pieces. In one dimension the dialogue scrolls out episodically, the brothers' absurd and unfulfilling argumentative sequences interlarded again and again by Socrates' more nutritive protreptic demonstrations. In another dimension the threads of narrated and paraphrased conversations cut over and through one another, with Crito, Crito's son, an anonymous Isocrates, and Connus—and a broad range of vocal or implied audiences—put into complex temporal and referential play.¹ Sympathetic readers have sought to vindicate this thesaurus of sophisms, exhortations to virtue, and byplay between our hero and his recurrent friend, a dialogue with an opaquer textural variety and structure than, for example, the *Protagoras* or the *Phaedrus*.

This problem calls for a scene-by-scene analysis, according to Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi. She gives it one, thereby entering core debates, one after the next, about the relationship between knowledge and virtue, goodness and wisdom, and fortune and success, and then setting out the deepest puzzles concerning being and omniscience. These debates and puzzles have their intrinsic interest; but when read alongside related dialogues, she shows, we see that the brothers Dionysodorus and Euthydemus also unwittingly press their readers to abandon exhaustive binaries (e.g. knowing vs. not knowing) and accept or posit the middle terms exemplified by the *Symposium's* *eros*, *philosophia*, and *doxa* (111–116). The scenes

¹ This dimension has been developed most recently by James Collins in his *Exhortations to Philosophy* (Oxford, 2015); the dissertation on which that book was closely based, "Philosophical Advertisements: Protreptic Marketing in Fourth-Century Greek Culture" (Stanford, 2007), is the most notable absence from Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi's bibliography (which cites four other dissertations).

more than merely reiterate these lessons, and others, including about Forms and teachers; they build up to them—and Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi elaborates this logic persuasively (109, 123–123).

The *Euthydemus* also has an overall goal. Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi argues that the dialogue affects an inquiry into the nature of philosophy, setting out in particular its differentiae relative to eristic and its proper objects. Basically, philosophy pursues virtue, not refutation; takes itself as a process of learning, not knowing; and concerns itself with recoltable Forms, not surface appearances. Yet Socrates—whom Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi identifies repeatedly as “the philosopher”²—acts awfully like a sophist, arguing fallaciously with equivocation, begged questions, and skipped steps (44–47). Thus philosophy is “playful,” in Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi’s wonted phrase. Well, that’s spinning it pretty positively, or vaguely. The author means that the dialogue’s repeated toggling between scenes of captious hootenanny and earnest-if-not-always-above-board philosophical protreptic underlines Plato’s point that philosophy and sophistry draw from the same playbook, and accordingly that people might readily conflate the two practices (110).

Fortunately for the partisan of philosophy, these parallel scenes also emphasize their difference in purpose: “sophists seek to prove victorious over their interlocutor merely for the sake of that victory,” whereas Socrates, no matter the invalidity of his arguments, “encourages his interlocutor to live a philosophical life ... which is the single way to happiness” (47). Now, one may wonder whether Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi ought to use “living the philosophical life” in the definition of philosophy’s purpose, or, more strikingly, whether such a life centrally includes the use of invalid arguments, and indeed whether philosophizing is a license to paternalize and deceive; but it is true that *Euthydemus*, like many of Plato’s other dialogues, prompt hard questions about the nature of philosophy.

The question of philosophy recurs throughout the book, usually in the following form: “it befalls the reader to determine ... what is to be termed philosophy” (142; cf. 8). But Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi does not leave it so open-ended as that; she believes that philosophy is a quite specific activity, such that even Crito, one of

² She does so at 12–14, 21, 39, 52, 56, 79, 82–85, 88, 92, 101–103, 140, 156, 160–161, 173, 177, 183–185, despite the *Euthydemus* containing no such explicit identification. She should have justified this naming, given that she surely knows that “philosopher” in the *Republic* (mentioned at 48, 55, 62–64, and 104–105) and in the Digression of the *Theaetetus* (mentioned at p. 135), two dialogues she dates to around the same time as the *Euthydemus* (pp. 29n51, 121), appears to pick out someone quite unlike Socrates; on this issue, see a book the author cites for another reason, Sandra Peterson’s *Socrates and Philosophy in the Dialogues of Plato* (Cambridge, 2011).

Socrates' closest friends, can misunderstand it (140–142; 151–152). Similarly, “from Plato’s point of view ... Isocrates has grave misconceptions about what philosophy is” (151). But given the assumption that philosophy is simply that which conduces to wisdom, as adumbrated early in the book (e.g. 5, 29, 36), it is surprising that Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi does not justify her apparently narrow delineation of philosophy and that she articulates no principles of individuation for this or any practice. That is, she does not explain why different people could not use the term in different ways, and have in mind different routes to wisdom, but differ perhaps in their respective conceptions of wisdom, or the degree to which they believe the practice must actually attain to the wisdom it seeks, or the aspect of a shared view of wisdom that proves most salient. Thus her rejection of Sandra Peterson’s claim that Socrates “recognizes that there are a variety of ways to use the word ‘philosophy,’” a rejection made on the grounds that “the general purpose of the *Euthydemus*... is precisely to distinguish philosophy from its competitors” (143 note 243), fails as an answer—the purpose of the *Euthydemus* could just as much be something else, such as distinguishing Socrates’ practice and the pursuit of virtue *he calls* “philosophy” from that of the brothers. We would then ask whether Crito understands Socrates’ aims and the route he takes for them. I emphasize what might seem simply a semantic dispute concerning the use of the word “philosophy” for the reason that Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi advances at once an admirable belief that this dialogue foregrounds the question of “philosophy” and a starkly minimal conceptual structure for assessing possible answers.

In this sketch of the first three chapters I have unfortunately left out any hint of the book’s quantity of detail, range of scholarly debate, and helpful analytic distinctions. I must also merely mention the book’s fourth chapter, which tracks instances and references to laughter and the notion of seriousness (*spoudazein*) across the dialogue (155–187).

Because the book runs through the course of the dialogue several times, each time with a different focus, and does so through dense exegeses of nearly every scene, the reader would gain from good indexes. But there is no index locorum, and the “General Index” ought to be at once more complete—it lacks key entries such as “doubles,” “eristic,” “laughter,” “learning,” “play,” “protreptic,” “seriousness,” “similarities,” and “sophistry”; and more analytic—it simply lists 33 page or page-range references for “knowledge” (thereby citing 47% of the entire text); 33 for “wisdom”; 32 for “virtue”; 30 for “happiness”; and 26 for “philosophy.”

