

BOOK REVIEW

Exhortations to Philosophy: The Protreptics of Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle. By JAMES HENDERSON COLLINS, II. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xiv + 306. Hardcover, £47.99. ISBN 978-0-19-935859-5.

James Collins' *Exhortations to Philosophy: The Protreptics of Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle* takes up two tasks. The first is to present a "new typology" of these three authors' protreptic writing. The second is to show how some of their "protreptic" publications, meant to persuade people to commit themselves wholly to "the best and happiest lifestyle," work.

The book's real appeal is in its first task. Collins makes special note of the genre's recursiveness. Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle each incorporate into their "protreptics to philosophy" a range of counter-protreptics to philosophy. By animating the contention between competing exhortations, these often lengthy works become dramatic and pull readers or listeners through. Promises of great pleasure or popularity might simply not suffice to hold our attention; better is to get us to wonder how Socrates, for example, might triumph argumentatively once again, or with which sophistic scoundrel his young friends might come to associate.

So Collins cares about literary exhortations' ability to gain their audiences' commitment. As it turns out, however, he does not focus on them as instances of storytelling as such. He attends instead to their sociological-pragmatic function—their use as school advertisements. He argues that such exhortatively recursive texts serve two functions at once. They establish philosophy as a discipline worth the esteem of any who desire happiness, virtue, skill, or whatever. They also vaunt the form of philosophy being espoused by the particular writer of the text, who turns out also to be a schoolmaster. In other words, they argue (i) "my opponent wants you to do it, too" (so philosophy must be good), and (ii) "I'll show you his arguments" (so I must be trustworthy), but (iii) "see how my arguments are better" (so you should study with me). An argument like this is familiar from Andrea Nightingale (who advised the dissertation revised into this book), in her *Genres of Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1995). Whereas she identifies Plato's appropriations of "non-philosophical" literary forms for his construction of

“philosophy,” however, Collins sticks to the intramural debates among self-styled “philosophers,” and is less anxious to present a particular view of Plato’s normative “philosophy.”

The book discharges its second task with sustained description. For example, it gives one hundred pages to the *Euthydemus*. These pages include a minute account of the internal and external narratives, and the cross-over between those frames; the (literal) choreography of the dialogue and its characters’ gestures; the role of Isocrates and the all-around-fighting brothers, Dionysodorus and Euthydemus; and Socrates’ protreptic arguments at each level of analysis. Collins’ account demonstrates the complex scene of pedagogical marketing, positioning, and insinuation into which Plato sets his characters. It also gives plausibility to Collins’ claim that “philosophy can be as much story, gesture, voice, and appearance, as it is thought and argument” (59). Collins does not address an unexpected result of this definition of philosophy: wouldn’t a protreptic to philosophy then be a protreptic to storytelling, gesturing, vocalization, and appearing? Also, since this long exegesis (like the long exegeses of Isocrates’ texts and Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* that follow) is meant to show the texture of the work rather than to solve some puzzle, the abundant details often feel unmotivated and not so urgent.

A comparatively brief section (twenty-two pages) takes on the *Protagoras* as a comparison case, again focusing on the dramatic choreography and the characters’ self-presentation as professional teachers. Collins puts weight on the facts that, compared to the *Euthydemus*, the *Protagoras* has a more private setting, shows collaboration, and presents men already convinced of the value of philosophy and higher learning. This last fact means that Socrates can “move past advertisements to the products themselves.” Interestingly, however, as Collins notes, Socrates, in his opening discussion with Hippocrates, conflates consuming the advertisement with consuming the lessons. Collins makes some valuable remarks about Protagoras’ “construction” of the profession of sophistry while differentiating himself from other sophists, and the similarities between Protagoras and Socrates. This section concludes with a sort of addendum relating the *Protagoras* to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*.

The oddest three pages of the book come in the middle, a discussion of the *Clitophon*. Collins mostly summarizes the dialogue (though he does not note that only “justice,” not “philosophy,” is mentioned in the dialogue). Yet his point in doing so is unclear. He claims that in the *Clitophon* Plato “is ... keen to highlight the ultimate failure of Socrates’s protreptics.” He does not say what “ultimate” means. Perhaps some listeners fail to be converted, perhaps Socrates sometimes

misjudges his audience—but is Collins proposing that Socratic protreptic is *fundamentally* ineffectual? This would be an extremely provocative argument but not one, I think, he makes or defends. Indeed, for the *Clitophon* only careful interpretation could show that the dialogue presents any failure by Socrates; some scholarship suggests it does not. In some way this is all moot, however, since Collins then dismisses speculation about the meaning or content of the dialogue. He claims that his project is uninterested in “what Plato might have meant by this assessment,” i.e., Clitophon’s assessment of Socrates’ speech-giving. This claim baffled me; I could not see why Collins’ goal of “investigat[ing]... the strategies that Plato uses to construct the discursive practices of a literary project” would not be advanced by a more developed study of this dialogue.

The remaining part of the book present fine-grained studies of Isocrates’ protreptic speeches and letters; with Tarik Wareh’s *The Theory and Practice of Life: Isocrates and the Philosophers* (Center for Hellenic Studies, 2012), this nicely situates Isocrates in an exciting intellectual milieu. Collins ends with an epilogue on Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*, which has been recently reconstituted by David Hutchinson and Monte Ransome Johnson.

All told, this book makes a convincing case for the dazzling subtlety of so-called “philosophical” school-masters’ student-luring literary self-representations. Scholars concerned with the “protreptic” genre should study it carefully, as well as those working on the *Euthydemus*, Isocrates’ speeches about “philosophy,” and mid-fourth-century Athenian intellectual history.

I note that the text has a recurring typographical problem: the lower-case mu and the upper-case pi tend to come from an awkwardly distinct font set.

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