

Mason Marshall *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry: Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement* (Routledge Publ., New York, NY: 2021: series: *Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education*)

Jakub Z. Lichański

Correspondence: ORCID 0000-0002-1943-5069; Full member of the *SOCIETATIS SCIENTIARUM VARSAVIENSIS*; Editor-in-Chief FORUM ARTIS RHETORICAE; E-mail: zjlichan@uw.edu.pl

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Abstract

This article is based on a study by Mason Marshall *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry. Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement*. The author makes, inter alia, analyzes of the Plato's dialogue Euthyphro and emphasizes the ways of promoting and encouraging Socrates used for self-evaluation and conscious reflection in the interlocutor. By focusing his work on Socrates' use of protreptic, Marshall proposes a practical approach to reading Plato, illustrating how his writings can be used to enhance intrinsic motivation amongst students, and help them develop the thinking skills required for democratic and civic engagement.

The article shows how to practically apply a protreptic in didactics; it also points to the work of Ole Fogh Kirkeby, who writes about similar matters and justifies the use of traditional teaching methods in a modern school.

Keywords: protreptic, Socrates, Plato, W. Witwicki, M. Marshall, O.F. Kirkeby

Mason Marshall's book *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry. Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement*, published by Routledge Publishing (New York, NY: 2021) in the *Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education* series, is - I think - one of the most interesting and most important books that have been published in recent years¹. In the introduction, the author puts forward two theses, which he develops in the later sections. The first one reads (Marshall 2021, *Introduction*):

In this book, I propose a radically new way of studying Plato. I explain what it is and what it has to offer. Nowadays most of Plato's readers examine the arguments in his dialogues, try to find the meaning of the drama in them, or both. Herein I develop an alternative, something else worth doing in addition, either as philosophers of education, as Plato scholars, as teachers who introduce Plato to students, or as students who encounter him for the first time. The point of this new project would be to understand protreptic, as I will call it, borrowing a term based on an ancient Greek word (προτρέπειν)². One literal meaning of that word is "turning or converting (someone) to a specific end," and in antiquity protreptic was, most broadly, just the effort to change a person's behavior, or the act of changing it. But there was such a thing as philosophical protreptic—converting someone or trying to convert them to a philosophical way of life—and this is the sort of protreptic that inspires my use of the term. I will use the term 'protreptic' to refer to the attempt to lead someone to inquiry of a certain sort, meaning, first and foremost, the attempt to bring about a fundamental change of heart so that they want truth more than anything else, they seek it

¹ The fact that protreptics (cf. Kirkeby 2008), is used as a teaching method does not affect the foregoing. Marshall's work shows how the method was really used by Socrates and Plato.

² Cf. Jean-Pierre Wils, *Protreptik*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. W. Jens, G. Ueding, red. G. Kalivoda, F.-H. Robling, Th. Zinsmaier, S. Fröhlich, Max Niemeyer Vlg., Tübingen 2005, Bd. 7, Sp. 376-380.

through reasoned exchanges with other people, and they are honest enough to follow wherever the evidence leads. Today, by and large, people mention protreptic just in discussing ancient Greece and Rome, but protreptic is no less important now than it was in antiquity. Among other reasons, it has a pivotal role to play even in the most basic classroom pedagogy.

This is a very important point, I think. The author points out the difficulty of a fundamental change in didactics; protreptic - as a method of solving problems, especially ethical or moral ones, and therefore in the field of axiology - may be a type of "breakthrough" in the education process. This is the first thesis; the other one is (ibid.) as follows:

One of the critical issues in schools across the world is the need for students to want to learn: students who are motivated to learn for extrinsic reasons typically do not learn as much or as deeply as those who are motivated to learn for intrinsic reasons.² And there is a need for protreptic not just in schools but in all educational endeavors. This even is signally implied by a number of widespread views—for one, the idea associated with John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, and a range of contemporary political theorists, among others, that democracy is in crisis when citizens are poor thinkers.³ Serious thought also is vital not just for democratic citizens but, more basically, for human beings, at the least because of its capacity to produce wonder, elevate the mind, and free us from dogmatism and prejudice. Even when it does not yield knowledge, it can help us find our way to the most sensible and responsible decisions we can make. And the world needs people who make decisions well. We need parents, spouses, attorneys, social workers, physicians, and so forth who can analyze a problem in ways that are trenchant and informed and are attuned to what is good and right. A corollary of this is that we need genuine debate on central issues about how to live—debate that is genuine insofar as it is gracious, upbeat, and productive both in spite of and by virtue of being candid and vigorous, because the people who take part in it aim at finding the truth even at the price of losing face or losing political ground. The idea of such debate and the idea of protreptic are as relevant as ever, though both, perhaps, are legacies of ancient Greece. Philosophers and others who took up the project I propose would study Plato's Socrates in order to learn something about protreptic³. They would ask what strategies he employs in his conversations with other people (for example, ways he may play on other people's emotions); they would assess which strategies are the best strategies one could employ in the circumstances he is in; and if there are better strategies than Socrates', they would rely on Plato in analyzing what they are. In the process, they would simply suppose certain things, such as the following: Socrates tries to improve other people.

These two extensive quotations are necessary because the author proposes a completely new, I will not hesitate to say, even revolutionary didactic method, which, unlike the ones used so far, can involve both parties in a specific "game" aimed at learning the truth⁴. What's more - we will - as the following parts of the book show - discover it together. The very purpose of such an educational process is important, and so is the path along which we walk to reach it.

It is worth paying attention to the fundamental issue here: how does protreptic "work"? To simplify things a bit, it can be said that there is a type of procedure similar to that described in the theory of rhetoric as the so-called status science, i.e. a technique for determining the subject that we want to investigate and then present it in our text / speech⁵. The difference is that protreptic uses a method that combines the science of status with the procedure used in the construction and analysis of syllogisms, with the simultaneous justification of subsequent premises (*epicheirem*). This point is well presented in the first three chapters with very helpful diagrams, which are slightly modified Venn diagrams.

If you don't read Marshall's book very carefully, the question may arise; Why so many references to didactic issues? Because today's didactics still resembles a very old method of teaching: reading and analyzing a pattern (it can be, and

³ Cf. Jan Erik Hessler, *Socrates Protreptic and Epicurus. Heading through Philosophy*. In: *Socrates and the Socratic Dialogue*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2017, pp. 665-681.

⁴ Cf. Agnes Callard, *Everyone Desires the Good. Socrates' Protreptic Theory of Desire*, "Review of Metaphysics" 70, 2017, no. 4, pp. 617-644. The problem of truth or "the pursuit of good", as Charles Taylor, in this case (but only in this one!) can be identified.

⁵ Cf. Josef Martin, *Antike Rhetorik. Technik und Methode*, Beck Vlg., München 1974, pp. 28-52.

usually is, a literary text), according to which we then write a new text. This method is criticized not only in the work of Marshall, but, inter alia, in the study of Richard Andrews, who even writes as follows (Andrews 2017, 78)⁶:

Progymnasmata are text-book exercises based on a simple pedagogic model: principle, example, imitation. To explain more fully, the approach was to outline the principle of the rhetorical device; then to provide an example of it; and then to ask the student to imitate that example. Such a rigid, formal and transmission-like pedagogy was bound to become tedious as a practice for students, but also to kill off the dynamic, fit-for-purpose nature of rhetoric itself in its reduction from a live social practice to a set of rules and regulations.

The approach proposed by Marshall radically rejects this pattern in favor of the full involvement of both the learner and the scientist in the process of discovering and getting to know the subject of our joint research. I believe that the emphasis on the research community is an extremely important methodological change that Marshall proposes.

How is his book structured?

It consists of five chapters, an introduction, an ending and an index. These chapters are: 1. A Top-Down Approach: Refining Protreptic Through Platonic Thought Experiments; 2. A Bottom-Up Approach: Reimagining Protreptic by Examining Socrates; 3. Would the Two Approaches Be Legitimate?; 4. Would the Two Approaches Be Valuable Enough?; 5. The Two Approaches in Action.

As you can see, the author changes the perception of Plato's dialogues and treats them as peculiar and "thought experiments" and a prototype. The author's primary areas of interest are the four dialogues: *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Meno*, *Republic*. What is especially interesting is the analysis of a passage from *Euthyphro* (11e-12d 2-2), which deals with considerations on *justice* and *piety*, in the second chapter. This is important because it allows us to see an attempt to understand and clearly define the subject that we will discuss further. Therefore, at every stage of this research we can follow the cognitive process, which is extremely important, also. Because we can then notice some mistakes that are made during the experiment. On the other hand, the chapter in which we learn about the Socratic method, but precisely as a prototype, is extremely instructive. This is a much broaderview than the one used so far; we assumed that the Socratic method was maieutics and the elenctic method, and thus we lost an important didactic and cognitive track. The problem, Marshall says after Socrates, is not whether we have any prior knowledge on a subject, but one that is hidden and that we "evoke" using the majeutical method. Protreptic is much more important, because it "guides us" to the goal we set for ourselves; it. Allows us to understand the process of finding the truth. The next two chapters show that both approaches are legitimate and valuable at the same time. The closing chapter is a summary that shows how in practice the teacher, but also the student can use this method in school or university classes or any other situation involving a dialogue on/ dispute over a topic.

Naturally, it is debatable whether this form of reading Plato and, let us add, the protreptics is correct? The answer was given a few years earlier by Ole Fogh Kirkeby, who already in 2008 had published a book with a meaningful title: *Protreptik: filosofisk coaching i ledelse (Protreptic: Philosophical Coaching and Leadership)*⁷. So the very idea of reusing protreptic is not surprising; the important thing is that it turns out to be an extremely useful method, or rather technique.

What's more - if we go back to the work of 1969 by Egidius Schmalzriedt *Platon. Der Schriftsteller und die Wahrheit (Plato. The Writer and the Truth)*, it will turn out that some ideas that Marshall fully develops in his study had already been noticed at that time⁸. However, the German researcher did not indicate protreptics as a specific method of solving philosophical problems.

⁶ In the Polish translation, it is p. 11 in this volume, i.e. *Rhetoric and/in Education: Argumentation Problems (Retoryka w edukacji: Problemy argumentacji)*, DiG Publ., Warsaw 2021 (series: *Forum Artis Rhetoricae*, 2021, no 1 [63]) – to be released soon.

⁷ Cf. Ole Fogh Kirkeby, *Protreptik: filosofisk coaching i ledelse*, Samfundslitteratur, Fredreksberg C 2008[https://books.google.pl/books?id=FZ3i_ZQ7Ce0C&pg=PA7&hl=pl&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false, (2021-02-04)].

⁸ Cf. Egidius Schmalzriedt, *Platon. Der Schriftsteller und die Wahrheit*, Piper Vlg., München 1969, pp. 81-107 (analysis of *Euthyphro*).

Marshall's book is therefore an extremely important voice in the current discussion on the need to make changes to a fairly ossific didactic technique. It is protreptic that may become this new tool to help students in their development process, and the teaching process itself will become much more attractive. What's more, the use of protreptic will facilitate a troublesome process, i.e. the process of teaching critical thinking, and will help prepare students better to live in a democratic society.

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