

IN DEFENCE OF FOUR SOCRATIC DOCTRINES¹

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In this article, Sandis defends four of the most notorious doctrines which Plato attributes to Socrates. The first is the 'theory' of forms, the second is the doctrine of recollection, the third Socrates' contention that philosophers ought to be the guardian-kings of the ideal state, and the fourth his rejection of rhetoric. Sandis does not claim that his interpretation (which owes a lot to Wittgenstein) is correct, but only that it renders the doctrines both relevant and plausible.

1. The Theory of Forms

Plato introduces the ideal forms with a common sense distinction between, on the one hand, *things* in the world that are just, good, beautiful etc. and, on the other hand, justice, goodness, and beauty *themselves*. For example, once we accept that there are beautiful things, we must also accept that there is such a thing as beauty; yet whatever beauty is, it is *not* an object in the world which might be observed with our eyes:

- Here are some more questions, Simias. Do we recognise such a thing as absolute uprightness?
- Indeed we do
- And absolute beauty and goodness too?
- Of course
- Have you ever seen any of these things with your eyes?
- Certainly not...
- ...we are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself...Then it is a fact Simmias, that true philosophers make dying their profession, and that to them of all men, death is least alarming.²

Beauty, goodness etc. are not objects in the world but more like *ideals*: they cannot be seen with the eye but only contemplated with the mind (or soul). Hence the Socratic suggestion that philosophy is a kind of training for death, for we cannot expect that in death we will continue to dwell within a material world. Elsewhere, Plato adds that while there are *many* just things, there is only one (form of) justice:

The same is true of justice and injustice, good and evil, and all qualities; each of them is in itself single, but they *seem* to be a multiplicity because they appear everywhere in combination with actions and material bodies and with each other.³

Plato further characterizes the ideal forms as belonging to the *eternal* order of things, as opposed to the *changing* order of things in the world of sights and sounds. This seems appropriate, for while a beautiful painting can be destroyed, a good person corrupted, and a just ruling overturned, beauty, goodness, and justice do not *themselves* come in to or out of existence, and it makes no sense to talk of their changing from one state to another. In short, the ideal forms are *eternal* (which, incidentally, provides Plato with yet another reason for thinking that to contemplate them is to practice for death):

Can we rightly speak of a beauty which is always passing away, and is first this and then that? Must not the same thing be born and retire and vanish while the word is in our mouths? How can that be a real thing which is never in the same state?⁴

I would like to introduce Plato's next point with a simple remark about the relation between perception and what we might call our 'conceptual framework': a person may perceive a painting without knowing what paintings are. In such a case we might say that he does not perceive the painting as a painting, but perhaps only as a canvas or board (and even this would not be necessary). Likewise, a person may perceive an

impressionist painting without perceiving it as an impressionist painting (or indeed as a painting at all). By the same token, a person may perceive a beautiful painting without perceiving it as a beautiful painting, a just action without perceiving it as a just action etc. For example, if someone does not *know* what impressionism is, they will not be capable of perceiving a painting as an impressionist painting.

In a similar vein, a person who does not know what beauty is would perceive beautiful paintings *without* seeing them as beautiful paintings. This will be the case even if they were to perceive thousands of beautiful paintings in their life. For just as a person exposed to thousands of impressionist paintings will not be able to perceive them as impressionist paintings unless they know what impressionism is (which is not to say that they might not come to appreciate certain impressionist traits, but only that they will not recognise them as such), so too a person who perceives thousands of beautiful paintings without knowing what beauty is will not be able to perceive them as being beautiful. The same point would apply to just actions and justice, good people and goodness, etc. Needless to say, if someone cannot see things as being just or beautiful, then it also follows that they cannot understand *why* they are just or beautiful. Instead, they remain trapped in what Plato calls the 'world of sights and sounds':

Those who love looking and listening are delighted by beautiful sounds and colours and shapes, and the works of art which make use of them, but their minds are incapable of seeing and delighting in the essential nature of beauty itself.⁵

Such people cannot appreciate the *value* or *disvalue* of the things around them because they cannot see them in ways that further enable them to see them as being valuable or otherwise:

Nor can we reasonably say, Cratylus, that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition

and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge too cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist.⁶

By contrast those who know what beauty and justice are, are capable of *recognising* them in the world around them. While anyone can have *opinions* about what is beautiful, only someone acquainted with the (eternal form of) beauty can *know* what is beautiful, and what is not:

The man who, contrawise, believes in beauty itself and can see both it and the particular things which share in it, and does not confuse particular things and that in which they share...and so, because he knows, we can rightly call his state of mind one of knowledge; and that of the other man, who holds opinions only, opinion.⁷

One might object here that we do not acquire 'abstract' ideas such as those of beauty or justice *before* we learn to call things just and beautiful (anymore than we learn to distinguish between tallness and shortness before we learn to distinguish between tall and short things). But such evidence would be neither here nor there: it simply doesn't matter which of these came first, for in learning how to use the phrases such as 'is tall', 'is good', or 'is beautiful' children *are* acquiring (and to some degree thinking about) the concepts of tallness, goodness, beauty, etc. The bigger worry which this leads us to is that it now appears to be trivially true that most of us (and not just philosophers) know what things like knowledge, justice, and beauty are. Yet we can easily respond to this by pointing out that this is all a matter of degree: it is one thing to have *some* understanding of what beauty consists in and quite another to have a full grasp of the relevant concept(s).⁸ To illustrate this, let me say a little more about Socrates' conception of knowledge.

2. The Doctrine of Recollection

According to Socrates, learning (at least in philosophy) is a case of *recollecting* what was formerly known before birth where this specifically refers to a past acquaintance with the ideal forms themselves:

The soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen everything there is, both here and in Hades, there is nothing it has not learned. It is no wonder, then, that it has the capacity to recollect all that it formerly knew about virtue and so forth...enquiry and learning are entirely recollection [anamnesis].⁹

Despite the striking similarities which this doctrine bears to modern nativism (the popular view that that we are born with concepts and knowledge not derived from external sources), we *need not* take this doctrine seriously on a metaphysical level to see that it harbours an important insight. We find a clue for this in a reference to the successful nature of Socrates' dialectic method, and in particular his *elenchus* (his use of questions to demonstrate the untenability of his opponent's position):

Besides, Socrates, rejoined Cebes, there is a theory which you have often describe to us – that what we call learning is really just recollection...one very good argument, said Cebes, is that when people are asked questions, if the question is put in the right way they can give a perfectly correct answer, which they could not possibly do unless they had some knowledge and proper grasp of the subject.¹⁰

The refutation [*elenchus*] works because Socrates only needs to ask the right questions and his opponent immediately *recalls* things which would contradict his own previous assertions. Thus the famous image of Socrates as a midwife helping people to give birth to ideas that are already in some sense *within* them. His questions help his interlocutors to think

about things in the right way where this involves *recalling* things which they previously knew. As we do so, our grasp of the related concepts becomes clearer. This insight, combined with Socrates' view that one cannot 'understand the name of a thing, when he does not know what the thing is'¹¹ and his confession that he 'decided to take refuge in language, and study the truth of things by means of it'¹², is not dissimilar from Wittgenstein's idea that to know what justice is, is to *recollect* the multifarious ways in which we use the term 'justice'¹³ (which is *not* to say that justice is identical to the word 'justice', nor indeed with the *concept* of justice¹⁴:

Learning philosophy is *really* recollecting. We remember that we really did use words that way.¹⁵

The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.¹⁶

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.¹⁷

By *recollecting* the multifarious ways in which words such as 'justice' and 'knowledge' are used we come to see that no list of necessary and sufficient conditions can be given in answer to traditional philosophical questions such as 'what is justice?' and 'what is beauty?' The philosophical process, so understood, aims at such recollection.

Such a linguistic reading of Plato may seem ridiculously anachronistic, and I certainly wouldn't want to put it forward as *the correct interpretation* of his methodology. Indeed there is an obvious tension between the Socratic elenchus (which often seems to aim at discovering necessary and sufficient conditions) and Wittgenstein's conception of good philosophy. Wittgenstein was not oblivious to this:

When Socrates asks the question, 'what is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a *preliminary*

answer to enumerate cases of knowledge...the discussion begins with the pupil giving an example of an exact definition, and then analogous to this a definition of the word 'knowledge' is asked for. As the problem is put, it seems that there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word 'knowledge'. It appears we don't know what it means, and that therefore, perhaps, we have no right to use it. We should reply: 'There is no one correct usage of the word "knowledge"; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used'.¹⁸

However this interpretation plays down the fact that (a) Socrates himself never offers an answer to his general question (b) he doesn't accept any definition proposed to him either, and (c) he spends most of his time accusing his interlocutors of conflating *examples* of knowledge which *definitions* of it.¹⁹ These elements are all in keep with Wittgenstein's concerns, something confirmed by the following undated observations by his students Norman Malcolm and G. H. von Wright:

Wittgenstein observed in a lecture that there is a similarity between his conception of philosophy (e.g. *Investigations* § 127 [quoted above]) and the Socratic doctrine that knowledge is reminiscence: although he believed that there were also other things involved in the latter.²⁰

It is significant that he did read and enjoy Plato. He must have recognized congenial features, both in Plato's literary and philosophical method and in the temperament behind the thoughts.²¹

3. The Philosopher Kings

Let us now ask whether we would want our ideal leaders to be philosophers, in the sense of the term 'philosopher' just outlined. Here is how Socrates sees the dilemma:

If philosophers have the capacity to grasp the eternal and immutable, while those who have no such capacity are not philosophers and are lost in multiplicity and change, which of the two should be in charge of a state?²²

The obvious answer would seem to be that someone who has *no* knowledge of (the ideals of) justice, goodness, etc. is in *no* position to rule the *ideal* state:

[T]here would never be a perfect state or society or individual until some chance compelled this minority of uncorrupted philosophers, now called useless, to take a hand in politics, willy-nilly, and compelled society to listen to them; or else until providence inspired some of our present rulers and kings, and their sons, with a genuine love of true philosophy.²³

Does this mean that we should hand over all governing to philosophy teachers? Heaven forbid! A philosopher, in the relevant sense, is simply *anybody* who devotes their time to such recollection. Teaching (such) philosophy, by contrast, is primarily the activity of helping others to recollect. Socrates did not think of himself as a having knowledge but (as I mentioned earlier) as a midwife who helps *other people* give birth to it:

You're suffering the pains of labour Theaetetus; it's because you're not barren but pregnant...I watch over minds in childbirth...God compels me to be a midwife, but has prevented me from giving birth. So I'm not at all wise myself...but not so with those who associate with me...they do so, not because they have ever learnt anything from me, but because they have themselves discovered many admirable things in themselves, and given birth to them.²⁴

Arguably Socrates would not have proposed *himself* as guardian-king, but rather those promising students who did

not become teachers themselves, choosing instead to put their recollections to practice in a socio-political arena. Similarly, perhaps the best political leaders today remain those who are successful philosophers in the sense described above, and who will thereby *respect* the various ways in which we correctly use terms like 'justice' and 'goodness'.

In her book *The Therapy of Desire* the otherwise careful Martha Nussbaum makes a slip that nicely illustrates the contemporary socio-political perils of such neglect when she writes that 'courage consists in a certain way of acting a reacting in the face of death and the risk of death.'²⁵ What Nussbaum fails to recall is that one can also act courageously in the face of any danger that might bring serious mental and/or physical pain, when there is no risk of death at all (for example one might act courageously in the face of bankruptcy, impending disability, imprisonment, separation, and so on). To ignore this is to reach false conclusions about the kind of practices within which the virtue of courage is to be cultivated and, subsequently, to be disposed to train oneself or others in ways that are, at best, unnecessary and at worse dangerous. In the ideal states, those who lead us would not make such mistakes.

4. The War on Rhetoric

In the *Gorgias* Socrates warns against the teaching and practice of rhetoric which he characterizes as 'a sort of knack gained by experience...producing a kind of gratification and pleasure'²⁶ by means of *persuasion* and a pandering 'which is to the soul what cookery is to the body'.²⁷ Part of what is wrong with rhetoric, I wish to show, is that it is intentionally parasitic on the kinds of failure to recollect that I have been criticizing above. Let me try to demonstrate with a topical example.

Numerous writers including Timothy Garton Ash and Geoffrey K. Pullman have recently claimed that 'there can be no such thing as a war on terror' because, in Ash's words 'you can't capture an abstract noun. You can't shoot fear.'²⁸ This comment appears to embody the sorts of confusions that Plato and Wittgenstein have tried to warn us against. To begin with terror, like fear, is not an abstract noun but something *denoted*

by the abstract noun 'terror'. A war against the US, for example, would not be a war against a noun anymore than it would be a war against an acronym! We might also note that the word 'terror' need not denote a kind of feeling. To assume it always does is to fail to recollect that we *also* use the term 'terror' to denote a particular kind of threat or violence (e.g. an instillation of fear or any other kind of psychological manipulation which aims to intimidate or coerce). Finally, there is nothing incorrect about the notion of waging a war on either fear *or* violence, for it is simply false to claim that one can only wage war on things that one physically damage in a direct manner. A war on terror, for example, need only involve physical violence towards any people and/or infrastructures that help to promote it and a *cold* war, not even this²⁹.

I sincerely doubt that writers of Ash and Pullman's caliber are completely oblivious to such basic points. So how might we account for their apparent failure to recollect what they doubtlessly know on some level? A charitable explanation would look to aspects of their critique that are justified. It serves to remind us, for example, that a war on terror is a far more optimistic venture than a war on *terrorism*. So understood, the problem would not be abstract nouns but what abstract nouns *refer* to. Similarly, the 'can't' in phrases like 'you can't shoot fear' need not be taken too literally. Perhaps what they are really getting at is that in terms of *International Law* war can only be declared by one sovereign nation-state on another. If so then we might do best to interpret Ash and Pullman as criticising the Bush administration for engaging in rhetoric with the prime aim of *persuading* the general public that a policy which might otherwise be seen as an act of aggression that violates international law is somehow both a legitimate declaration of war *and* a humane struggle against an unjustified form of violence. On such a scenario, far from being the semi-illiterate buffoon that the media often portrays him to be, President Bush (at least one of whose orators is known to have a degree in philosophy) has deliberately chosen to use a phrase painstakingly crafted to mask a contentious government policy by facilitating certain failures of recollection. Ironically, with retorts such as 'you can't

capture an abstract noun' and 'you can't shoot fear', Ash and Pullman would thereby stand equally guilty of using rhetoric to mock and deceive.

In a similar move Noam Chomsky (who allows that all that is meant by the expression 'war on terror' is a war on terrorism) argues that 'there cannot be a war on terror' according to the US government's definition of it as 'a calculated use of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature':

There can't be a war against terrorism as terrorism is defined in official US documents. It's a logical impossibility because the reaction is [by that same definition] an uncontroversial case of international terrorism.³⁰

Taken at face-value this only shows that a particular attempt at a war on terrorism (namely Bush's) happens to be self-defeating given a particularly sloppy definition of 'terror' that involves a failure on the part of the US government to recollect that various ideological uses of violence need not involve terrorism (one important aspect of terrorism missing from the US definition is the aforementioned instillation of fear or other form of psychological manipulation which aims to intimidate and/or coerce). Striking as this is, it is a far cry from demonstrating that *all* war against terrorism is a logical impossibility (even on the US definition of 'terrorism' he cites) For, crucially, a purported war against terrorism need not involve acts of terrorism in the relevant sense. For example, the reaction may involve intelligence followed by non-violent arrests and dismantling.

More charitably, we might instead understand 'the reaction' as referring to a *particular* reaction in which case Chomsky would be certainly right to point out that a *particular* war on terrorism is self-defeating given an unfortunate definition on 'terrorism' given by the very same people who are waging the war in question. However if that is all he's getting at then he too is guilty of using rhetoric that aims to dupe us into thinking that something much grander is at stake here.

The Socratic objection to the artifice of rhetoric is that it is unconcerned with honesty and truth. It aims to *persuade* at the cost of blurring the distinction between knowledge and *mere opinion* or *conviction*, for rhetoric only succeeds if its victim(s) come to think that they have *learned* something when in actual fact they have merely been *convinced* of it.³¹ (In more modern terms, we might say that the distance between the rhetoric and reality measures a kind of cognitive dissonance). In intentionally causing the failure of recollection, rhetoric promotes *ignorance* over knowledge and *deception* over honesty, and should thereby be avoided at all costs, not least by the guardians of the ideal state (who must have knowledge of the good). Given that it is ethically worse to be a culprit than a victim, we must conclude that the deliberate demotion of recollection involved in rhetoric is more *dishonourable* than the unintentional failure to recall which I had been describing so far. It is no wonder, then, that Socrates concludes that 'oratory is a spurious counterfeit of a branch of the art of government.'³² Would you want the guardian kings, journalists, and political commentators of your ideal state to either neglect distinctions or intentionally promote their conflation when policies that are directly related to them could affect millions of lives?

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Notes

¹ Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the University of Bath in 23 November 2004, the XVIth International Symposium of the Olympic Centre for Philosophy and Culture at Pyrgos of Elia & Ancient Olympia, Greece 25-30 July 2005, and the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association, University of Bristol, 6-9 July 2007. Many thanks for helpful comments and questions to those in the audience, especially Elizabeth Belcher, Hugh Benson, David Charles, Catherine Osborne, and Ron Polansky. Thanks also to Stephen Boulter, David Dolby, and John Shand for helpful discussions and communications. Last but not least, the final section benefited greatly from Tom Joyce's extremely useful comments on an earlier draft.

² *Phaedo*, 65dff. Trns H. Tredennick (London: Penguin, 1954).

³ *Republic*, Book V, 476a. Trns. D. Lee (London: Penguin, 1955). Cf. *Theaetetus* 146dff. I remain neutral on whether or not the term 'eidos' should be translated as 'form' here but see no reason to deny the existence of 'negative eternal forms', save that these will be the opposite of ideals (which is not to say that the belong to the order of earthly things that can change, see below). I do not wish to defend that part of Plato which extends his 'theory' of forms beyond such to include forms of objects such as beds and tables (cf. Plato, *Republic*, Book X, 596b-597b), though I see no reason why it cannot work for all non-normative properties (such as tallness) as well as for normative ones (such as uprightness).

⁴ *Cratylus*, 439dff., Trns. B. Jowett (Oxford: OUP, 1871)

⁵ *Republic*, Book V, 476b.

⁶ *Cratylus*, 440b.

⁷ *Republic*, Book V, 476d.

⁸ Recent debates among academics suggest that concepts themselves do not obviously belong in either the world of ideas or the world of sights and sounds. But one can remain neutral on this issue while agreeing that some of the things which we can have concepts of have no independent material existence (but only material manifestations).

⁹ *Meno* 81 c-d. Trns. R.W Sharples (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1985).

¹⁰ *Phaedo* 72e-73a.

¹¹ *Theaetetus* 147b, trns. J. McDowell (Oxford: OUP, 1977).

¹² *Phaedo*, 99E.

¹³ Cf. O. Hanfling, *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (London: Routledge, 2000), Ch. 1.

¹⁴ Cf. *Cratylus*, 436b-439b.

¹⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, Trns. C. G. Luckhardt & M.A.E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), § 419.

¹⁶ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trns. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), § 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, § 127.

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 20. & p 27. Emphasis in the original. The passage in Plato that Wittgenstein is referring to is *Theaetetus* 146d-7c where, interestingly, Socrates asks *Theaetetus* about what he means by certain words he is using.

¹⁹ See, for example, *Theaetetus* 146e.

²⁰ N. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: OUP, 1958), p. 51.

²¹ G. H. von Wright 'Wittgenstein: A Biographical Sketch', *Ajatus* 1954 & (in English) *Philosophical Review* 1955. Reprinted in Malcolm (1958: 20-1). Malcolm's reference to the *Investigations* makes it likely that the lecture in question was delivered after the dictation

of the passage from the *Blue Book*, quoted above, while his final remark suggests that he had not entirely abandoned his earlier view of Socrates either.

²² *Republic*, Book VI, 484b.

²³ *Ibid.* 499b-c.

²⁴ *Theaetetus*, 149b-150d. Trns. J. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

²⁵ M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, p227 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²⁶ *Gorgias*, 462. Trns. W. Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1960).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 465. Given his definition of cooking as 'a pandering which corresponds to medicine', I take it that Socrates' real target here is what we would now call nutriology; alternative medicines such as aromatherapy might also fit the bill.

²⁸ T. G. Ash, 'The War on Terror is Over' *The Age*, January 27, 2004.

²⁹ Such legitimate uses are at odds with some of the conditions which Barries Paskins and Michael L. Dockrill claim are 'necessary' for war in their 1979 book *Ethics of War* (University of Minnesota Press). They might insist that some uses of the word 'war' are parasitic on others and therefore in some sense secondary; I leave such arbitrary etymological questions for another day.

³⁰ N. Chomsky Distorted Morality. Televised talk at Harvard University (Epitaph, 2002).

³¹ *Gorgias*, 454-60.

³² *Ibid.*, 463. Trns. W. Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1960).