CHAPTER 17

Eristics, Protreptics, and (Dialectics): Strauss on Plato’s Euthydemos

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Strauss stresses that the Euthydemos is Plato’s “most bantering, not to say frivolous and farcical dialogue.” Indeed, the dialogue appears to be a comedy of errors. Many of these errors are made by Socrates himself, who at times presents himself as a rather slow pupil, in dealing with ridiculous arguments of two sophists on serious topics. The main topic concerns how human beings, especially the young, can be exhorted to attain virtue or wisdom. The inquiry touches upon the deeper question of whether virtue or wisdom can be taught. The basic questions of what virtue is and whether wisdom is possible form a subtext. But the serious initial discussion evolves into a caricature of Socrates, recalling Aristophanes’ The Clouds, before concluding with serious practical considerations. Strauss seems to stress the obvious: the Euthydemos is a parody of Socratic education. As such, it might fall short of a serious presentation of Socratic philosophy. But Strauss shows that the comedy magnifies sophistic eristics while obscuring Socratic dialectics in a way that defines Socratic protreptics. The Euthydemos is as serious as any other Platonic dialogue, not despite but because of its farcical quality. Strauss reveals its vital perspective on Socratic education and philosophy (67, 84–85).1

Strauss is led to consider the Euthydemos after considering the Crito by the structure of the Euthydemos (67). The character Crito ties the dialogues together. The action of the Euthydemos precedes that of the Crito, thus the Euthydemos sheds light “retroactively or in advance” on the Crito. We may extend Strauss’ view to the Apology. Crito, along with his son Critoboulos, is first among those Socrates calls as witnesses against the corruption charge. Crito has never been blamed publically by his fellow Athenians for bad behavior, and is singled out in his capacity as an old friend and a well-respected Athenian (Apology 33e, Xenophon’s Memorabilia 48–49). But Crito later, in the dialogue bearing his name, blames Socrates in private for acquiescing in the jury’s unjust sentence of death. Socrates’ behavior is most shameful because he is abandoning his sons even though he always claimed to care about virtue (Crito 45c–46a).

1 All parenthetical page references are to Strauss 1983.
Socrates makes his famous argument for legal obedience, which he gives to the personified laws of Athens, to vindicate before Crito his decision to die and thus his concern for virtue (50a5–54d). Strauss thereupon makes his infamous observation that the argument of the Laws does not represent Socrates' philosophical reasons for dying (66). Thus, Strauss' use of the *Euthydemos*—Plato's “most farcical” dialogue—to shed light on the *Crito*—Plato's “most solemn” dialogue—reveals Socrates' concern for virtue, philosophy, and exhortation. But Crito mediates both dialogues. Strauss thus identifies two limitations that define Crito's perspective. The *Euthydemos* reveals that Crito's unawareness of Socratic irony is his “most important limitation” (67). The *Crito* reveals that Crito's “specific limitation” is his inattention to the “soul” as the seat of virtue and wisdom (58). Crito's limitations, along with his character and concerns, as they come to light in both dialogues, are keys to understanding Socrates' report to Crito in the *Euthydemos* and his reply to Crito in the *Crito*.

Strauss begins his prologue by analyzing the initial conversation between Crito and Socrates (271a1–273d8). He emphasizes that Crito opens the dialogue and is thus responsible for its taking place. “The dialogue is as it were imposed on Socrates” (68): Crito asks Socrates who it was with whom he was conversing the day before in the Lyceum. Strauss' qualification “as it were” indicates Crito imposes on Socrates only in a sense. Socrates could after all have circumvented the conversation. Crito is interested in Socrates' activities, assumes that Socrates' conversation with the sophists is philosophic, and affirms at the end of the dialogue that he loves listening to Socrates' discussions (304c7). But his initial question belongs to the “sphere of ordinary curiosity.” It reflects his ordinary concerns. Strauss notes that Crito's question contrasts with Socrates' characteristic “what is” question belonging to the sphere of philosophy. Insofar as a crowd standing around Socrates and his interlocutors prevented Crito from seeing everyone and hearing anything distinctly, and since the conversation is called philosophic by Socrates, “we may say,” adds Strauss, “that Kriton's access to philosophy was blocked.” But Strauss' qualification “we may say” implies that Crito's access to philosophy was blocked by his ordinary intellectual capacity and concerns; he could, after all, have involved himself in the discussion if he so desired, but he decided to take a stroll instead (304d5). Crito's behavior stands in contrast to Ctesippos' pushing his way in to the center of the group because of his desire to see his beloved Cleinias and because he loves listening to these discussions (274c4). Ctesippos' erotic desire to see and to hear caused the formation of the crowd that blocked Crito's access to philosophy. Crito may love listening to Socrates' discussions, and he finds what he regards as philosophy to be charming, but he is not driven by a need to learn (304e8). Philosophy is an erotic activity; “Kriton is not an erotic man” (71).