

Platonic Inquiry

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Hugh H. Benson

Clitophon's Challenge: Dialectic in Plato's Meno, Phaedo, and Republic. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. x + 318 pp. \$65.00. ISBN 9780199324835 (hbk).

This important study occupies a place in the literature closest to Richard Robinson's influential *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*.¹ Or rather, it occupies a place comparable to the second part of that book ('Dialectic'), the issues raised by the first ('Elenchus') having already been treated in depth in Benson's *Socratic Wisdom*.² The present work is no retread of Robinson, however. It offers fresh interpretations of the core issues and texts, and in several ways it covers more ground than Robinson's work, including a chapter on the idea of learning from others in the 'elenctic' dialogues as well as nearly a hundred closely-argued pages on the last two thirds of the *Meno* (a dialogue to which Robinson devotes only nine pages).

Benson's book deserves the careful attention of anyone interested in Plato's conception of philosophical inquiry and of anyone engaged in detailed exegesis of the texts it treats. Although written in dense, argumentative prose, the book provides an appealingly unified vision of the methodology at work in those texts. Indeed, it advances as rich a program for understanding the interconnections between central portions of the Platonic corpus as anyone has offered in recent decades. What's more, it is packed with well-reasoned departures from common scholarly approaches as well as with valuable treatments of the secondary literature. In short, it is an excellent book, and it deserves to become a starting point for future work on its topics.

The challenge of the title is Clitophon's demand, in the eponymous dialogue, that Socrates 'supply what comes after the exhortation' and show him how to

1 R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

2 H. Benson, *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

attain virtue (and thereby become happy). Because Benson reads Socrates as holding that knowledge is ‘in some way essentially connected with virtue’ (p. 2, with n. 3), he takes the challenge to be one of showing how to acquire the relevant knowledge. Yet Benson considers Clitophon wrong on at least one important count – namely, his idea that Socrates may possess the knowledge in question. To the contrary: when it comes to knowledge of virtue that is ‘robust’ rather than ‘ordinary’ (pp. 12-14), Socrates lacks knowledge, seeks it, and encourages others to do so as well. Nonetheless, Benson holds that Socrates ‘has left [one] hanging’ if no answer to Clitophon’s challenge is forthcoming (p. 3). Or what is the same, the author Plato has done so (p. 4), since what is ultimately at issue is Plato’s method for philosophical discovery.

The seriousness of the challenge raises a difficulty, since no viable answer is to be found in the elenctic dialogues. As those familiar with his earlier work will be aware, Benson is not a ‘constructivist’ about the *elenchus*, whether the constructivism concerns ‘robust’ knowledge or knowledge of some lesser sort. The *elenchus* does not establish truth. Nor is he a ‘moderate constructivist’, someone who thinks the *elenchus* can improve one’s epistemic position without yielding knowledge (pp. 21-2). Still, Benson accepts that the *elenchus* is generally cooperative rather than agonistic in nature. What, then, is Socrates’ aim in using it? He treats it as a device for learning from someone he considers to have robust knowledge of virtue. To the extent that Socrates offers a response to Clitophon’s challenge in the elenctic dialogues, it is *solely* one of learning from a person who knows. Unfortunately Socrates gets nowhere with that approach, and over the course of the relevant dialogues he actually poses several theoretical challenges for it, perhaps devastating ones.

In the *Meno*, one finally finds a discussion of learning *de novo*, without relying on one who knows. The dialogue famously raises a difficulty for such an idea. Benson labels it ‘*Meno’s paradox*’ – italics so as not to tie the paradox exclusively to what is said by either Socrates or Meno. The paradox is addressed by the theory of recollection – specifically, by the doctrines of prenatal knowledge and the connectedness of nature. Yet the latter theory defends only the bare possibility of acquiring knowledge in absence of a teacher. It is mute as to the proper method to be followed, and thus it supplies no answer to Clitophon’s challenge. Benson’s deft handling of the different interpretive and philosophical issues here is especially illuminating, and students of the *Meno* will find much to appreciate in his discussion, not least his way of reconciling the different statements of the paradox by Socrates and Meno, his comparison of the paradox with somewhat similar puzzles from the *Euthydemus*, and his comments on various scholarly approaches to its resolution.