

Socrates and the Gods. By N. Ranasinghe. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2012. Pp. 256. \$28.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-58731-779-8

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In *Socrates and the Gods*, Nalin Ranasinghe sets out to provide an interpretation of Plato's *Apology* in light of the *Euthyphro* and *Crito* that bookend the *Apology* in the canon of Thrasyllus. The thesis is ambitious. In Ranasinghe's own words 'this book will argue that the *Euthyphro* offers the best way to gain access to Plato's *Apology* of Socrates in the sense of giving us Plato's own views about Socrates' trial and its truest cause' (1). The point, then, is to learn Plato's reaction to Socrates' trial and understand his thoughts regarding the causes that led ultimately to Socrates' conviction and execution. Ranasinghe also hopes to discover Plato's reflections on the consequences of Socrates' trial (7). In fact, he claims, the trial haunts Athenian society and Greek culture in two peculiar ways. According to Ranasinghe, Plato sees Socrates as a challenge to the prevailing theology and religious practice of the Greek world. He is a threat to the view that the gods are vindictive thugs whose actions humankind are obliged to imitate; Socrates offers an alternative picture of divinity, one that sends men like Socrates as emissaries of a new religious and political order (99).

Ranasinghe proposes to justify this interpretation by commenting on each of these dialogues. The book is, therefore, organized in three parts: the first considers the dramatic setting of the *Euthyphro* and the character of its namesake; the second the setting of the *Apology* and the character of Meletus; and the third the setting of the *Crito* and the character of its namesake. Here I would like to sketch briefly the purpose and outcome of each section.

In the first section, Ranasinghe undertakes a close reading of the *Euthyphro* concentrating on Euthyphro's character and his notorious theological claims about the behavior of Greek gods such as Zeus and humanity's obligation to imitate such behavior. The result is the view that Socrates' behavior constitutes a challenge to traditional Greek theological and religious practice as exemplified in the character and actions of Euthyphro. This, Ranasinghe insists, forms a backdrop for Socrates' trial in which he is charged with introducing and worshipping new deities and must be taken into account in order properly to understand Plato's intentions in writing the *Apology*. This position grants Ranasinghe license to read episodes of the *Apology* into the events of the *Euthyphro* and, among other things, to compare Euthyphro and Meletus. The result is an interpretation of *Euthyphro* that largely anticipates the events of the *Apology*.

In the second section, Ranasinghe develops his principal thesis: Plato sees Socrates as correcting the Athenians distorted picture of divinity. Ranasinghe's method is a close reading of the *Apology* that occupies the greater part of the book. Ranasinghe shows that Socrates' divine mission—given to him by Apollo—constitutes a challenge to the traditional Greek theology and religious

practice and, in particular, to the Athenian conception of divinity. As part of his exposition, Ranasinghe connects features of Socrates' trial to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The purpose of this is to illustrate how the typical Athenian (including Plato) might have reacted to Socrates' claims about divinity in the *Euthyphro*. It should come as no surprise that, for Ranasinghe, Socrates' indictment, trial, and execution are evidence of a serious conflict between Socrates and Athenians over theology and religious practice, which paves the way for the Athenian solution. Socrates dies because the Athenian conception of divinity triumphs; yet his challenge remains long after his execution in his efforts to establish a new political order founded on this reform of Athenian religious tradition, which Ranasinghe discusses in more detail in his commentary on the *Crito*.

In the third section, Ranasinghe concludes with a brisk commentary on the *Crito*. The stated purpose of this section is to disclose 'Socrates' stubborn insistence on dying a citizen of Athens' (172). In particular, Ranasinghe's 'working hypothesis is that Plato, after having presented the explicit position of Socrates in all of its literal purity in the *Apology*, speculates as to the implicit 'arguments of his actions' in both the *Euthyphro*, which suggestively examined the implications of Socrates' enigmatic behavior as it concerns the gods he serves (and presumably goes to) and in the *Crito*, which seems to summarize his unspoken attitudes and hopes concerning those he left behind—both individually and severally' (174–175). Thus the aim of this section is to spell out the consequences, as Plato sees them, of Socrates' trial. For Ranasinghe, Socrates' decision to remain and die in Athens reveals his commitment to the positive transformation of the community. His conversation with the personified laws of Athens demonstrates a desire to establish a new and improved understanding of citizenship, which Ranasinghe consider a revision of the Athenian conception of divinity.

In all, Ranasinghe's commentary shows that Plato sees the cause of Socrates' trial as an effort to correct the pernicious aspects of traditional Greek theology and religious practice and the consequences as a significant modification of Greek political thinking. There are, however, a number of difficulties with Ranasinghe's treatment. Here I wish briefly to discuss them.

I do not fully understand the third section, particularly its place in the argument of the book. As I have mentioned, Ranasinghe concentrates throughout on Socrates' relationship with traditional Greek theology and religious practice. In Ranasinghe's commentaries on the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* this focus is evident. Yet in his commentary on the *Crito*, this issue vanishes, replaced with a new concern for politics and, in particular, on the consequences of Socrates' decision to remain in prison despite Crito's efforts to release him. The impact of Socrates' actions on religious beliefs and practice, especially on Athenian conceptions of divinity, is not explored. Thus there is an overall lack of coherence in the book, which focuses mainly on the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*. Discussion of the *Crito* seems superfluous and does not develop the main argument as Ranasinghe presents it.

Perhaps a reason for this lack of coherence can be found in Ranasinghe's con-

fusion about his intended audience. At times he suggests the book is aimed at a general audience, including readers not familiar with Plato. (Consider the subtitle of the book: ‘How to Read Plato’s *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*’.) Yet the book expects quite a lot of its readers. It assumes they are familiar with many classical authors, such as Homer and Hesiod as well as Aristophanes and the Greek tragedians. It expects reader to make and understand loose (even free) associations between such authors and Plato’s writing. It also assumes a fairly strong command of the Platonic corpus, especially with Plato’s *Republic*, and to some extent knowledge of classical Greek (Ransinghe’s use of anglicized Greek words and phrases is ubiquitous). Thus, the book is not obviously for a general audience; it appears to be written for a well-educated, scholarly audience who are clearly well acquainted with classical literature. Despite this impression, Ransinghe excuses himself from framing his interpretation in any scholarship on the grounds that ‘so Sisyphean an enterprise would only interfere with the orderly unpacking of my original reading’ (2-3). Instead, he confines his references to those works of scholarship that have aided his interpretation. But here too his references are idiosyncratic. He seems to refer to whatever scholar or book he associates with what he is saying at any given moment. While any scholar will readily sympathize with the drudgery of documenting every source used in writing a work of scholarship, if such a book aims to convince scholars of a certain interpretation (as Ransinghe’s does), it ought to take the time to acknowledge all of those writers whose work has shaped one’s own thinking. Such acknowledgment should include those with whom one has wrestled. Ransinghe does no such thing in his book. If indeed he means to convince academics, then he would have helped them considerably by taking the time to document all of his sources. If he intended to write for a different audience, he would have done well to write at a more appropriate level.

Finally, Ransinghe exaggerates the originality of his interpretation. It is, in his own words, ‘an interpretation [that] has not hitherto been undertaken’ (1). This is not true. Ransinghe’s interpretation is in fact the traditional interpretation. It can be found in Thrasyllus, in his motivation for situating the *Euthyphro* and the *Crito* before and after the *Apology*. It can also be found in George Grote’s *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: John Murray, 1888. 455-457; cf. 425), and in Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith’s *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 87-100), neither of which Ransinghe cites. These texts do not develop the thesis they share with Ransinghe to the extent that he does, but there is no doubt that they propose the same thesis he does.

In sum, Ransinghe’s commentary on these three dialogues is noteworthy for its concern with the theological and religious background of Socrates’ trial. It is also noteworthy for its attention to the context and setting of each dialogue, and especially to Socrates’ actions rather than his arguments. This is appropriate considering that the aim of the book is to understand the circumstances and consequences of Socrates’ trial and especially when the jury seems to disregard

Socrates' defense entirely. Nevertheless, as a work of scholarship, its shortcomings prevent it from addressing the concerns of the scholarly community.

DEPARTMENT?

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