

MORAL EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

EDITED BY

DOUGLAS W. YACEK

Technische Universität Dortmund

MARK E. JONAS

Wheaton College

KEVIN H. GARY

Valparaiso University



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*Plato's Significance for Moral Education**Mason Marshall***2.1 Introduction**

Plato had more than just a passing interest in education. As one scholar in philosophy of education has argued, Plato's "engagement with education was central to his life" (Mintz, 2018, p. v), and education is "frequently . . . a central topic" in his dialogues (p. 15). In his *Republic*, education is even said to be "the one great thing" or, rather, "sufficient" thing (423e2–3),¹ meaning that it is far and away the most important means of producing suitable rulers for the ideal city (423d–427a). Moreover, the various sorts of education that are pictured in Plato's dialogues have as one of their main purposes, if not their sole purpose, to cultivate virtue in people, both intellectual virtue and moral virtue.

Not surprisingly, then, Plato has a lot to contribute to contemporary theorizing about moral education. In this chapter, I will name some of the reasons. To allow a sense of how wide the range of reasons is, first (in [Section 2.2](#)) I will list 10 miscellaneous reasons that one can compellingly offer and some of which scholars *have* offered. Then (in [Section 2.3](#)) I will present my preferred reason, which I have developed at length elsewhere (Marshall, 2021). In the process, I will describe a way of approaching Plato that is new and unorthodox.

2.2 Ten Miscellaneous Reasons

I start with 10 reasons which are not the ones I favor but which I think are forceful:

1. Plato's *Republic* contains an elaborate and extensive discussion of how education can make a person virtuous by redirecting their

¹ Herein all references to Plato's works are to the most recent editions of the Oxford Classical Texts. All translations are based on the ones in Cooper (1997).

soul – redirecting their soul particularly through reorienting its rational element, but no less notably by reworking its baser parts. For anyone who thinks education should affect students’ whole selves rather than being strictly cerebral, that discussion is, as one commentator puts it, “a splendid prototype to use in thinking about education” (Reeve, 2010, p. 227). To be sure, the discussion is inadequate as it is. In fact, much of it is even appalling, if we are to take it at face value, and has to be drastically overhauled. But it is a classic discussion that has been exceedingly influential and, accordingly, is an excellent touchstone and starting point.

2. Plato’s dialogues have a remarkable capacity to make their readers more virtuous than they already are – not only more intellectually virtuous but also more morally virtuous. Plato inspires many of his readers to pursue virtue rather than money, power, pleasure, and the like. And regardless of whether he means to be, he is so successful at it that, by studying his dialogues, we can learn how to shape other writings so that they, too, conduce to virtue.²
3. Despite how much success he tends to have with his readers, Plato can seem deeply pessimistic about the prospects for morally improving people. He thinks that, although most people can be saved from vice if they live under philosopher-rulers, they are otherwise a lost cause. They simply don’t have it in them to be reflective or self-aware, and there is no chance of changing them through the sorts of conversations that Socrates has, for example. So says an interpretation that is common among scholars (see esp. Scott, 1999). Regardless of whether it is correct, it is at the least plausible and intuitive, and the pessimism it ascribes to Plato is something that probably everyone is familiar with and, at one point or another, is unpleasantly tempted to accept. Everyone must wrestle with whether pessimism of that sort is warranted,³ and one of the best ways to gain the motivation to give it its due and consider it in earnest is to study

² Of the many commentators who provide evidence of this, Futter (2015), to my mind, provides the best.

³ Callan and Arena (2009, p. 118) underscore one of the less obvious reasons. Referring to the argument in the *Republic* for “an education for the masses of citizens that instills steadfast adherence to true beliefs with no understanding of the grounds of those beliefs,” they aptly note: “The argument affronts our egalitarian sensibilities. Nevertheless, if Plato were right that the recipients of political indoctrination were capable of no greater understanding than their indoctrination gives them, we could not say that it denies them the value of greater understanding.”

the resistance that Socrates faces when he tries to improve his interlocutors.

4. As one Plato commentator in philosophy of education (Nakazawa, 2021) has recently pointed out, myths do a lot to shape education today, particularly moral education: teachers use myths in ways that heavily affect students. Exploring how they do so might let us better understand and enhance education; or, at the least, it is worth asking whether it would. And studying Plato helps us see this, since the use of myth in his dialogues is integral to how the characters in them, and to how Plato's readers, are educated.
5. A couple of Plato scholars in philosophy of education (Jonas & Nakazawa, 2020) have argued that, like Aristotle, Plato recognizes how important habit is in shaping our characters, and he surpasses Aristotle by naming a way in which people who were poorly raised can rehabilitate themselves so as to become virtuous. To wit, he holds that dialogue of the right sort can allow them to catch a glimpse of virtue which gives them partial knowledge of what it is and which motivates them to undertake the long process of rehabilitation. And as he sees it, they can complete that process successfully by remaining in dialogue with a suitable teacher and imitating people who model virtue for them. It is significant whether Plato holds these views, both for the reasons that these two commentators offer and for another reason that I will add. Plato, of course, is clearly sharp and insightful, and he occupies a prominent place in the history of philosophy. Whatever views he holds, it makes sense to take them seriously and examine them closely.
6. Everyone, including each philosopher who theorizes about moral education, tends to think they need education only with respect to things they don't already know – in other words, that they need to learn only what they are ignorant of. As a result, a natural thought is that moral education has to start from the realization that students are not already good or do not know they are good. People resist that thought (perhaps with good reason), in part since nearly everyone takes themselves to be morally upstanding and to know that they are. But Socrates teaches us that inquiry into goodness calls only for the premise that our grasp of goodness can be improved. That is an important lesson and one that needs to be repeatedly relearned, since we are psychologically prone to deny it or at least forget it.
7. Socrates denies being a teacher, of course (*Apology* 19e–20a), but to many of Plato's readers it seems that he *is* one and, in fact, is

exemplary as a teacher, whereas it appears that, as educators, the Sophists are only corruptive. (I refer to Plato's fictive Sophists as opposed to their historical counterparts.) A persistent issue in the dialogues, however, is what distinguishes Socrates from them, and that question turns out to be remarkably difficult to answer. Socrates can seem to share many traits with them – for example, it can look as if he often makes the weaker argument appear the stronger, in the common phrase⁴ – plus, it proves surprisingly hard to say exactly what a Sophist is. For readers who think Socrates is a model educator, it is instructive to study his behavior in the dialogues and ask what separates him from the Sophists, so as to get clear on what defines ideal education and which pitfalls that sort of education avoids. And the question takes on added urgency for philosophers interested in moral education, since, of all sorts of education, it may do the most to affect that which is “dearest” to students, as Socrates would put it, referring to their souls (*Protagoras* 314a1).

8. In engaging in friendships, for example, we largely shape the world to us, since we choose which friends we have, with the result that our friends are mostly like us. Yet we have far less control over whom we erotically desire, and if we are to make ourselves appealing to them, we have to consider what they value and how they see us, so as in key part to shape ourselves to them. Consequently, *erōs* (meaning, roughly, their erotic desire) more than *philia* (love between friends) can unsettle us and change our priorities: *Erōs*, has a power to interrupt the egoism that every human being naturally tends toward. So it is to Socrates' credit that he often makes his interlocutors erotically attracted to him, since once they are, they will shape themselves to him by trying to make their souls beautiful. And as one scholar has noted, there is a lesson in this for us who are modern-day teachers, which is that we must somehow draw students to us “instead of us chasing after them and their often transitory, job-oriented goals” (McPherran, 2013, p. 18). It is by making our way of life attractive that we give them real incentive to change.
9. In the *Republic*, Socrates claims that narrative art, or a certain share of it, is perverse in the sense that it leads many people to favor the baser parts of their souls. To us modern readers, claims such as that tend to look outrageous, if not simply bizarre, and for that very

⁴ Language of this sort appears in Aristophanes, *Clouds* 882–885, 893–894; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a23; Cicero, *Brutus* 30; Plato, *Apology* 19b5–c1.

reason, we do well to examine them. As many historiographers in philosophy have emphasized, considering ideas that are foreign to us is important in the same way that traveling to other places is: it can broaden us, and give us new perspective, by making the familiar seem strange and the strange seem familiar (see esp. Williams, 2006, p. 259). Now, one can object, as a certain critic has, that encountering foreign ideas will not broaden us unless we are already *open* to these ideas: if we are prone to dismiss them, then that is all we will do (see Cottingham, 2005, p. 36). But Socrates' claims about art are harder to dismiss than we might expect, as another scholar has recently argued.⁵ On the one hand, as he notes, modern-day science confirms something pivotal that Socrates suggests, which is that eliciting a particular emotion over and over, such as by repeatedly seeing sad plays, conditions a person to have that emotion more readily than they otherwise would. On the other hand, psychotherapists have had success in recent years in using virtual reality to evaluate and treat mental disorders, and this is significant since beneath their use of virtual reality is the same assumption that underlies Socrates' comments about art – namely, that we are affected even by experiences that we realize are of purely fictive representations rather than something real.

10. There is a longstanding disagreement about which of the following education should do – make students better people or simply make them better equipped. In making them better people, it would get them to value the right things, for example, so as to motivate them to act well. In just equipping them, it would simply give them skills and knowledge and then leave them to decide on their own what to value and pursue. Some thinkers who have held that education strictly equips have conceded that it is not value-neutral entirely, since teachers cultivate intellectual virtues such as curiosity and perceptiveness. But the idea has been that these intellectual virtues are autonomous from moral virtues, such that education remains neutral with respect to moral development even in the process of turning students into inquirers. It can seem that, for Plato, by contrast, the project of becoming an inquirer is a genuinely moral endeavor, so education never can be morally neutral. If this *is* Plato's belief, it puts him in a minority nowadays. Arguably, figures such as

⁵ The full argument appears in Grethlein, 2020, and a more recent but abbreviated version is in Grethlein (2021, pp. 101–104, 279–282).

Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey think education makes students better people; and there are contemporary philosophers who contend that intellectual virtues are a subset of moral virtues.⁶ But by and large, the reigning view today is that education is morally neutral and simply equips students. For people who dissent from that view, Plato is a useful resource. His example can inspire them, and the arguments in his dialogues might help them bolster their own arguments for their minority view.⁷ For people who accept the *majority* view, Plato can be *especially* valuable – not only because it is helpful to entertain foreign ideas, but also since there are arguments in the dialogues that can generate formidable objections, and it is good for all of us to face objections, particularly in case there are weaknesses in our arguments that we have overlooked.

2.3 An Unorthodox Reason

The reasons I have considered so far have something in common with one another: they all are reasons that come to mind when we suppose that the way to engage Plato is to try to interpret him correctly, such as by trying to determine what he intended to convey or what his writings indicate he intended. It is possible, though, to engage him without making any such attempt, and elsewhere (in Marshall, 2021) I have argued that doing so can be both legitimate and productive. Here I will not try to explain why it is legitimate, but let me summarize part of the reason it can be productive. I will describe a project that philosophers, Plato scholars, teachers, and students can carry out, a project that centers on Plato's Socrates.

2.3.1 *Studying Protreptic*

The aim behind this project would be to gain insight into protreptic, to borrow a term derived from an ancient Greek word (προτρέπειν, “turning” or “converting”). My inspiration for using the term is the protreptic that philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome practiced, meaning their attempts to convert other people to a philosophical way of life, and I will suppose that protreptic might involve a variety of devices, including even

⁶ See the Appendix in Baehr (2011) for discussion and citations of relevant contemporary work and for a defense of a compromise position in the debate.

⁷ For discussion of relevant arguments in the dialogues, see esp. Ebrey (2017).

nonrational means of persuasion, as it apparently did in antiquity. But whereas many ancient philosophers tried to lead people to particular philosophies, such as Stoicism or Epicureanism, we who carried out the project I propose would ask simply how to promote a certain kind of inquiry.

I have in mind inquiry of the most basic sort, something we can call self-examination. To engage in it is to try to determine how to live well, and it is to ask not only how to reach your ends but also what the best ends are. It is also to want the truth above all else – that is, to want it even if it might turn out to be different from what you prefer – and in turn, to form certain traits of character, or at least to have some share of these traits. To have the first of these traits is to be at pains to focus on the strength of the evidence in front of you rather than, say, being blinded by seductive imagery. To have the second trait is to take care to evaluate evidence correctly. To have the third trait is to be responsive to evidence in the sense that, if you find some that conflicts with what you believe, your beliefs can change. To have the fourth trait is to seek out all the salient evidence that is relevant to the issue before you, at least when your stance on that issue does a lot to affect how you live. Part of being thorough in this way is debating with other people in case they can offer evidence you have not yet seen. Thoroughness of this sort also involves reflecting on classic philosophical questions such as what justice and goodness are and whether there are Platonic Forms or a God, since the answers to those questions affect the answers to others, including even everyday questions about how to live.

We who took up my proposed project would learn about protreptic by examining what Plato's Socrates does. We would ask what his strategies are with his interlocutors and how he could improve on his strategies. In the process, we would adopt certain suppositions, such as these:

- Socrates' goal in interacting with others is to make them better people.
- Socrates aims to make them better people by leading them to self-examination.
- That is the *only* way he means to improve them. He is, for example, minimally, if at all, interested in changing what they believe. If ever he tries to instill certain beliefs in them, such as the belief that there are Forms, it is only because he thinks that holding these beliefs will make them more likely to examine themselves.

We would adopt these suppositions not because they are true (they might not be), but because they are expedient. Rather than trying to interpret Plato correctly, we would simply use him as a tool for crafting a theory of

protreptic – a theory about how best to lead people to self-examination, or which strategies for leading them to it are the most effective conscientious strategies – and we would choose our suppositions accordingly. Because of how they would shape the results of our study, the suppositions named above would be the most useful for learning about protreptic.⁸

And learning about protreptic is valuable. Among other reasons, protreptic has a lot to offer teachers, since it is critical to increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn in school. Further, it is not just students who need to think diligently and well: so does everyone who lives in a democracy, due in part to how much they affect everyone else therein. For that matter, thinking seriously is of value not just for people in a democracy but for human beings in general, even if only because of how it can lift our sights and counteract our biases. Regardless of whether it gives us knowledge, it enables us to make responsible decisions. And it is important to make decisions responsibly, to analyze problems trenchantly, to reflect on what our consciences tell us, and to debate with other people earnestly and in good faith.

Moreover, protreptic matters not only for the sake of cultivating *intellectual* virtue but also for the sake of instilling moral virtue, so the study of protreptic has a contribution to make to philosophers' conversations about moral education. The main reason is that the less we want the truth and act accordingly, the greater the risk that we will end up with false beliefs, including false beliefs that affect how well we live. There are various sorts of false beliefs that can do that, including the following three:

- false beliefs about what is best or most important (for example, which matters more – enjoyment or self-improvement, lawfulness or compassion, frugality or sustainable practices);
- false beliefs about what has happened in our interactions with other people (for example, whether they have wronged us or we have wronged them);
- overestimations of ourselves.

In overestimating ourselves, we may misjudge how much we know, or think our beliefs are clearly true when, in fact, they are false, or at least highly questionable. The antidote is to spend time in serious reflection and in conversation with others who are adept.⁹ People who have done this enough are not overconfident, even if they posture at times. Even when

⁸ For elaboration on this point and several others in the rest of this subsection, see Marshall, 2022.

⁹ Ahlstrom-Vij (2013, pp. 26–27) discusses some of the relevant research. And see Ballantyne (2019).

they suspect they have a successful argument, they always hold their breath until they hear the next objection, because of how often they have been surprised before. They come to have a firm sense of how much can be said against their views and how hard they are to defend. In this respect and others, they develop intellectual humility. This is significant since there is evidence that how intellectually humble or arrogant we are affects how well we behave – for example, how benevolently, empathetically, and altruistically we act.¹⁰

2.3.2 *Two Approaches*

The reason to engage *Plato* in carrying out my project is that his dialogues are ideal fodder for theorizing about protreptic. If we were to assess which protreptic strategies would be conscionable and which would be most effective, our task would be, first, to analyze a variety of hypothetical scenarios in which one person protrepticizes another person or group of people. The imagined scenarios would need to be rich with detail about the sorts of people involved and what their circumstances were, since the details of a situation can determine what is morally permissible and what is most effective in that situation. Whether it is right, say, to return a friend's car keys may depend on whether she is drunk: returning her keys may be morally required if she is sober, but not, perhaps, if she is potentially a threat to herself or someone else. Similarly, whether refuting someone would be an effective way to protrepticize her might depend on exactly what sort of relationship you have with her, precisely what her current emotional state is, and a range of other factors too. So moral questions and questions about what makes protreptic effective might often hinge on details.

One way to convey the details of a scenario would be simply to list them. In describing a given scenario, one could say, for example, that it takes place in public when two strangers meet, that the two strangers are a woman protrepticizing a man, that the woman is calm and reserved but has a loud, commanding voice, that the man is emotionally volatile – and so on. But in several respects, there are limits to how helpful a list of details would be. One problem is that even a long list might not be thorough enough; it might always omit some of the details that mattered. For that

¹⁰ See esp. Krumrei-Mancuso (2017). See also Hannon (2020) for reason to think that deliberation in democracies (“the exchange of reasons for preferring certain outcomes or believing certain facts”; p. 593) fosters empathetic understanding which is a moral good.

reason and others, the scenarios should probably come from narratives, such as the kind one finds in literature or film, since narratives of that sort color in the details of situations more efficiently than mere descriptions of them. Particularly helpful, of course, would be stories in which someone protrepticizes other people. So Plato's dialogues featuring Socrates are an ideal source of scenarios, since he, more than nearly any other literary figure, can be plausibly construed as practicing protreptic.

The way the dialogues could help us answer *ethical* questions about protreptic is by supplying protreptic scenarios to examine as case studies. That, I suspect, is obvious enough. But I should explain briefly how Plato could help us answer questions about which protreptic strategies would be most effective. There are two approaches we would take in addressing those questions.

One approach would be to study in detail the ways in which Socrates interacts with his interlocutors and to try to determine why he responds to them as he does. In taking this approach, we would suppose that he means to lead them ultimately to self-examination, but we would ask why, in order to reach that goal, he makes specifically the moves he makes rather than other moves. Asking that question might lead us to identify Socratic strategies we would not have considered otherwise, and that would be the point of taking this approach: not to tell what Socrates' strategies actually are, but to think of a wide range of strategies he *might* have. Once we had thought of them, we could evaluate each of them by taking the second approach.

In taking the second approach, we would picture strategies that Socrates might have, and we would gauge how promising they are, meaning how likely they are to be effective. If, for example, we imagined that, in some specific case or other, Socrates means to lead someone to self-examination by convincing them that they lack knowledge, we would start by asking how likely that tactic is to be effective, given the circumstances Socrates is in and who he and his interlocutor are. Next, if we supposed that the way Socrates means to convince them of their lack of knowledge is by refuting them and exhorting them, we would inquire into how effective *those* means are likely to be. And so forth.

The way we would answer questions such as those is, first, by following common sense as far as it could take us. In many cases, there might be a lot in front of us that was fairly straightforward and that could inform our conclusion about which strategies to favor; for example, even without much examination, it might be relevant and safe to say that Plato's Meno is stubborn or that Euthyphro is deluded. At some point, of course,

we would run into questions that were too difficult for common sense to answer by itself. But what we could do then is imagine hypotheticals in detail. For example, if our question was whether Socrates would make more progress with Euthyphro by being gentle than by being as abrasive as Socrates is, we would find the answer by imagining specifically what Socrates might do and say in being gentle with Euthyphro, and by estimating what Euthyphro's most likely reaction would be. Our goal in carrying out the second approach would be to determine, regarding each strategy we considered, whether it is the most promising strategy Socrates could employ in the situation he is in and, if it is not, what the best alternative would be. Most notably, the issue would be not what the savviest strategy is according to the text, but what the savviest strategy would be if Socrates and his interlocutors were real people in ancient Athens.

2.3.3 *An Example Involving Crito*

Naturally, a main test of my way of studying Plato is how well it pays off, so it can help to see what sorts of interpretations it produces. Elsewhere I have offered examples of the results we get when we take the two approaches I just described; without fully carrying out the process of interpretation, I have defended provisional readings of several Platonic dialogues. In the rest of this chapter, let me summarize part of what I have said about one of them, Plato's *Crito*.

The *Crito* depicts a conversation that Socrates has while in prison after his famous conviction. Socrates talks with Crito, a friend whom he has had for a long time and who is from the same deme as Socrates. Crito is a businessman who is intent on accruing wealth to pass along to his sons. When he visits Socrates in prison in the *Crito*, it is early in the morning, and he and Socrates talk for some time, apparently by themselves. Crito tries to convince Socrates to escape from prison so as to avoid execution, and in response, Socrates argues that he should stay. In offering arguments, he presents them as parts of a speech that the Laws of Athens might make. Once Socrates finishes, Crito has essentially nothing to say, as if he is at a loss to see how to reply.

When we view together the three dialogues in which Crito appears – the *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, and *Phaedo* – it grows clear enough that Crito is uninvested in self-examination, despite expressing great enthusiasm for it, and that he cares enough about his friendship with Socrates that Crito will agonize over losing him if he is executed. This leads me to my

conclusion about what Socrates' strategy is with Crito. My thought is that Socrates articulates the Laws' speech just to nag at Crito and get him worked up and frustrated. Of course, Socrates *acts* as if his purpose is to convince Crito of the need to stay put rather than escape from prison, but in fact, Socrates does not mean to persuade Crito of this or of anything else; Socrates does not even aim to persuade Crito that he should examine himself. Socrates takes it for granted that justificatory arguments would fall flat with Crito: insofar as Crito is uninvested in self-examination, he does not take arguments seriously enough, and it would be ineffective to give him an argument for valuing arguments. Instead of trying to *persuade* Crito to examine himself, Socrates intends to lead him into a deep regret. Socrates predicts that Crito will be defenseless against the Laws' speech – he will have nothing to say in response to it – and this will eat at him after Socrates is gone: Crito will try and try to think of how he might have refuted it. Socrates' hope is that, in turn, Crito will be drawn into self-examination: he will attend to the strength of arguments and, perhaps, even take up abstract issues such as what justice is.

What are we to say about this strategy that I have imagined? Is it the best strategy that is available to Socrates? The answer, I think, is that although it has a lot going for it, there are ways to improve on it. To be sure, part of what it has in its favor is that justificatory arguments might indeed fail to move Crito, since Crito may already believe in the importance of self-examination and simply blind himself to it for self-interested reasons. However, there is only a chance that he does, and for reasons I have discussed elsewhere, far more likely is that, at base, he is not, in fact, convinced of the importance of self-examination, in which case Socrates' strategy will be ineffective.

I should quickly clarify the sense in which Crito does not believe in self-examination, supposing he does not. If, indeed, he does not believe in it, the likelihood is that he simply does not grasp what it is or why it matters as much as it does. The best way to explain this is to make a comparison involving religion, a comparison which is apt here since the purpose of protreptic is to provoke a certain sort of conversion. Crito's posture toward self-examination is analogous to the posture that many people in Christian societies today have toward God. Daniel Dennett makes some comments that are helpful for characterizing what that posture is:

Many people believe in God. Many people believe in *belief in* God. What's the difference? People who believe in God are sure that God exists, and they are glad, because they hold God to be the most wonderful of all things.

People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that *belief in God* exists (and who could doubt that?), and they think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be strongly encouraged and fostered wherever possible: If only *belief in God* were more widespread! One *ought* to believe in God. One ought to *strive* to believe in God. One should be uneasy, apologetic, unfulfilled, one should even feel guilty, if one finds that one just doesn't believe in God. It's a failing, but it happens. (Dennett, 2006, p. 221)

The people I just referred to believe in believing, yet they don't actually believe in God; and if you asked, they might even say they don't, but that they wish they did. We can call these people aspirants. They might go to church, at least on occasion, but they are not one with religious culture. They like the idea of theism, but at their core religion does little or nothing to shape the way they think. Most significantly, this is less because they are atheists or agnostics at heart than because they scarcely think beyond practical affairs – practical affairs such as making money, having the right social standing, and so forth: their vision barely extends beyond day-to-day life. As a result, they never genuinely assess the truth-values of religious propositions or even come to understand them. If you endorse those propositions or say you go to church, they will applaud, but only since they generically support the idea of being a good person and bettering oneself. They won't have thought through whether being religious is the way to do that: they will take it for granted that it is, just as eating right and exercising are obviously the way to care for one's *physical* health. Similarly, if you offer them arguments for theism, your *inferences* will hardly register for them: they will salute you for the arguments' conclusion without really considering whether you have shown it is true. Arguments about religious issues are too remote from where they live.

The likelihood is that Crito is the way he is because he is to self-examination what aspirants are to God. Crito is taken with the thought of self-examination, but his enthusiasm for it goes only so deep: he merely believes in believing in it. Although he wants the best for his sons and thinks that, in theory, the best includes acquiring moral virtue, deep down he believes money is more important, and his devotion to inquiry quickly dissolves when he is no longer in Socrates' company. Arguments about philosophical issues are too remote from where Crito lives. For him, the final arbiter for every decision is simply common sense.

In that light, let me describe a strategy that I think would be preferable to the one I have attributed to Socrates. Part of this alternative strategy would be for Socrates to give Crito arguments for the importance of

examining oneself. Of course, if Crito is analogous to aspirants, then giving him arguments would be inadequate by itself: he would salute the arguments' conclusion and ignore the inferences, such that the arguments would do nothing to persuade him, and he would stay unconvinced. But there would be a way to adjust for this. Socrates could adopt a tactic which is comparable to one that a religious evangelist can adopt with aspirants. The problem with aspirants is that they never actually evaluate the truth of theism – the question of whether it is true never genuinely arises for them; that is why arguments for theism leave them unfazed. To get them to ask the question for the first time, you can raise an objection to theism that is so forceful as to make them puzzled that anyone would *accept* theism. Admittedly, if they think your goal is to refute theism, they will close their ears and refuse to hear what you say. So you have to assure them at the outset that, after raising your objection, you will answer it and demonstrate that theism is true after all; and when you assure them of this, they may not take your objection seriously when they first hear it. But here, too, there is a solution. When you defend theism after raising your objection, you offer only an argument that is obviously meager, you act fully confident that it is rock solid, and you talk as if it is the only argument theism has. This, anyway, is the most promising tack for an evangelist to take in discussing God with aspirants. Socrates could proceed similarly in discussing self-examination with Crito, and Socrates could offer his *serious* arguments for self-examination only after Crito has squirmed for a while.

2.4 Conclusion

For a range of reasons, Plato has a substantial contribution to make to contemporary thinking about moral education. I began by offering some of the more straightforward reasons – reasons that emerge when we set out to give correct interpretations of Plato. I said, for example, that Plato has a significant function to perform by spurring us to confront our temptation toward pessimism, and he has something pivotal to tell us about how to motivate students. Reasons such as those are sensible and compelling. Yet there is room for an approach to Plato that brackets the task of interpreting him correctly. To learn about protreptic, we can study his Socrates, first examining the details of how he interacts with other people, and then evaluating a variety of strategies he might employ; we can do this all

without trying to discern Plato's thoughts or the meanings of the text. To be sure, it can seem odd to use Plato this way, given how iconic he is. But we might as well approach him in the way that is most productive, since he is not just a piece of history: his writings are a living and relevant source of insight into education.

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