



Plato and the Morality of Fallacy

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PLATO AND THE MORALITY OF FALLACY

Though the possibility that Plato might intentionally employ fallacious arguments in his dialogues has received some attention from recent scholars, the implications this might have for understanding his works have been all but undiscussed. In this paper, I explore the possibility that Plato does use fallacious arguments, and attempt to show that the widespread contention that he does not (or would not) use them does not hold up under scrutiny. Since the use of such arguments by Socrates is by far the most important case, I concentrate attention on that. In section I, I discuss the view that Plato would not depict Socrates arguing fallaciously. In sections II and III, I attempt to establish criteria that can be used to identify one specific context in which he might well do so. Finally, in section IV, I examine some implications this might have for studying Plato's works.¹

I

In recent years, many scholars have asserted that Plato does not knowingly depict Socrates employing fallacious arguments. Though scholars have generally not argued for this contention in detail, typically, they advance considerations of two kinds in its defense. (a) Considerations of morality: the argument here is basically that Plato would not depict Socrates engaging in such conduct, because it would be improper and unworthy of Socrates.² (b) Philosophical considerations: The argument here is basically that for Plato to intentionally employ fallacious arguments in his writings would be an odd thing for a philosopher to do.³ Though these moral and philosophical points should be distinguished, they are sufficiently similar—with implications for the

¹The criteria used to identify fallacious arguments are discussed in my article, "Criteria of Fallacy and Sophistry for Use in the Analysis of Platonic Dialogues," *CQ* 33 (1983). In two previous articles, I argue that Socrates intentionally employs such arguments in different dialogues; for the *Protagoras*, see "Toward a Consistent Interpretation of the *Protagoras*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 61 (1979); for *Republic* I, see "Thrasymachos *Eristikos*: The *Agon Logon* in *Republic* I," *Polity* 17 (1984).

²E.g., C.C.W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford 1976) 158; G. Vlastos, "The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*," *Platonic Studies* (Princeton 1973) 223, n. 5.

³E.g., M. A. Stewart, "Plato's Sophistry," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 51 (1977) 21.

commentator that are also similar — to be lumped together as one broad contention, which we can call the “argument from the immorality of fallacy,” or the “immorality argument” for short. Stated more precisely, the immorality argument is as follows: Plato does not intentionally put fallacious arguments into the mouth of Socrates, because (a) to do so would be to depict Socrates in a morally dubious and unworthy activity, and/or (b) to do so would be an odd thing for a philosopher to do. The strongest ground in support of (b) seems to be the obvious pointlessness of using fallacies. But I believe that this should be set aside. Because Plato wrote dialogues, not ordinary philosophical treatises, it is not obvious that the use of fallacies would be pointless. Until this pointlessness can be established, the major support for (b) would seem to be the possibility that Plato’s use of fallacies could confuse and mislead his readers.⁴ Accordingly, throughout the remainder of this paper, the claims I will examine — and to which I will refer as the “immorality argument” — center upon the dubiousness of (a) Socrates’ activity in using fallacies, and of (b) Plato’s possibly misleading his readers by composing arguments that contain them.

One other distinction should be made. There are two different kinds of cases in which Plato could use fallacies: (i) cases in which he uses arguments that he knows to be fallacious; and (ii) cases in which he depicts Socrates using arguments that Socrates knows to be fallacious. The immorality argument denies both kinds of cases. Ground (a) denies the existence of (ii), and ground (b) denies the existence of (i). (Ground [a] also denies the existence of [i].) In this paper, I will not explore the possible differences between (i) and (ii) or their implications, in order to avoid becoming embroiled in the Socratic problem. In general, I think it is safe to assume that if Plato knowingly employs fallacies, Socrates is meant to be aware also. But nothing hinges on this. In order to avoid confusion, I will discuss the wider question, whether Plato knowingly uses fallacies — regardless of whether Socrates is meant to be aware of this. Various arguments are discussed below in reference to Socrates’ intentional use of fallacies, but of course if Socrates argues sophistically in such cases, this is intentional on Plato’s part.

Now, it seems to me that the immorality argument will not bear up under examination. Several considerations tell against it. First, not only does Plato repeatedly employ arguments that appear to be fallacious in numerous dialogues, but many of his fallacies are obvious and

⁴Vlastos, *Introduction to Plato: Protagoras*, Jowett’s translation, revised by M. Ostwald (Indianapolis 1956) x1, n. 50.

transparent. In addition, there are a number of cases in which Plato seems to be aware that specific arguments are fallacious.⁵ To cite the clearest case, because of a number of hints and clues scattered throughout the *Hippias Minor*, numerous scholars hold that Plato is aware of the sophistical nature of the arguments Socrates uses in this work.⁶ In other dialogues, the *Protagoras* for one, Socrates' interlocutors object to certain of his arguments as fallacious,⁷ while in other works they repeatedly voice the suspicion that he will argue unfairly.⁸ Along similar lines, Plato uses a number of arguments in various dialogues that are markedly similar to ones employed in the *Euthydemus*, which he undoubtedly knows to be fallacious.⁹ Thus it is not surprising that many respected commentators have pointed out specific cases in which they believe that Plato intentionally uses fallacies.¹⁰ Surely, the fact that so many well known scholars took it for granted that Plato intentionally uses fallacious arguments should cause us seriously to consider the possibility that he does.

Though scholars have discussed aspects of Plato's use of fallacies, their treatment is lacking in important respects. Because they are not really interested in the problem of fallacy itself but discuss specific fallacies encountered in the course of their disparate researches—as they comment upon other curious features of the dialogues—on the whole, they do not deal with this question systematically, on an abstract level. Two particular deficiencies should be noted. First, these scholars have not attempted to establish criteria that can be used to determine when Plato intentionally employs fallacies and when he does not. In particular, they have not attempted to identify specific contexts in which Plato

⁵Some examples are discussed below in section IV.

⁶For references, see M. O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill 1967) 99, n. 11.

⁷*Prt.* 331b–c, 350c–51b; discussed in Klosko, "Toward a Consistent Interpretation of the *Protagoras*," 133, 139ff.

⁸E.g., *R.* 341a–c.

⁹This is the means used by R. K. Sprague to identify Plato's conscious fallacies, (*Plato's Use of Fallacy* [New York 1962] xii).

¹⁰E.g., W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols. (Cambridge 1962–81) e.g., 4. 246, 195, 143–50; P. Friedlander, *Plato*, 3 vols., tr. H. Meyerhoff (Princeton 1958–69) e.g., 2. 19, 181; P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago 1933) 90. Cf. the view of C. Ritter concerning the *Hp. Mi.* (*The Essence of Plato's Philosophy*, tr. A. Alles [London 1933] 39, n. 1) and his strategy for dealing with the work (*Platon: sein Leben, seine Schriften, seine Lehre*, 2 vols. [Munich 1910–20] 1. 308, 270–71; *Essence*, 39, n. 1); cf. the view of U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (*Platon: Sein Leben und Seine Werke*,⁵ 2 vols. [Berlin 1959–62] 1. 103–104).

would be especially likely to use fallacious arguments.¹¹ Second, they have not attempted to reconcile their view that Plato does use fallacies with the widespread contention that he would not, that is, the argument from the immorality of fallacy. In order to defend their view, they must criticize and qualify the contention that Plato would not use fallacies.

In this paper I deal with both problems. First I explore the possibility that certain contexts in the dialogues are marked as admitting fallacy. I believe that I will be able to establish a criterion that will, in certain cases, afford a relatively high degree of assurance. Though I do not believe that the kind of context I identify is the only one in which Plato uses fallacies, I believe that it is one that can be delineated fairly clearly. Because this kind of context is encountered in a number of important dialogues and involves a number of important arguments, I believe that it has significant implications for many issues central to Platonic scholarship. Second, I will attempt to show that the argument from the immorality of fallacy does not hold for fallacious arguments used in these contexts. In other words, I will demonstrate important exceptions to the immorality argument's broad assertions.

II

In order to show that there are contexts in which Plato would not find it objectionable to use fallacies, I must establish two points. I will refer to these as (i) the "Moral Thesis" and (ii) the "Mimesis Thesis" respectively. The Moral Thesis has two parts:

- (i.a) there are specific circumstances under which the employment of fallacious arguments is an accepted (indeed a common) practice — by Socrates as well as various interlocutors. (i.b) by depicting the kinds of circumstances discussed in (i.a) in different dialogues, Plato would not mislead his readers.

The distinction between (i.a) and (i.b) corresponds to the two parts of the immorality argument noted above. But I will discuss the two issues together, concentrating on (1.a). At least in the cases I examine, to establish this is also to establish (1.b). The circumstances under which I believe Socrates uses fallacies were part of a common Greek cultural activity. Plato's readers would have recognized this activity and so

¹¹The closest approximation is R. Robinson, "Plato's Consciousness of Fallacy," *Mind* 51 (1942) 102. Sprague avoids the question of criteria in *Plato's Use of Fallacy* (xii).

would have been alerted to the possibility of sophistry. The Mimesis Thesis is as follows:

- (ii) the kind of circumstances discussed in (i.a) and (i.b) are represented in particular dialogues.

For reasons of space, I will discuss (i.a) and (i.b) more completely than (ii). Thoroughly establishing (ii) would be a lengthy process, and so I will limit attention to only some of the evidence concerning a few obvious cases.

There is strong textual support for the Moral Thesis. Several times in the dialogues Plato distinguishes two different kinds of discussions, the “debate” in which the participants argue contentiously (*agōnizomenos*), and the “conversation,” in which they behave more cooperatively (*dialeghomenos*) (*Tht.* 167e4–5). According to Plato: “A debate need not be taken seriously and one may trip up an opponent to the best of one’s power,¹² but a conversation should be taken in earnest; one should help out the other party and bring home to him only those slips and fallacies (*sphalmata*) that are due to himself or to his earlier instructors” (167e–168a; Cornford, tr.). A similar distinction—call it the “eristic distinction”—is found in at least six other places in the dialogues, and in various works of Aristotle as well.¹³ What is important to note is the casual, almost offhand manner in which the distinction is mentioned in passage after passage. I believe that this language reveals that *as a matter of course* Plato (and Aristotle) distinguished between different kinds of discussions, and that both believed that, in the debate, sophistry was used, also as a matter of course.

It is not necessary to discuss contentious argument in detail here, though a few points should be made.¹⁴ First, it is clear that verbal competitions were carried on in two basic forms, according to two relatively set methods, consisting of opposed, lengthy, rhetorical speeches (*makrologia*) and alternating, brief questions and answers (*brachulogia*).¹⁵

¹²*en men tō paizē te kai sphallē kath’ hoson an dunētai . . .* (167e5–6).

¹³*Meno* 75c–d; *R.* 454a, 539c; *Tht.* 164c–d; *Phlb.* 17a; *Ti.* 88a; from Aristotle, *Topics* 159a26–32, 161a23–24; *Sophistici Elenchi* 182b33–35. Additional passages from Aristotle could be cited to confirm this general distinction.

¹⁴The major evidence is reviewed in Klosko, “Thrasymachos *Eristikos*,” 17–20 (on which the discussion here draws).

¹⁵These methods are mentioned a number of times by Plato: e.g., *Prt.* 329b, 334e–335a, 348a; *Crg.* 471e; *Hp. Mi.* 369b–c; *Tht.* 166a, 167d–e; *Sph.* 225b–c, 268b. See H. Hudson-Williams, “Conventional Forms of Debate and the Melian Dialogues,” *AJP* 71 (1950).

Since Socrates generally preferred question-and-answer debate, we will concentrate on this. A second and more important point is that this form of debating was developed and widely practiced—as the casual manner in which Plato and Aristotle allude to it indicates. Compelling evidence of its importance is Aristotle's closing statement in the *Sophistici Elenchi*, where he takes great pride in being the first to write a systematic treatise on the art of dialectic (183a27–184b8).¹⁶

The thesis of this paper attains its plausibility in the light of the importance of competitive dialectic. Considerable progress has been made in recent years in understanding various aspects of Aristotle's logical works through the realization of their close connection with competitive debating.¹⁷ Scholars working in this area have indicated similar connections in the case of Plato.¹⁸ In keeping with this line of approach, I believe that a good number of the fallacies that Plato uses can be accounted for.

From the works of Plato and Aristotle it can be seen that eristic differs from cooperative dialectic in two main respects.¹⁹ First is the attitude of fierce competitiveness that characterizes its participants. Second, and crucial for our concerns, eristic also allows the employment of fallacy. As we have seen, this is stated explicitly in *Theaetetus* 167e. Plato also notes that the failure to apply proper divisions and distinctions is enough to transform a philosophical discussion into a contentious one.²⁰ Additional evidence of the use of fallacies in eristic competitions is the argumentation in the *Euthydemus*, in which fallacies of course abound.²¹ Thus, for Plato, there are serious, cooperative discussions, aimed at truth, and contentious discussions, aimed at victory, in which fallacies are routinely used.

The practice of eristic has serious implications for both components of the immorality argument. Because eristic was a common, widely practiced activity, it was familiar to the readers for whom Plato

¹⁶As E. Kapp points out, E. Kapp, "Syllogistic," in *Articles on Aristotle* I, J. Barnes et al., eds. (London 1975) 40.

¹⁷See esp. R. Weil, "The Place of Logic in Aristotle's Thought," in *Articles on Aristotle* I; Kapp, "Syllogistic."

¹⁸E.g., Weil, "Place of Logic," 103.

¹⁹For evidence, see Klosko, "Thrasymachos *Eristikos*," 19–20.

²⁰*Phlb.* 17a; *R.* 454a.

²¹These are analyzed by Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy*, Ch. I; and in her edition of the *Euthydemus* (Indianapolis 1965). Also valuable are H. Bonitz, *Platonische Studien*,³ (Berlin 1886) Ch. 3; and L. Méridier, ed., *Euthydème* VI, Budé series (Paris 1931).

wrote, who would have recognized its depiction immediately. Because they were aware that eristic admitted fallacies, they were not likely to suppose that the sophistical arguments they encountered in depictions of eristic were intended to be valid. Along similar lines, because eristic practitioners were expected to employ fallacies, Socrates' doing so would not cast him in a poor moral or philosophical light. Thus the hypothesis that Plato depicts eristic competitions in certain works provides us with reasons not to be surprised or dismayed that he knowingly puts fallacious arguments into the mouth of Socrates.

III

As noted above, considerations of space preclude a full examination of the Mimesis Thesis here. To some extent, detailed consideration is unnecessary, for there can be no doubt that Plato does depict a dialectical competition in at least one work, the *Euthydemus*. That this work depicts some version of this activity is incontestable, and as far as I am aware, uncontested. Equally incontestable is the fact that the famed eristic brothers, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, repeatedly use blatant sophistry in order to advance their ends in the debate (note 21 above). Thus rather than having to establish the Mimesis Thesis as stated above, I must establish only that Plato *also* depicts eristic in works other than the *Euthydemus*. Moreover, the fact that Plato does this in the *Euthydemus* creates a strong presumption that he would not object to doing so in other works as well.

Certain signs can be looked for in order to determine if particular dialogues depict eristic contests. Like the *Euthydemus*, these works would depict discussions between Socrates and (probably) other persons with reputations for skill in debate. As in the *Euthydemus*, these discussions would be public, competitive events. Thus, in assessing a particular work, we must look for certain distinguishing features, and keep certain questions in mind. First, is the discussion depicted conducted in public? If it is, do the participants play to the audience? Is the audience aware of any rules or procedures according to which the debate is conducted? Do the contestants in fact discuss the possibility of having the audience judge the debate and choose a winner?

Since a difference in attitude seems to have been the most important factor distinguishing cooperative and contentious discussions, we must look for evidence concerning the attitudes of the participants. Do the participants appear to be competing? Do they suspect one another

of being willing to go to all lengths to prevail in the discussions? Do they discuss winning and losing?

We should make every effort to identify the rules and procedures according to which various discussions are conducted. First, are the participants following the rules of a recognized method, or are they merely talking? If there does seem to be a method involved, is it also understood by any spectators present? Do the participants—or at least certain participants—seem to regard this method as interchangeable with that other method of verbal competition, *makrologia*? In addition, if an identifiable method of discussion is employed, is it the method discussed in Aristotle's *Topics* and *Sophistici Elenchi*, some semblance of which is represented in the *Euthydemus*?

Finally, one feature of considerable importance in helping to identify a context in which fallacies are likely to be used is the accusation of someone present that fallacies are being used. In connection with the accusation of fallacy, several questions arise. If fallacies are detected or apparently detected, how do the participants react? Are they surprised? Are the spectators surprised? Is the use of fallacies roundly condemned as immoral—as meriting the kind of condemnation it receives from recent scholars? Though I do not contend that this sort of accusation alone is enough to identify a specific discussion as contentious dialectic, it is an important indication. Viewed in the context of other evidence we have mentioned, it can go a long way toward making this case.

Because it is not always easy to interpret Plato's works with assurance, we must be wary of leaping to the conclusion that a given dialogue depicts a verbal contest. However, when a number of the identifying features appear in conjunction, we should be prepared to be swayed by the weight of evidence, and I believe that there are a number of works in which the evidence is sufficient to indicate that we most probably are witnessing an *agōn logōn*. The dialogue in which this is most obviously the case is of course the *Euthydemus*. A brief review of the main evidence concerning the eristic in this work will provide a more secure basis for assessing the activities depicted in other dialogues.

The *Euthydemus* depicts a verbal battle between Socrates and the two eristic masters, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. The brothers are described as follows: "a pair of regular all-round fighters," skilled at fighting under arms, and in the battle of the law courts, while their greatest skill is in verbal battle, as they are able to confute any argument true or false (271c–272b).²² The details of the debate cannot be sum-

²²On Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, see Méridier, *Euthydème* 127–28.

marized here, though many are of great interest to the student of eristic.²³ Though the ostensible occasion for the conversation depicted in the work is instructing Cleinias about the teachability of virtue, there are unmistakable signs that the discussion is actually a form of competition. Especially important is the fact that it is conducted publicly, before a large crowd, to which the opening lines of the dialogue draw attention. The sophists' avowed aim in their demonstration is to attract students (esp. 274a-b). Plato cannot resist the running joke that Socrates is a potential student. He wishes to take their course and learn their art. In fact, the ostensible purpose of the "frame-conversation" between Socrates and Crito is Socrates' desire to convince Crito to take the course along with him (272b-d; also 295d, 304b-c).

Not only is there an audience but it is divided into supporters of two contending sides. On the one hand we have the companions (*hetairoi*, 274c6) of the sophists, on the other the admirers of Cleinias. As the debate progresses, these groups lend active, vocal support to their respective dialectical champions. As the brothers question Cleinias, their followers are heard from. Each time Cleinias is tripped up, they let out a raucous cheer (276b-d). As for the supporters of Cleinias, Socrates reports that "we on our side were dismayed and held our peace" (276d). But Cleinias' supporters also make their presence felt. When Cleinias has been thoroughly bested and Euthydemus is getting ready to press him for the third fall, Socrates interrupts, to give Cleinias a breather, "lest he should shame us by losing heart" (277c-d). At the end of the debate, when Socrates concedes defeat (303a), the crowd rocks the very pillars of the Lyceum with laughter and applause for the wily brothers.

An additional sign of the competitive nature of the debate is the attitude of the participants. We have noted that contentious dialectic is distinctive because of its competitiveness. Thus it is notable that the participants in the discussion here are generally hostile and truculent (287b, 284e, 285d, etc.).

There is strong evidence that the *Euthydemus* depicts a recognized, public activity. The conduct of the activity is well-known to a wider public as well as to the participants. We have noted that the crowd plays an active role, rooting on the opposing sides. Thus the crowd knows what to cheer and when to cheer. At one point the partisans of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are described as raising a cheer and a laugh "like a chorus at the signal of their director" (276b6-c1).

²³See esp. H. Keulen, *Untersuchungen zu Platons Euthydem* (Wiesbaden 1971).

Such outbursts prove that the crowd is aware of the overall nature of the proceedings, of the object of the debate and how it is attained.

Two additional, striking indications of the public nature of eristic should be noted. First, Socrates has seen at least one of the brothers' arguments before. He has heard their proof of the impossibility of contradiction "from many people on various occasions" (286c1), especially from the followers of Protagoras.²⁴

The fact that Socrates has already heard this argument indicates that certain lines of argument concerning well-known questions were worked out and became standard fare for dialectical debaters. The existence of a tract like the *Dissoi Logoi*²⁵ indicates the existence of a stock of standard arguments, both for and against various positions on common questions, which the serious practitioner of dialectical debating could easily memorize and would be expected to know.²⁶ Aristotle recommends that the student of dialectic memorize a large store of standard arguments, in order to equip himself for future encounters.²⁷ However, Aristotle complains that previous teachers of dialectic gave their students collections of existing arguments to memorize, without teaching them the art of constructing arguments for themselves—a deficiency that he seeks to remedy in the *Topics* and *Sophistici Elenchi* (*SE* 183b34–184a8).²⁸

Our second point is that in the *Euthydemus* Plato refers to definite rules and conventions that govern the conduct of the discussion. Three pertain to the conduct of the answerer. First, the answerer is required to answer the questions put to him (287c–d, 297b). Second, he is not allowed to ask questions of his own when he is being questioned—which would allow him to qualify obscure questions (295b). Third, he is not allowed to qualify his answers. He must give an unambiguous "yes-or-

²⁴The evidence that this was a common argument is presented by Guthrie, *History* 3. 182, n. 2.

²⁵For similar tracts, see Klosko, "Thrasymachos *Eristikos*," 19, n. 45.

²⁶G. Ryle calls such arguments "moots"; the analogy that springs to mind is the store of worked out chess openings collected in *Modern Chess Openings* (Ryle uses a similar analogy; *Plato's Progress* [Cambridge 1965] 118). Though I find much in *Plato's Progress* highly improbable, I am indebted to Ryle. Many points in this paper—and in the other papers listed above in note 1—were suggested by his overall approach.

²⁷*Top.* 163a29ff.; *SE* 172b9ff.

²⁸For the possibility that arguments employed in the *Euthydemus* originated in a book of sophisms written by Euthydemus, see *SE*. 177b12; *Rh.* 1401a26ff.; E. M. Cope and J. E. Sandys, eds., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* 3 vols. (Cambridge 1877) 2. 307; K. Praechter, "Platon und Euthydemus," *Philologus* 87 (1932).

no" answer — to even the most ambiguous question (see 295b–296e, esp. 296a–c). Though these rules might appear to be so ridiculous that they must have been invented by Plato in order to further his satire of eristic debating, strong evidence of their authenticity is the fact that Aristotle recognized them — or something closely related to them — as features of the dialectical debating conducted before his own time.²⁹ In the *Euthydemus*, they are accepted as conventions governing competitive dialectic.

Thus the competitive dialectic represented in the *Euthydemus* is a recognized, public activity, which is conducted according to definite rules and conventions. Its depiction satisfies many of the criteria we have listed above to identify contexts in which the reader can expect fallacies to be used. The eristic brothers of course employ numerous fallacious arguments and actually get the better of Socrates by doing so (see above, n. 21). For our purposes, it is interesting to note that, in this work Socrates too uses a fallacious argument and freely admits that he does so (see below, pp. 623–624). Of course, according to the thesis of this paper, the fact that Socrates employs sophistry is explained by the activity in which he is engaged.

Two additional works that depict verbal competitions are the *Hippias Minor* and *Protagoras*.³⁰ Because I have already examined the *Protagoras* in another paper, I will discuss only the *Hippias Minor* here, and this work only briefly, and refer the reader to my other paper.³¹ In both of these works the activity depicted resembles that seen in the *Euthydemus*, and it is notable that both of these are works in which Socrates is widely believed to employ sophistical arguments.

It can be seen that the encounter between Socrates and Hippias in the *Hippias Minor* is an organized dialectical competition. Most of the indications we have noted are present. The occasion depicted in this work is a public performance given by Hippias, which has just ended. Though part of the audience has departed (363a), at least part still remains (369c6, 373c2), and Socrates is invited to question Hippias by

²⁹SE 175b8–14 (see also 172b19–20); noted by G. Grote, *Aristotle*² (London 1880) 404 n. f; cf. Weil, "The Place of Logic," 102 and n. 24; Keulen, *Untersuchungen* 71 n. 46.

³⁰Considerations of space preclude discussion of *Republic* I, which could also be included; evidence concerning the eristic in this work is presented in Klosko, "Thrasymachos *Eristikos*," 21–27.

³¹Klosko, "Toward a Consistent Interpretation of the *Protagoras*."

Eudicus, apparently the promoter of the event (363a, 364b9). Hippias is obliged to answer, because he had earlier offered to field any question anyone asked (363c-d). It is important to note the likening of Hippias' verbal activities to the performance of physical athletes and Hippias' claim that since he began to contend (*agōnizesthai*) in the Olympic Games, he has never met his better in anything (364a).

The attitudes expressed by those present at the discussion indicate the contentious nature of the proceedings. There can be no doubt that Hippias sees himself involved in a competition. Finding himself coming out at the short end of question-and-answer debate, he voices his suspicion about the nature of Socrates' arguments — clearly revealing that he believes Socrates to be competing with him — and suggests that they continue the debate in lengthy speeches:

Socrates, you are always making intricate arguments of this sort, and, picking out the most difficult part of the argument, you stick to it in detail, and you do not discuss the whole subject with which the argument deals; for now, if you like, I will prove to you by satisfactory argument . . . [that Homer made Achilles better than Odysseus]. And, if you like, you should oppose argument to argument, maintaining that the other is better; and these gentlemen here will determine which of us speaks better.

369b-d

Further evidence of Hippias' view is his later complaint that Socrates "always makes confusion in argument, and seems to want to make trouble" (373b4-5). This accusation of fallacy on Hippias' part occurs in a context in which fallacies are being used.

If on the basis of these brief looks at the *Euthydemus* and *Hippias Minor* we can take it as at least probable that Plato does depict eristic contests in certain works, according to the Moral Thesis, we should not be surprised to see Socrates argue sophistically in them. Now, this is to assume that Socrates would behave in eristic contests according to the same standards as his sophistic opponents. Two considerations indicate the likelihood that he would do so. First, there seems to be little reason why he would not. Eristic was a common activity and one in which fallacious arguments were widely used. Thus the reasons recent scholars have presented to support their contention that he would not do so are defused. Second, compelling evidence that Socrates would use sophistry against sophists is the fact that he does so and admits this in the *Euthydemus*. At *Euthydemus* 301a Socrates uses clear and obvious sophistry

concerning the word *heteron*, and freely says that he does so.³² Thus, if Socrates is willing to use sophistry in the eristic contest depicted in the *Euthydemus*, there seems to be little reason why he would not be willing to do so in other eristic contests as well.

IV

In *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, Crombie proposes the following policy for dealing with arguments that appear to be fallacious: ". . . we shall naturally try, whenever we find a passage the reasoning of which is apparently sophistical, to find an interpretation of it which renders it valid, or at least to reconstruct the valid train of thought the presence of which in Plato's mind allowed the fallacy to pass undetected. In my judgment, one or other of these interpretations will commonly be successful."³³ However, if the Moral Thesis and the Mimesis Thesis are accepted, we are left with quite a different rule of thumb. In spite of the apparent reasonableness of Crombie's procedure, it seems that, when we encounter an argument the logic of which is apparently sophistical, we must begin by attempting to determine if the fallacy is intentional. If we believe that the argument in question might occur in an eristic context, we must explore this possibility, and the possibility that other arguments employed in the debate are also intentionally fallacious. It is difficult to generalize about matters of this sort, and one's final judgments must be made on a case by case basis. But when the evidence concerning the eristic context is strong and the arguments in question appear to turn on simple verbal fallacies, this sort of policy is preferable to twisting texts in search of validity. Of course, if the flaws in the arguments are more complex, we have less license to declare them intentional. Similarly, if the debate in question is less obviously a competition, we must proceed with more caution.

I believe that following the procedure outlined here would clear up longstanding problems in the interpretation of certain dialogues. This helps us to clear up one troubling question about the *Euthydemus*. We have noted that Socrates uses sophistry in this work and admits to

³²See, e.g., Bonitz, *Platonische Studien*, 102-103; Méridier, *Euthydème* ad loc. Cf. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy* 26-27; Sprague, *Euthydemus* 55, n. 95.; Guthrie, *History* 4. 278-79.

³³I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines* 2 vols. (London 1962-63) 1. 26; T. Irwin presents a similar statement of policy, in the Preface to his edition of the *Gorgias: Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford 1979).

doing so. And so the unavoidable question is why he does so—and by implication, if he does so here, why he cannot do so elsewhere as well. To these questions, I believe, I have presented clear answers—clearer than any that have been given previously.

The majority of scholars believe that Socrates uses intentional fallacies in the *Hippias Minor* as well. But as far as I am aware, the fact that he does so has never been adequately explained. Again, why is Socrates justified in using fallacies in this work but not elsewhere? Scholars tacitly distinguish between the *Hippias Minor*, where Socrates does use fallacies, and other works in which he does not. On what grounds can this distinction be justified?

A second question concerns the nature of the activity in which Socrates is engaged in the *Hippias Minor*. While many scholars note the fallacies Socrates employs in this work and discuss the points that Plato appears to be trying to make through his use of them, the question that they overlook is what Plato depicts Socrates as *doing*, as he baffles Hippias with a string of fallacies. Given the overall raucousness of the *Euthydemus*, the question of Socrates' motives in that work might easily be overlooked. But even if the *Hippias Minor* is also a comic work, it is not as comic;³⁴ the question of Socrates' motives cannot be avoided. Scholars have explored numerous aspects of Plato's dialogues, but this aspect of the mimetic or representative side has largely been lost in the shuffle. The argument of this paper, then, helps to answer questions with which, I believe, the commentator is obliged to deal.

Though I have not been able to discuss the *Protagoras* in this paper, it should be noted that the argument of this paper also helps to clear up problems in this important work. One major difficulty in interpreting the *Protagoras* is the fact that so many of its arguments appear to be fallacious.³⁵ The problem of fallacy in the *Protagoras* comes to a head in the notorious "interlude" in which Socrates presents a ludicrous interpretation of one of Simonides' poems. Socrates' arguments here are so obviously meant to be sophistical that few scholars have been able to interpret them in any other way.³⁶ In order to preserve their view, then, that Socrates' other arguments in the *Protagoras* are to be taken seriously, scholars are forced to make a distinction between a serious philosophical discussion on the one hand, and this "interlude" in which So-

³⁴Cf. Guthrie *History* 4. 195.

³⁵These are analyzed in Klosko, "Toward a Consistent Interpretation of the *Protagoras*."

³⁶References *ibid.*, 130, n. 14.

crates argues “whimsically” on the other.³⁷ I do not contend that this distinction is impossible to maintain, but so far as I know, no scholar has adequately explained it, or explained just why Socrates is justified in using fallacies in the interlude, but not elsewhere in the work. Moreover, a number of scholars argue that Socrates’ arguments in the interlude are intended to “outsophisticate the sophists.”³⁸ But again, these scholars distinguish between the interlude and the rest of the dialogue and hold that Socrates uses such tactics only in the interlude. Thus one significant advantage of the thesis of this paper is that it accounts for Socrates’ behavior in the interlude in the *Protagoras*. Of course, I disagree with most scholars and hold that Socrates does not confine this sort of conduct to the interlude alone. I believe that arguments employed by Socrates in the *Protagoras* that seem to turn on obvious fallacies should be interpreted accordingly.

Finally, the account of Socrates’ conduct given in this paper explains what he is *doing*, the activity in which he is engaged, as he batters Protagoras with a string of outrageous paradoxes. Because of the failure of other scholars to explain adequately Socrates’ conduct in the *Protagoras*, or in the other works we have examined—and because of their failure to explain exactly why these contexts are exceptional—I believe that the argument of this paper should be accepted, until a better explanation comes along.³⁹

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³⁷Ibid., n. 15.

³⁸Ibid., n. 17.

³⁹For reasons of space, I have not been able to discuss the question of Plato’s motives for writing works that depict dialectical contests. Though, obviously, this difficult question cannot be addressed adequately here, it should be borne in mind that the question *whether* Plato composed such works is logically independent of the question *why* he did so, and that my account of what he did does not rest upon any specific account of his motives. I have addressed the question of Plato’s motives, in regard to *Republic* I, in “Thrasymachos *Eristikos*” (27–29), and in regard to the *Protagoras*, in “Toward a Consistent Interpretation of the *Protagoras*” (128–29). I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Professor Diskin Clay for helpful comments and suggestions.