An Avuncular Socrates?\footnote{This is a response to the original form of the paper that Dr Schultz read at Boston College in March 2014. A revised version of the paper did not reach me before the deadline I was given for submission to the editors.}

Comment on A.-M. Schultz’ Socrates and Socrates: ‘Looking back to Bring Philosophy Forward’

Suzanne Stern-Gillet
University of Manchester and University of Bolton

John Cleary (1949-2009)

*Dis Manibus*

In her ambitious paper, which comes on the heels of her book *Plato’s Socrates as Narrator: A Philosophical Muse* (2013), Anne-Marie Schultz claims to have opened up a new avenue in Platonic studies. By drawing attention to the various self-narratives that Plato put in the mouth of Socrates, she points to a feature of the dialogues that previous scholars, so she contends, had missed: “Aside from my own work,” she asserts, “the narrative dimensions of Socrates’ philosophy are overlooked in the secondary literature” (p.2). Such neglect is all the more regrettable, she continues, in that Socrates’ self-narratives have particular significance for us, contemporary educators, in so far as they stand “to shape the philosophical stories that we tell our students” and thereby help us to “create the philosophers of the future.”

The Socrates that comes to life in Schultz’s paper is an avuncular and guileless mentor, whose self-awareness and readiness to express his emotions have rendered “profoundly sensitive” to the emotional states of his interlocutors. The emphasis that she places on the softer sides of the personality of the Platonic Socrates is dictated by her strategic aim of presenting a Socrates for our educationally troubled times, a Socrates who lives his philosophy and for whom “the practice of philosophy is a means by which [we] can support each other” (p. 20).
To grasp the full impact of Schultz’s Socrates, we have to contrast him with the other Socrates, the Socrates of academic tradition, whom our students encounter when embarking on the study of philosophy. That Socrates is a master of argument, a gadfly, a torpedo fish and, at times, a manipulating bully, who makes use of the *elenchos* to reduce his interlocutors to a state of *aporia*, and whose perverse philosophical views include the denial of *akrasia*. Schultz, it may be taken for granted, does not deny the existence of that other Socrates, whether he be conceived as a philosopher in his own right or as Plato’s mouthpiece or as an amalgam of the two. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that she would deny the validity of the labours that philologists and philosophers over the ages have expended on the text of the dialogues. What she denies is that the Socrates of our austere academic tradition is the only *persona* of the Socrates of the dialogues, or even the most appropriate one to present to our students. Her Socrates leads “a self-reflective philosophical life,” in which “emotions play an important part” (p. 2). He is a mentor who “underscores the affective dimensions of the learning process” (p.15) and who does not hesitate to “hold his own life up for analysis” (p. 17) so as to prepare his friends and pupils “to do philosophy without him.” (17) In short, he “‘practices philosophy as care for self and care for others’” (p.1) Such aspects of the philosophical personality of Socrates can be seen to best advantage, Schultz argues, in the Socratic self-narratives that Plato has included in the *Symposium*, the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*.5

As soon becomes apparent upon reading her text, Schultz’s current work builds on a thesis made famous, in their different ways, by Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault, namely that in Classical and post-Classical antiquity philosophy was a way of life in the sense of serving a practical and soteriological function. In his influential *What is Ancient
Hadot argued that the various philosophical schools of the ancient world are best seen as offering, not only abstract cosmological speculations and metaphysical theories, but also - and perhaps chiefly - systems of values destined to help their adherents and followers to understand where their true good lay and to live their life accordingly. To support them in what was nothing short of a transformation of the self, these schools devised various spiritual exercises and practices. As is now widely recognised, Hadot’s influence was instrumental in causing Michel Foucault in the last ten years of his life to embark on an in-depth study of ancient thought. His protracted reflections on the personality of the Platonic Socrates, which form the bulk of his last set of lectures at the Collège de France (1984), are for the most part focused on Socrates’ use of the elenchos and his reflections on death in the Phaedo. The Platonic Socrates’ thinking on death and the soul, Foucault argued, led him to defend a conception of philosophy as care of the self - one’s own self mainly, but also that of one’s interlocutors, friends and fellow citizens. Foucault’s presentation of the Platonic Socrates’ interest in philosophy as a practice is particularly relevant to the topic of Schultz’s paper.

However, if it is clear that Schultz has been influenced, whether directly or indirectly, by these two thinkers, she is far from being a mere disciple. She brings her own preoccupations to the study of the Platonic Socrates. While Hadot and Foucault both see Socrates as an apostle of reason, of logos, she introduces a coda to their common thesis by bringing in the perspective of a contemporary educator who takes emotional self-awareness to be part and parcel of self-care and, as such, central to the philosophic life. Rather than dealing with those aspects of Schulz’s work that are shared with Hadot’s and Foucault’s, I shall henceforth direct my response to claims that are her own. More specifically, I shall address what is in my view the main controversial point in her paper by asking whether her emotive and avuncular Socrates is to be found in the dialogues that she has chosen for analysis. As a challenger of exegetical orthodoxy, the onus is on her to show that the two Socrates - hers and that of various academic traditions - can cohabit in the text of Plato, and hence that her approach usefully complements the existing ones. I shall first concentrate on the

---

7 For a detailed and enlightening study of Hadot’s and Foucault’s respective Socrates, see Alexander Nehamas (1998), chapter 6.
9 For Hadot (2002), see, e.g., p.32; for Foucault (2011), see, e.g. pp. 100-101.
autobiographical narrative in the *Phaedo* before offering some brief and seemingly rudimentary remarks on the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima in the *Symposium*.

1. Socrates’ autobiographical narrative in the *Phaedo*

It was a shrewd move on Schultz’s part to pick the self-narrative of the *Phaedo* as a passage likely to support her thesis. Because it is relatively free of irony – “relatively free” does not mean “entirely devoid of it” – this particular self-narrative is one of the few passages in the corpus where the Platonic Socrates can reasonably be assumed to mean pretty much what he says.

The passage has considerable historical and literary value. Insofar as Socrates’ rejection of the Anaxagorean concept of *nous* marks a break with what we now call Presocratic enquiries into nature, it is one of the most significant in the history of western philosophy. Insofar as it features a kind of discourse never attempted before, namely an autobiographical narrative in which a philosopher gives a detailed account of the stages of the intellectual journey that led him all the way to his final, albeit as yet tentative, conclusions, the passage has considerable literary value. Admittedly, Hesiod in the proem to the *Theogony* had explained how the Muses had made him a poet, and, a couple of centuries later, Parmenides had recounted how wise mares and young maidens had borne him to the house of a goddess who would teach him “the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth.” But however sophisticated Hesiod’s proem proves to be on close analysis, and no matter how evocative Parmenides’ opening lines continue to be, Socrates’ self-narrative in the *Phaedo* is in a different league. Only Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* can arguably rival it for contrived philosophical candour and literary merit.

Consider if you would the giant steps forward achieved by the Socratic narrator in the *Phaedo*: after his youthful enthusiasm for natural science (*peri physeōs historian*, 96a7) had waned, he had come to realise that the naturalistic causes propounded by his predecessors could not, on their own, fully account for the phenomena of coming-to-be and perishing. This led him to seek another kind of causes, causes which would possess a “good binding force which literally binds things together and holds them fast” (99c5-6), that is, causes that would be self-sufficient as causes and separate (*chorista*) from the phenomena to be

---

10 For a comparison between the two autobiographical sketches, see Stern-Gillet (2014).
explained. He then evolved a conception of the soul as principle of organisation of both individual living things and the universe as a whole, a conception that would later be developed and refined in the *Phaedrus* (where the soul is defined as a self-moving entity) and the *Timaeus* (where it is presented as the origin and the source of excellence of all bodily nature). And, as if this was not enough, he had opened up an inquiry into the nature of causality and the difference between causes and conditions, thereby identifying an avenue of reflection that would continue to this day. Because these issues are so philosophically and historically weighty, the self-narrative in which he recalls the stages of his philosophical life has been the object of minute scrutiny on the part of the most astute scholars and philosophers of their time. Yet, *mirabile dictu*, those aspects of the passage that are of particular interest to Anne-Marie Schultz have mostly been ignored or by-passed. This may possibly be due to the long scholarly neglect of the literary aspects of the dialogues. After all, it was not so long ago that Gregory Vlastos delivered himself of the opinion that Plato liked to cover “the bones and sinews of arguments” with “a skin of graceful chatter and badinage.”11 Fortunately, that view is no longer widely shared and what Vlastos called “badinage” is now mostly recognised to be a source of useful insights into Plato’s philosophy.

Is so much true of this particular self-narrative? Has it got more to yield than a highly complex set of arguments expressed in glorious prose? Schultz has mounted a passionate plea to show that it has. She claims that it is the manner in which Socrates is made to recount the search that led him to undertake a *deuterōs plous* (second sailing), rather than the reasons for undertaking it, that has educational as well as philosophical relevance for us today. The features of the passage that make it particularly worth studying at the present time are the emotions that Socrates is made freely to express in it and the pedagogical skill with which he adapts his autobiographical narrative to the needs of his audience of grieving friends and associates.

Schultz emphasises what she would have us see as the emotional content of the passage on no fewer than four occasions; Socrates, she writes, “characterizes his thought process in highly emotional terms” (14), he “underscores the affective dimensions of the learning process” (15) and he “eloquently describes his emotional state” when he reports fearing the blinding of his soul as he tries to look “at things with his eyes.” (16) The lines she quotes in support of this last point are those in which Socrates explains that, as he was growing

---

disenchanted with the naturalistic explanations of the physikoi, he decided to embark on ‘a second sailing’ and to turn instead to logoi (arguments, propositions, reasons) in the hope of finding an explanation as to why things are the best way for them to be:

Εἴδοξε τοίνυν μοι, ἡ δ’ ὅς, μετὰ ταύτα, ἐπειδὴ ἀπειρήκη τὰ δυνατὰ σκοτῶν, δὲιν εὔλαβηναι μὴ πάθοιμι ὄπερ οἶ τὸν ἡλιον ἐκλείποντα θεωρούντες καὶ σκοτούμενοι πάσχουσιν. διαφεύρονται γὰρ ποιεῖν τὰ δῆμματα, ἐὰν μη ἐν ὑδατὶ ἤ. Ἐτινὶ τοιοῦτω σκοτῶν τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ τοιοῦτὸν τι καὶ ἐν ὑδενόηθην, καὶ ἐδεισαμὴ παντάπασι τὴν ψυχὴν τυφλωθεὶν βλέπων πρὸς τὰ πράγματα τοῖς δῆμασι καὶ ἐκάστη τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἐπεὶ χειρῶν ἀπεσθαὶ αὐτῶν. ἐδοξεὶ δὴ μοι χρῆναι ἐἰς τοὺς λόγους κατὰ φύγοντα ἐν ἐκεῖνοις σκοπεῖν τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλῆθειαν.

Well, at that point, when I had wearied of my investigations, I felt that I must be careful not to meet the fate which befalls those who observe and investigate an eclipse of the sun; sometimes, I believe, they ruin their eyesight, unless they look at its image in water or some other medium, I had the same sort of idea: I was afraid I might be completely blinded in my mind if I looked at things with my eyes and attempted to apprehend them with one or other of my senses; so I decided I must take refuge in propositions which I judge to be the soundest, and I put down as true whatever seems to me to be in agreement with this.12

My reading of these powerful lines is somewhat different from that of Schultz; lots of philosophy and a modicum of emotion is what I find in them. For the reasons just outlined, I would describe Socrates’ account of his search for teleological causes as well-paced and lively, humorous in places, faintly self-deprecatory in others and generally well-judged to hold his auditors’ attention. The vocabulary is somewhat recherché perhaps, but the verbs of

12 Phaedo, 99d4-e6; all quotations from the Phaedo are in Hackforth’ translation, with occasional modifications, always flagged as such.
mindfulness (eulabeomai, dianoeomai) are not especially self-revelatory or emotional in their connotations. As for paschō, it here bears its prime meaning of ‘to have something done to one’, which in translators’ English becomes ‘to suffer’ and in common English ‘to undergo.’ The lines refer back to characteristically self-deprecatory statements made earlier: in 96c1, Socrates says that by nature he is no ‘great shakes’ (aphuēs … ouden chrēma) at the kind of investigation (skēpesis) that seeks to explain natural phenomena by other natural phenomena, and in 97b6 he explains that he had come to abandon that particular method in favour of what he calls ‘a confused jumble of my own’ (autos eikē phyrō).

More generally, the Phaedo as a whole appears to me to be conspicuous for the subdued and restrained manner in which emotion is expressed in it. Let me take a few examples: in 60a, Socrates has a lamenting Xanthippe and the baby taken home, presumably for fear that they would stand in the way of calm and composed philosophical exchanges. A similar point is made at the close of the dialogue, when Socrates urges his friends to compose themselves and avoid unseemly behaviour; the use of plēmmeleō, whose first meaning is to make a false note in music (117d7-e1), suggests that a public display of emotion would strike him as aesthetically unpleasing and therefore undesirable. In what is possibly the most poignant passage of the dialogue Socrates strokes Phaedo’s hair and anticipates that it would be cut the following day as a sign of mourning. If, as I readily concede, there is more than a touch of melancholy in Socrates’ remark, it is directed at Phaedo’s future sorrow, not at his own impending demise. Indeed Socrates himself remains strikingly serene throughout the whole exchange. Most significant of all in that respect is his remark that if, unlike him, one could not be sure that the soul is immortal it would be rational to fear death (cf. phobeisthai … ei mē anoētos eiē, 95d6-e1). The same point is made at the conclusion of the eschatological myth (114d4), where Socrates reiterates that since he holds the soul to be deathless (athanatos) as well as indestructible (anōlethros), he has no reason to fear death and every reason to attend (epimeleias dē deitai) to his soul, “not only in respect of this present period which we call our lifetime, but in respect of all time”. More generally, within the context of the dialogue, Socrates’ remarkable emotional restraint is presented as stemming from his conviction that the body is to be held in check if it is not “to confuse, disturb and alarm us, thereby preventing our soul from seeing the truth” (66d5-7). As he is made to point out:

13 LSJ, s.v. 1. In the self-narrative likewise pathos has the meaning of experience, e.g., Phaedo 96a2
14 This refers back to ibid., 63b-c.
15 Ibid., 105e10 and 107a1 respectively.
16 Ibid., 107c2-4. Incidentally, this is the only occurrence of epimeleia in the whole of the dialogue.
… the body fills us with desires and longings and fears and imaginations of all sorts, and such quantities of trash (phluaria), that as the common saying puts it, we really never have a moment to think about anything because of the body. (66c2-6)

In the Phaedo, as can be seen, the negative theorization of the body practically rules out that any positive role be ascribed to the emotions in the philosophic life. So much is borne out in the valedictory speech that Socrates addresses to his disciples.

You may think that I am labouring the point - perhaps I am. But if I am, it is as a preliminary step to arguing that Socrates’ composure in the face of death, his refusal to allow a display of emotion to intrude into the proceedings at any time, come as a direct result of the philosophical insights and arguments recalled in the self-narrative. One of the lessons of the complex autobiographical narrative that Plato put in the mouth of Socrates is to suggest that ontology and ethics are not separate undertakings. Reason, when properly used, shows us that the ultimate causes of all there is, including the sublunar world and its contents, should guide the way in which we live our life. Admittedly, this particular point is not explicitly stated in the Phaedo, but the seeds of Socratic intellectualism and what contemporary philosophers call moral realism are sown there, only to be nurtured and fully articulated in later dialogues. Suffice it to say for now that, paradoxical though it may seem, the serenity that the Platonic Socrates displays in the face of death ultimately comes as a result of his break with the pre-Platonic philosophical past, a break that took him from one mode of investigation (skepsis) to another, from a physicalist conception of nous as principle of order and cause of all things (97c2) to a radically different conception of causation, according to which causes properly so-called do account for the optimal being or state of their effects. Conceived as Socrates came to conceive them, such causes are both the ultimate grounds of value and the normative objects of human aspiration. Socrates’ intellectualism, I conclude, is best understood in the light of the teleological conception of causality that he came to formulate as a result of undertaking ‘a second sailing’. Platonic causes, therefore, should ideally have a direct bearing on our conduct; to care for the self is ultimately to turn away from the phluaria generated by the body and to orient the soul to what it is most akin, namely the deathless and the indestructible.

If I have argued that the self-narrative of the Phaedo is tied to a singular moment in the history of western philosophy, it does not mean that I would deny its pedagogical value for today’s readers. Far from it, for I do agree with Anne-Marie Schultz that the passage does
have such a value. However, rather than seeing it as she does, namely as a model of ‘therapeutic self-care’, I read it as a paradigm of philosophical enquiry. Although it is the story of one man’s particular experience (cf. pathē) at a particular juncture in the history of philosophy, the autobiographical narrative of the Phaedo gives a vivid account of the way in which the philosophical mind, as embodied in the person of Socrates, typically works as he goes through the stages of his inquiries. The stages are all there: Socrates’ hopes and assumptions as he begins to think of the problem, the first difficulties he encounters and how he attempts to overcome them, his false starts, his hesitations in starting afresh before coming to formulate a hypothesis likely to yield a tentative solution, and finally, how the various implications of the tentative solution would still have to be tested for consistency and truth. Having recounted the reasons for his dissatisfaction with Anaxagoras’ concept of causation, Socrates turns to the steps that he took before he could address the problem anew. He first unlearned what he thought he knew, questioned what he had so far taken to be so obvious as to be beyond question, and recognised his general ignorance in matters of causation. He had to come to terms with a state of aporia not dissimilar to the kind he had so often in the past induced in his interlocutors (96c-97a). Finally, in order to overcome the intellectual confusion generated by the process of unlearning, he came to realise that he had to approach the problem from a radically different angle. He posited (cf. hypothemenos, 100b5-6) the existence of the Beautiful in itself (auto kath’ hauto, 100b6), the Good in itself and all the other Forms and considered this to be the safest (asphalestaton) answer that he could provide to the question as to why things bear the properties that they do.

Therein, in my view, lies the pedagogical value that Plato ascribed to the self-narrative that he put in Socrates’ mouth. Not only did he make Socrates impress upon Cebes the principle of intellectual hygiene that requires that hypotheses and their consequences should be discussed separately (101d), but he also had Socrates calmly tell Cebes and Simmias that his experiences (pathē) would be of some use to them in later life, at such a time as they would be able to conduct their own inquiries. For all these reasons, Socrates’ self-narrative in the Phaedo also came to be Socrates’ last tutorial, in the course of which, through his exemplary serenity and self-control, he taught the assembled disciples how to use their reason and critical faculties in order to address, not only metaphysical and epistemological issues, but also problems of value concerning human life and death.

17 Although such self-induced state of aporia was “not dissimilar” to that which he had induced in others in the past it was not, even so, exactly the same in so far as no elenchos was involved. It may be because self-refutation would be a paradoxical relation that Plato used the word skepsis.
2. Socrates’ conversation with Diotima

In his *Symposium* Plato would spell out what he had only hinted at in the *Phaedo*. He would articulate the way in which the ultimate structure of reality bears directly on questions of value, particularly those concerning the nature of the best life for a human being to lead. To reach out to the highest cognitive object, to behold the Form of Beauty, he had the Mantinean priestess teach Socrates, nothing less than a re-orientation of desire (erōs)\(^\text{18}\) is required. But if Plato’s message is clear, the way in which he conveyed it is highly complex, so complex that few texts in the corpus raise as many problems as does the speech ascribed to Diotima, the priestess in question. Is she a fictional character and, if so, does she speak for Socrates or for Plato or, possibly, for both? Is Socrates’ so-called ‘account’ of their conversation enlivened by touches of his mysterious irony and, if so, what form do they take and what bearing do they have on the content of the exchange? Is the portrait of Socrates that emerges from his ‘instruction’ at the hands of the priestess consistent with the one drawn by Alcibiades at the end of the dialogue? Lastly, to what extent can either speech, or possibly both, confidently be assumed to be true to the historical Socrates?

Perhaps wisely, Schulz does not bother with any of these questions. Her sole concern is with the persona of Socrates as it emerges from his exchange with the priestess, a persona that she regards as mostly concerned with emphasizing “the value of the practice of philosophy as a therapeutic mode of self-care” (p. 3). Schultz contends further that, like the figure whose death is narrated in the *Phaedo*, the self-professed pupil of Diotima takes emotion to play a crucial role in “the self-reflective philosophical life” (p.3) and that he sees no reason, therefore, to hide the emotions that the priestess’ speech has elicited in him. Combined, the two claims warrant the inference that Schultz believes that emotion has a significant place in all aspects of the philosophic life and that the manner in which Plato describes the interaction between Socrates and Diotima shows that such was his view also.

To test the validity of Schultz’ thesis, I shall begin by looking at the textual evidence that she quotes to substantiate it. Her first move is to draw attention to Socrates’ reactions to the priestess when she asks him “What does love actually do? Can you tell me?” (206b3-4). Rather than immediately addressing these questions, Socrates, so Schultz claims, declares

\(^{18}\) As the word is defined by Diotima in *Symp.* 202b-203a.
himself to be “impressed by your [Diotima’s] knowledge (206b5-6),” to find “what she [Diotima] had said surprising” (208b7), and to have a great “eagerness to learn” from her, so baffled has he been made to be by her claims (“I don’t understand what you mean ... I need a diviner to interpret it for me” (206b9-10, p. 5).

Let it be noted, firstly, that the ‘emotions’ that Anne-Marie Schultz lists in support of her thesis, namely admiration, bafflement and eagerness to learn, can aptly be described as intellectual reactions to the content of Diotima’s speech. Rather than turbulences of the thumos, they are expressions of philosophical puzzlement which, as such, are likely to act as spurs for further reflection.¹⁹ Let it be noted, secondly, that a question mark hovers the genuineness or sincerity of Socrates’ expression of admiration, bafflement and eagerness to learn. Given the persona he is given in the dialogues of definition, all of which almost certainly pre-date the Symposium, the possibility must be envisaged that in the latter dialogue, too, he is only pretending to be baffled, awed and eager to learn.

The possibility becomes a virtual certainty when we turn to the text of the dialogues in question. Consider the lines in which he replies to Diotima’s question as to whether he knows what the function of Love is: “Of course not, Diotima ... If I could [tell you what Love does], I wouldn’t be so impressed by your knowledge. This is exactly what I come to you to learn about.”²⁰ These lines cannot but resonate with readers familiar with the dialogues of definition, in which verbs expressing bafflement, such as thaumazein (to marvel at), are often closely followed by expressions denoting eagerness to learn (manthanein). When the speaker is Socrates, the bafflement and eagerness to learn from a self-professed expert cannot be taken at face value since the context invariably makes clear that the ‘expert’ in question is in reality no expert and that Socrates is about to subject him to an elenchos.

The clearest example of this typical Socratic move is in the Euthyphro. Socrates, who is about to stand trial on a charge of impiety, tells Euthyphro, who claims expertise in religious matters, that he hopes to learn from him the nature of piety: “... the best thing for me, my admirable Euthyphro, is to become your pupil and, before the suit with Meletus comes on”

¹⁹ A Bertrand Russell would famously note some twenty-four centuries later (1905): “... it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science.”

²⁰ Όὐ μεντὰν σὲ, ἑφην ἐγώ, ὁ Διοτίμα, έθαύμαζον ἐπὶ σοφία καὶ ἐφοίτον παρὰ σὲ αὐτὰ τὰ ταύτα μαθησόμενος. Symposium, 206b5-6. All quotations from the Symposium are in R. Waterfield’s translation.
In the *Lesser Hippias*, in the course of a conversation with the Sophist from Elis, who is portrayed as a bumptious know-all, Socrates describes his own attitude to learning: “I have this one remarkable good quality, which is my salvation; for I am not afraid to ask, but I inquire and ask questions and am very grateful to him who answers” (trans. H.N. Fowler). Lastly and most relevantly, a similar reaction is to be observed earlier on in our dialogue, at a point when Socrates claims to have been reduced to a state of *aporia* by the brilliance of Agathon’s speech, which, so he claims, has made him realize how foolish had been his earlier claim of expertise in *ta erōтика*.

In none of these cases does Socrates genuinely feel the amazement, admiration and humility that he claims to feel. So much is clear from the context, which has Socrates’ interlocutors, Euthyphro and Hippias, come across as insufferably conceited. As for Socrates’ admiration for Agathon’s speech, it, too, cannot but be sham; if he had genuinely admired the young playwright’s eulogy of Erōs, he would not have expressed his admiration by paroding his style and later labelling it Gorgianic. Would Schultz wish to deny that in those passages Socrates is deliberately saying one thing while meaning the opposite, and making sure that the victim is the only one to be taken in by his words of praise?

If Socrates’ praise in the above cases is sham, is there any reason to suppose that the almost identical words of admiration that he addresses to Diotima are genuinely and fully meant? ‘Up to a point only’, would be my answer. To be sure, there is one signal difference between Euthyphro, Hippias and Agathon on the one hand and Diotima on the other: while all three men come across as foolish in their self-confidence Diotima, who is given the honour of introducing the Forms, remains a figure of authority throughout her long speech.

This said, there are, even so, signs that Socrates, although impressed by the priestess’ speech, deliberately maintains a distance in relation to her extraordinary claims and that his eager embrace of the pupil’s position is a trifle forced. We may even speculate that the touch of scepticism that can be detected in Socrates’ account of the conversation reflects Plato’s own reluctance to express wholehearted commitment to the theory he has Diotima expound.

---

22 δὲ τούτῳ θαυμάσιον ἔχω ἀγαθόν, ὃ με σώζει· οὐ γὰρ αἰσχρόνοιμαι μαθάνον, ἀλλὰ πνευμάνοιμαι καὶ ἐρωτῶ καὶ χάριν πολλὴν ἔχω τῷ ἀποκρινομένῳ, *Hippias Minor*, 372c2-5. See also *Laches*, 181d2-4 and *Gorgias*, 489d7-8.
23 *Symposium*, 177d7-8.
24 As noted by Bury in an *ad loc.* comment to ibid., 198a6-7. Socrates’ description of Agathon’s speech as Gorgianic is at 198c1-2. The extravagant compliments that Socrates pays Agathon in the opening scene of the dialogue (175d-e) are equally insincere.
What, at any rate, is certain is that Socrates, in his customary amused and detached way, makes it clear how much Diotima’s manner of exposition and style of delivery are not to his taste. Her speech, as he reproduces it, consists of a very long monologue; as such, it is an example of the makrologia characteristic of the Sophists, which he is famously made to castigate in the Protagoras.\textsuperscript{25} Her manner is dogmatic and hyper-didactic; her self-confidence verges on arrogance; she instructs rather than teach, and she deals brusquely, if not scornfully, with her interlocutor of the moment who, one would have thought, least deserves her scorn. No wonder that Socrates likens her to “a true sophist” (208c1), throwing back at her the very word that she had used earlier to describe Erōs (203b8).

Lastly and most relevantly to the present context, the attitude of amused detachment that Socrates maintains throughout Diotima’s speech is all of a piece with the personality that Alcibiades’ eulogizes at the end of the dialogue. Alcibiades’ Socrates is a model of self-possession: not only is he able to resist the charms of the handsomest young man in Athens and to remain sober in the midst of drunken revellers, but his debating skills unfailingly enable him to gain the upper hand in discussions. In fact, such is the deftness of his arguments (logoi, 215d3-4) and the soundness of his judgments that Alcibiades cannot conceive that anyone else of such intelligence (phronēsis) and commitment to truth could ever have existed. As for Socrates’ physical endurance, it is as exceptional as his mental agility: he withstood the cold of Potidea and he can go without sustenance while silently working out philosophical problems. In short, so Alcibiades is made to conclude, Socrates can be likened to those crudely carved effigies of the satyr Silenus that are offered for sale at street corners, poised for merry singing on the outside, but containing effigies of the gods inside. This, Alcibiades explains, is what Socrates is like: the front he puts to the outside world is unlike what he is inside, namely “full to the brim of moderation (posēs ... sōphrosunēs, 216d7 and 219d5) and steadfastness” (cf. kareros, 220c2).

There could not be for Plato a more effective way than Alcibiades’ eulogy of conveying Socrates’ self-possession, indomitability, rationality and commitment to truth. Alcibiades’ Socrates is the very same character who, in the Phaedo, had presented misology, the distrust of reasonable discourse,\textsuperscript{26} as the ultimate sin that would-be philosophers should guard against. To trust reason had been the ultimate advice he gave to his friends and associates. As Phaedo reports him as saying: let us “courageously exert ourselves to become

\textsuperscript{25} Protagoras, 334c-335c.
\textsuperscript{26} Phaedo, 89d sqq. For an interesting commentary on this and related passages in the Crito, see Foucault (2011; 107-08)
sound (*hugiōs echein*), you, Phaedo, and you others out of regard for your remaining lifetime, I out of regard for death itself.”

To argue that the Platonic Socrates takes emotions to play an important role in the ‘self-reflective philosophical life’ is to run the risk of mistaking the outer casing of the personality of Socrates for his inner self.

Bibliography

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


---

27 Ibid., 90e3-91a; trans. Hackforth, modified.


