

**CONTEXTUALIST VS. ANALYTIC HISTORY OF
PHILOSOPHY: A STUDY IN SOCRATES**
Constantine Sandis

I here respond to James Warren and John Shand's replies to my paper 'In Defence of Four Socratic Doctrines' (all published in THINK 17) by questioning the supremacy of contextualist history of philosophy over the so-called 'analytic' approach.

In their critical responses to my paper 'In Defence of Four Socratic Doctrines',¹ James Warren and John Shand clearly and succinctly raised a number of important methodological questions relating to the study of the history of philosophy, with particular focus on the perils of making analogies between ancient and modern views.² I begin this piece by responding to some of their many insightful comments but end by making a more general point regarding had attacks on what has come to be called 'analytic history of philosophy' (of which my piece was an example, if not quite a paradigmatic one) by those sympathetic to the contextualist approach of looking at philosophical texts in a manner more befitting to historians (including classicists). I conclude that the history of ideas had better leave space for both approaches, and that it is a mistake to think of each as being in competition with the other.

James Warren rightly points out that many (perhaps even all) of the doctrines that I labelled 'Socratic' do not, at least as I have presented them, obviously correspond to anything that Socrates the semi-fictional character in Plato's writings ever argued for, let alone Socrates the historical figure (in my paper I only referred to 'doctrines which Plato attributes to Socrates'³). I see no reason, however, for treating this as even *prima facie* good grounds for using scare quotes around the term 'Socratic' whenever it is used. It is quite standard, after all, to use this term to refer

to views *inspired* by one Socrates or another, just as we may talk of Cartesian, Humean, and Wittgensteinian views before asking questions such as ‘was Hume a Humean?’, which are often (in my opinion correctly) answered negatively. If we are to distinguish between Socratic views and merely ‘Socratic’ views then the latter label should surely only be used for views that cannot justifiably be said to have either been *inspired* by a Socrates, a claim which neither Warren nor Shand wish to make about my own efforts.

Warren is also correct to note that the different Dialogues I quoted from (*Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Gorgias*) derive from different periods in Plato’s life, and that all the evidence suggests that the various thoughts I selected from them do *not* hang as a coherent whole that Plato or either Socrates would have ever adhered to. It was never my intention to suggest otherwise. Indeed, I stated quite clearly from the outset that I did not take myself to be offering *the* correct interpretation of the doctrines in question, but only one which ‘renders the doctrines both relevant and plausible’.⁴ That an attempt to do such a thing should prove to be eclectic is, I would hope, no more objectionable than it is surprising.

How plausible are the versions of the doctrines I defended? Warren objects that it is ‘far from necessary to make the leap from the recognition of some common property of ‘beauty’ which we can identify in such diverse instances as Helen of Troy, the sunlight on a college lawn, John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* and an elegant mathematical proof to the assertion that there must be some further thing, ‘beauty itself’, distinct from and separate from all these instances.’⁵ He suggests, instead, that (i) concepts such as that of beauty may be a family resemblance concept besides which (ii) even if this is not so, there remain alternative accounts that are metaphysically more plausible than that of Plato. I could not agree more with both of these last two remarks, but I fail to see how they support his view. For any concept X of a thing Y, the fact

that X is a family resemblance concept does not demonstrate that there is no such thing as Y. If anything, we might say that there must (at least in *some* relevant sense) be such a thing as Y for there to be a family resemblance concept of it in the first place. As for Plato's costly metaphysics, this is precisely what my deflationist version of the doctrine of the forms sought to avoid. Indeed, the explicitly Wittgensteinian presentation of the doctrine of recollection that I related it to implied that we would do best to think of any given thing of which Plato thought there existed an ideal form as a thing whose concept is a family resemblance one.

John Shand, in a similarly thought-provoking response, wonders whether this Wittgensteinian interpretation of the doctrines which Plato attributes to Socrates is too tenuous. His precise charge is that I have overplayed the similarities between the methodologies of Socrates (the character) and Wittgenstein. Shand proceeds to list a series of revealing disanalogies between the methods of the two aforementioned figures. But my central task was *not*, as Shand supposes, to demonstrate 'that there are greater similarities between the philosophical methods of Socrates and Wittgenstein than is often supposed'⁶ but, rather, to offer a Wittgensteinian reading of certain Socratic doctrines in the hope that this renders them more relevant and plausible than standard interpretations do (though the latter may well be correct from a historiographical point of view). Indeed I write of my own account that 'such a linguistic reading of Plato may seem ridiculously anachronistic, and I certainly wouldn't want to put it forward as *the correct interpretation* of his methodology'.⁷

This brings us to an underlying dispute between Warren and Shand on the one hand and myself on the other which may help explain some of our disagreements. What I have in mind is the debate between so-called 'analytic' and 'contextualist' (or 'antiquarian') ways of engaging with the history of philosophy.⁸ Indeed we might say that what Warren and Shand find most objectionable is the fact (for it

is a fact) that I followed the former way at the expense of the latter. I did not do this on principle: I find neither method superior to the other for I do not think of them as being in competition. It just so happens that in this particular instance the former was better suited to my purposes, which were explicitly non-historiographical. Accurate historiography certainly enables us to better understand the thoughts and motivations of individuals and cultures but, to borrow a distinction from Anthony Kenny, it does not follow from this that the only legitimate engagement with the *history* of philosophy (what philosophers have done in the past) is through its *historiography* (what historians of philosophy do).⁹

If determining what a historical figure or set of figures *actually* thought is an aim not shared by the analytic approach, then where exactly does its value lie? The consideration of a philosophical text in (varying degrees of) contextual isolation allows us to focus on the most charitable formulation of arguments and ideas which it has inspired or anticipated. And what is the history of ideas if it is not, first and foremost, a history of *inspiration* and *anticipation*? Where the exploration of parallel, analogous, or overlapping ideas is concerned, it would be a myopic mistake to make authorial intention the prevalent criterion of identification.

Kenny recently advised that while antiquarian philosopher is 'likely to sin by superficiality' the non-contextualist only avoids this at the cost of being 'likely to sin by anachronism'.¹⁰ I sought to avoid the latter charge through the use of disclaimers, but have learned my lesson. Next time I shall make the warning labels bigger.

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Notes

¹ Constantine Sandis 'In Defence of Four Socratic Doctrines', *Think* 17/18, 2008, pp. 85-98.

² James Warren 'On Defending Socrates' (*Think* 17/18, 2008, pp. 99-101) and John Shand 'Sandis in Defence of Four Socratic Doctrines', (*Think* 17/18, 2008, pp. 103-107).

³ Sandis (op. cit.), p. 85.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Warren (op. cit.), pp. 99-100.

⁶ Shand (op. cit.), p. 103.

⁷ Sandis (op. cit.), p. 90.

⁸ For an informative overview of various key issues surrounding this debate see the essays and introduction collected in (eds.) T. Sorell and G. A. J. Rogers, *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹ Cf. Anthony Kenny's 'The Philosopher's History and the History of Philosophy' in T. Sorell and G. A. J. Rogers (op. cit., p. 13).

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 23.