

# PLATO

## A Guide for the Perplexed

Gerald A. Press



**PLATO: A GUIDE FOR  
THE PERPLEXED**

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**Continuum International Publishing Group**

The Tower Building      80 Maiden Lane  
11 York Road          Suite 704  
London SE1 7NX        New York NY10038

*www.continuumbooks.com*

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First published 2007  
Reprinted 2009, 2010

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 9780826491770

PB: 9780826491763

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk  
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book offers, in summary form, a way of reading and understanding Plato's dialogues that has been slowly growing in the shadow of older and rather different orientations for nearly a century. Its foundations are a few simple principles that I have thought were true since before I knew their names: contextualism (interpreting texts within their original linguistic, historical and intellectual contexts), holism (interpreting texts in their entirety rather than piecemeal), and organicism (treating passages and details of texts as parts of wholes organized by their authors in just this way). The chapters that follow synthesize not only my own work, but also, more importantly, work done by many scholars over many years. I wish to acknowledge them briefly here because the book is primarily intended for non-specialist readers for whom extensive footnotes and bibliographies are confusing rather than clarifying.

From my own teachers – Jason Saunders, Richard Popkin, Herbert Marcuse and Paul Henry, S.J. – and the teachers of my teachers – Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall, Jr and Frederick J. E. Woodbridge – I learned close attention to the texts in their original languages as well as sensitivity to textual types and nuances. I also learned from them the necessity of scholarship and the grounding of interpretation in historical context, the significance of drama in Plato, and the importance of challenging inherited modes of interpretation. I have also learned a great deal from scholars of places and times further removed from my own experience: Paul Shorey, Paul Friedländer, Luigi Stefanini, E. N. Tigerstedt, René Schaerer, Antonio Capizzi, Richard McKeon, Harold Cherniss and Jacob Klein. I have learned, too, from scholars of my generation whom I have not known – Rudolf Weingartner, Kenneth Sayre, Herman Sinaiko and Michael Stokes – and from those I have been

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

fortunate to meet or to know – Robert S. Brumbaugh, Rosamond Kent Sprague, H. S. Thayer, Victorino Tejera, James Arieti, Francisco Gonzalez, Hayden Ausland, Thomas Schmid, Samuel Scolnicov, Mitchell Miller, Lloyd Gerson, Debra Nails, Ruby Blondell, Christopher Rowe, Harold Tarrant and Thomas Alexander Szlezák.

Above all, over 40 years, from reading his publications and from personal interactions at conferences, by letter, and by email, and despite the points on which I remain in disagreement with him, I have learned from Holger Thesleff, to whom I dedicate this – as he would say – protreptic. His universality of scholarship, depth of textual knowledge, openness to new approaches, and flexibility in bringing a variety of approaches and points of view to bear on particular issues are ideals of humane learning and the opposite of the sycophancy, ideology and demagoguery that plague our times.

*March 2007*

# INTRODUCTION: PERPLEXITY, DOUBT AND THE QUEST FOR WISDOM AND HAPPINESS

## THE BEGINNING READER'S EXPERIENCE

Plato is one of the greatest and most influential of all Western philosophers, but reading Plato is a puzzling experience for many beginning readers. His dialogues seem much more approachable, more reader-friendly than the treatises, essays, disquisitions and meditations written by some of the other classic philosophers. For one thing, they read like stories; and the stories and characters are often interesting and entertaining even though the dialogues include a good deal of argumentation that can be fairly complex. For another, Plato's language is rich, often beautiful, and uses a wealth of literary devices that elicit, maintain, restore and reward the reader's interest in ways paralleled by only a few of the great Western philosophers. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are the best-known and most recent examples of highly 'literary' philosophers and, as with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – each of whom had a special relation to Plato – it is very difficult for the beginner to figure out what the 'philosophy' is exactly. It may be even difficult to recognize what teachers or books say the philosophy is, or the reader may find that the philosophy they say is there, while recognizable, seems wrong, offensive or unnecessarily complex.

An overall cause of reader perplexity about Plato is the contrast between what appears on the surface and what seems to exist, but obscurely, beneath the surface. The dialogues are characterized by many interesting details that change both within each dialogue and from one dialogue to another: dramatis personae, framing, setting, tone and subject. Behind or beneath these superficial differences, however, but difficult to articulate clearly, there seems to be a stable set of views about what is true and what is important, about what is

the right kind of life and how to live it. The reader's experience accurately reflects what the dialogues are really like. As literature the dialogues are infinitely various and inventive while, at the same time, they express some philosophical views that do not seem to change. One of those unchanging philosophical views is that while the world of sensation is always changing, there is another world, the world of thought, which does not change. The structure of the dialogues thus replicates the structure of reality, as Plato seems to see it. This book will attempt to guide the perplexed reader of Plato in part by replicating, in its own structure, these different aspects of Plato's thought as articulated in the dialogues. The early chapters treat aspects of the dialogues that exhibit variety and change, aspects that elicit our interest through sensation and imagination, while the later chapters will treat the unchanging vision, principles and ideas that elicit our assent through reason.

#### PERPLEXITY (*APORIA*) AND STRANGENESS (*ATOPIA*)

Perplexity is, in fact, a recurring event and theme in the dialogues. Although we ordinarily consider perplexity and doubt to be an undesirable state, Socrates often describes himself as being in doubt; he seems almost to relish it and to want other interlocutors to experience it. The Greek word *aporia* literally means to be 'without resources', but figuratively it means 'confusion', a situation in which different views or opinions of a matter seem reasonable but are inconsistent with each other or with the facts. Many dialogues end without arriving at a final or official answer to the question under consideration. They are sometimes called 'aporetic dialogues' because at the end the participants are in a state of confusion. For example, at the end of the *Euthyphro* all Euthyphro's attempts to explain piety have been refuted but no alternative account is clearly proposed by Socrates.

Socrates' attitude towards the experience of doubt is strange and unusual, but it is part of his broader view about happiness and knowledge. You can't be happy if you're bad (unjust, impious, cowardly, lacking in self-control, ignorant). In order to be good in a particular way you have to know what the good condition – justice, courage, piety – is. Many of Socrates' interlocutors – 'interlocutor' is the conventional term for any person with whom Socrates converses – begin with beliefs or thoughts that are unreflective, uncritical, and of which they cannot give a coherent account; but most of them

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*think* they know, whether because of conviction, pride or both. Before they can come to know what they don't know, they need to realize that they don't know, as is made explicit in the *Meno*. This is the experience of doubt and the reason why Socrates wants to induce it in interlocutors. So the experience of doubt is an essential step in the process of coming to know.

But the idea that doubt is essential and good is the inverse of what we ordinarily think and, therefore, strange. Strangeness (*atopia*) is a term used by Socrates and others with some frequency in Plato's dialogues to refer to Socrates' behaviour and ideas. Literally, the adjective *atopon* means 'out of the way' or 'out of place'; but figuratively, as always used, it means 'odd', 'strange', 'eccentric', 'extraordinary' or 'paradoxical'. It is strange that Socrates ignores his own wealth and possessions and instead spends all his time in conversations about right and wrong, knowledge and ignorance. He seems almost obsessed with these conversations to the extent that he once refers to himself as having a 'sickness.' It is strange that he publicly embarrasses powerful people without being strained by fear of vengeance. Some of his views are strange and paradoxical, too. He thinks that no one ever knowingly does evil. He thinks that a bad person cannot harm a good one. He thinks that spiritual well-being is more important than physical well-being.

The strange inversion of our ordinary beliefs, attitudes and expectations is an important feature of Plato's dialogues and of his philosophy. Many views associated with Plato and Platonism are *very* strange: Ideas are more real than things. Numbers are more real than the things numbered by means of them. The soul, which cannot be seen or measured, is more lasting and more important than the body. The well-being of the soul is more important than that of the body. The beauty of that *not* seen is more beautiful than that of things seen ('Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter', as Keats wrote). Real knowledge doesn't come from sensation, but from pure reason. The things that can be known are immaterial, not material. Politicians are like prophets and poets; they don't really know anything. When they make good choices or do good things, it is the result of inspiration that comes from outside them.

Perplexity and strangeness are not trivial features of the dialogues; they are important elements in Plato's philosophy. In a recent book, Nicholas Rescher defines philosophy in a way that aligns in several respects with the portrait of Plato's philosophy in this book. It is dialectical, in the sense that conversations go back and forth from

one side, one view, to another. It emphasizes *aporiai*, doubts, cognitive dissonances, perplexities. It operates by making distinctions and working towards thinking that is more complex because it brings more things into relationship. At the same time, this thinking is working towards synthesis, in the belief that the universe is a *cosmos*, an order. Doubts and problems are stimuli to grasp ordered relationships not previously seen. Thus, correlatively, philosophy must be holistic and systemic in order to succeed in dealing adequately with the inherent complexities of the issues. Thus philosophy is better thought of as continuing controversy than as the evolution of consensus; it is characterized by pragmatic evaluation of ideas and arguments. We work open-endedly towards increasingly inclusive synthesis through collaborative inquiry in awareness of the fallibility of all thinkers and the limitations of all conceptual structures.

Perplexity is the beginning; the sense that something is out of place. We are to be guided by some principles of operational (dialectical) rationality: the views to be accepted derive from arguments that provide adequate and relevant evidence, evidence that provides good reasons for the conclusion in an organized and efficient way. Guiding this is a two-level vision that reveals ironic, paradoxical truths.

## SOCRATES AND PLATO

We have already talked about Socrates, who is the literary hero of Plato's dialogues, not the historical Socrates. We will talk about the historical Socrates in Chapter 2. Socrates is a character in every dialogue that Plato himself wrote as well as in several dialogues that Plato didn't or probably didn't write but that come down to us with his name on them. In most of these dialogues Socrates is the leading speaker. Unlike the traditional Greek heroes (Achilles, Odysseus and the others), though, Plato's Socrates is a hero of thought, of the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. What Plato's Socrates wants to accomplish with respect to his interlocutors is what Plato wants to accomplish with respect to us, his audience: the recognition of ignorance and dedication to the task of learning the truth. Plato has also borrowed Socrates' methods, which include highly focused dialectical cross-examinations along with digressions, exhortations, sermons, jokes and stories. Socrates is Plato's hero, but he is not perfect and he does not always follow rules that might seem reasonable to us. An important example, identified by Kierkegaard, is that

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Socrates considers it all right to ‘deceive us into the truth’, a paradoxical notion.

Plato is a storyteller. Each dialogue is a story with a beginning, middle and end, in which the central problem is conceptual, and most of what happens in the dialogue is conversation. The plots of the stories, that is, the steps and stages in the conversation, are complicated. Plato’s vocabulary is large and diverse, and the dialogues are rich in metaphors large and small. Plato, in short, is a ‘poet’ in the ancient use of the term. His story is meant to make a point, though not a simple, propositional one. The point is related, but not reducible to, to the main question discussed. The story is supposed to change the way the audience thinks about things. The hero is the vehicle of this message but not reducible to a simple mouthpiece for Plato’s own arguments and beliefs. We are meant to learn as much from the hero’s errors as from his more positive characteristics.

In Plato’s dialogues philosophy and literature are united. In them, drama is a form of argument and argument a form of drama. The dialogues enact their philosophic point rather than, what most philosophical writers do, just directly argue for it.

## PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

Disciplinary divisions and specialization in higher education lead students to suppose that philosophy, whatever it is, is something different and distinct from literature. This is not entirely incorrect. Philosophy does emphasize arguments about highly general (universal, conceptual) matters while literature is about stories, plays, poetry, their language, structures and meaning or message. Much Plato scholarship, assuming a strict division like this, considers the arguments apart from their literary and dramatic setting on the assumption that this is a valid procedure. The literary and dramatic aspects are taken to be the ‘form’, and this is to be strictly separable from the arguments, which are the ‘content’. In this way of thinking about things, philosophers would be interested only in the arguments of the dialogues, while philologists, students of ancient literature, would study the details of language, characters, setting and action.

In the case of dialogues like Hume’s, where characters are purely fictional – only their names seem to have any relationship to the ideas they present – and the setting and plot are minimal or non-existent, this is a reasonable procedure. In Plato’s case it is not. The evidence

is that Plato expended an enormous amount of time and energy on writing. For example, in many dialogues Plato has carefully created internal relationships between individual characters and the topics they discuss with Socrates that intensify, clarify or deepen the point that Plato is making. Besides what we can see in the dialogues as we have them, reports have survived from antiquity about his continually revising dialogues and in one or two cases we can see different introductions or other revisions that have been made at later points. A third argument is that, if Plato had wanted to speak directly to the audience, to give his own views and his own arguments for them, the treatise form of writing was available to him, but he did not choose it. Finally, the dialogues resemble Greek drama far more than Greek philosophic essays.

It is worth reflecting on the difference between stories and arguments as means of getting readers to undergo an intellectual change.

#### ARGUMENT AND DRAMA

Arguments play a central role in Plato's dialogues. Arguments are linguistic structures in which evidence is presented (in the form of premises) that logically implies a conclusion. Here are two very simple and clear examples:

All men are mortal.	This must be a plant or an animal.
Socrates is a man.	But it's not a plant.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.	So, it must be an animal.

We can ask about the truth of the premises and we can ask about the logical connection between them and the conclusions. When there are certain kinds of logical connections between the premises and the conclusion, we describe the argument as being 'valid'. Whether valid or invalid, however, an argument contains what might be called a line of reasoning, but not a storyline.

Dramas are linguistic structures in which stories are told involving characters and events. A story has a beginning, middle and end; typically a problem confronts the character(s) who struggle with the problem and reach a resolution at the end. The characters may think or speak so as to use arguments, but the arguments are part of and subordinate to the story. In the *Hippias Major*, Socrates meets Hippias. A conversation commences about what beauty is. Several answers are proposed and rejected. Hippias gets frustrated

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and blames Socrates. The conversation ends and they part without deciding what beauty is. As a pure drama, they fail to accomplish what they are attempting.

It is possible to think of Plato's dialogues as simply dramas in this sense, but the dialogues are richer and more complex dramatic-philosophic texts in which not only are philosophic arguments part of a drama, but the drama is also part of the argument, part of what Plato has to say. The facts that Hippias is a sophist while Socrates identifies himself as a philosopher, that Hippias sees himself as a persuasive speaker whereas Socrates considers dialectical discussion the only rational kind of persuasion, that Hippias is engaged in political activity on behalf of his native Elis whereas Socrates avoids politics of that sort, that 'beauty' is a moral concept in ancient Greek, that Hippias is described in the first line as being 'beautiful and wise', and that beauty is associated with wisdom and knowledge, together invest the failed attempt to explain beauty with a complex philosophic significance.

The dialogues work through the interplay of words and deeds, persons and their beliefs and actions, of arguments and drama. This will be discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 10.

So, although philosophy and literature, argument and drama are conceptually distinct and often distinct in practice, in Plato's dialogues they coincide. Thus the reader is called on to follow logical arguments that are often difficult to grasp, and simultaneously the reader is called on to follow an imaginative story. The reader must have and use what the French philosopher Blaise Pascal called *l'esprit de finesse* as well as *l'esprit géométrique*: not only a logical mind but also a synthetically intuitive one.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

Readers' perplexities arise from several sources: the variety of interpretations of Plato's philosophy that exist; the dialogue form itself; the details of the arguments and their overall significance in each dialogue; the fables and myths that are encountered in many dialogues; the irony, humour and playfulness displayed by Socrates in the dialogues and by Plato as their author; Plato's insistence on remaining anonymous; themes and principles that recur without being clearly stated as philosophic doctrines; the inconclusiveness that one finds at the end of most dialogues; and the Socratic way of life that seems to be proffered for our approval but only indirectly.

After an introductory section on Plato's life and works and their historical contexts, the aspects that exhibit change will be treated in Part II and the aspects that exhibit permanence in Part III. My aim throughout is that when the reader recognizes the various sources of perplexity, they will become sources of a deeper and richer understanding of the dialogues. For each chapter there are Suggestions for Further Reading. Because this book is part of a series aiming to provide clear, concise introductions to important thinkers, these suggestions are limited to materials in English.

The book is guided throughout by three principles: contextualism; holism; and organicism. Contextualism means that texts must be understood within their original linguistic, historical and intellectual contexts, whatever meanings one might find for them in our own somewhat different context. Holism comes from *holos*, a Greek word meaning 'all', 'entire' or 'total'. It is the idea that all the properties of a given system (biological, chemical, social, economic, mental, linguistic, etc.) cannot be determined or explained by the sum of its component parts alone. Instead, the system as a whole determines in an important way how the parts behave. Organicism, an extension of holism, means that individual passages and details of texts must be understood as parts of wholes organized by their authors in just the way they are, and as having an organic relation to all the other passages and details.

#### NOTE ON TEXTS, TRANSLATIONS, CONVENTIONS AND USE OF GREEK TERMS

The standard form for quoting or citing Plato's dialogues, followed here, is Stephanus numbers, named for Henri Estienne (Latin, Henricus Stephanus c. 1528–98), who published an edition of Plato's dialogues in 1578 that remained the standard until the 1780s. The *Euthyphro* begins at Stephanus 2a, for example; the *Phaedo* at 57a. The titles of Plato's dialogues are conventional in English with one exception, the dialogue whose title is *Politikos* in Greek. Often the title is translated as 'Statesman', but the word *politikos* is actually ambiguous in Greek. It could indicate what we call a 'statesman', a respected diplomat or national political leader; but it could also mean more generally someone active in politics even in the negative sense. Since the Greek term does not choose one of our different English meanings, it is becoming customary to refer to the dialogue as the *Politicus*, and so it will be in this book.

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Except in Chapter 3, the persons and events discussed in this book are all ancient Greek. Years will be indicated in the conventional way from larger to smaller; for example, Socrates' dates will be indicated as 469–399 without using 'BCE' to indicate 'before the common era'. In Chapter 3, where confusion is possible, 'BCE' and 'CE' will sometimes be used.

The texts that provide the basis for all translations and interpretations of Plato are, of course, in ancient Greek. In this book translations will be used and translators identified. The available published translations all have strengths and weaknesses. Greek terms will often be given in transliterated italics (e.g. *philosophia*, *dialogos*), along with whatever English term is being used to translate the Greek at that point. In addition there is a glossary on pages 221–30 in which the reader can find a brief account of the (semantic) range of meanings of various Greek terms. This is important for any Greek author because the semantic range of a Greek term is never identical with the semantic range of an English term. But it is even more important for authors such as Plato, who deliberately use extensive vocabularies and take advantage of semantic range for poetic purposes.

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**PART I**

**BACKGROUND**

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## CHAPTER I

# PLATO'S LIFE AND WORKS

We are interested in the lives of famous political leaders, artists and authors in part because we think their life story will help us to understand their achievements better. There are dangers in this biographical orientation. One is that an individual's achievements may be reduced to details of emotional life and that the role of creativity or originality may be ignored. Another danger is that, having already decided that an individual is important, the biography will be constructed out of unreliable (or made up) data so as to prove that the individual was always destined to be great. In extreme forms, this is hagiography. A third problem is what is sometimes called the intentional fallacy, the erroneous assumption that the meaning intended by the author of a text is the only or most important consideration when we try to interpret the text's meaning. We may mistake what an author *thought* he was doing for the entire meaning or importance of what he did, ignoring outcomes the author did not intend or know about and interpretations by others.

### PROBLEMS ABOUT PLATO'S BIOGRAPHY

The details of Plato's life are for the most part mysterious. Six biographies survive from antiquity, but all are much later than Plato's lifetime. Much of what they say cannot be confirmed by contemporary or independent evidence and some information given by one biography is inconsistent with that given by another. The most recent scholar to have sifted the evidence, Nails, agrees that modern biographies largely 'mythologize' Plato by depending 'not so much on the original texts or their immediate context, but claims that grew up from them' hundreds of years later. The ancient biographies and other ancient texts also include many anecdotes and portents about

Plato – some positive, some negative – but the anecdotes cannot be verified and in many cases other evidence suggests that they are not historical. For example, it is a pleasant but unreliable story that he dreamed he was a swan, chased by all but never captured, and that he set out to be a poet but burned his plays when he met Socrates. Another problem is that several rather important aspects of the biography depend on the historical accuracy of a controversial letter that has come down to us in the ancient texts of Plato's writings. See below, pp. 20–2, for a discussion of the *Seventh Letter*.

### A PLATONIC BIOGRAPHY

About Plato's life there is little incontrovertible evidence. He was probably born in 428 or 427 BCE, though one bit of information implies that he might have been born a few years earlier. His family was aristocratic, though his father, Ariston, was not particularly noteworthy or wealthy, and died soon after Plato's birth. His mother, Perictione (or, perhaps, Potone), remarried a man named Pyrilampes. Plato's given name was Aristocles; Plato (meaning 'broad') was a nickname that may have been given for his physique, his writing style, or the size of his forehead. He had two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, and a sister, Potone, who were probably older. The brothers appear as characters in three of Plato's dialogues. By her second marriage, Perictione had another son, Antiphon, who also appears as a character in one of Plato's dialogues. The dominating person in the family was Critias, a cousin of his mother. Critias was brilliant, wealthy, intellectually inclined, to some extent a sophist, author of dramas, poetry and prose, and politically active. He is a character in two dialogues. After the end of the Peloponnesian War (431–404), he headed the vicious right-wing reaction, the Thirty Tyrants, and was killed in street rioting during 403, along with Plato's uncle, Charmides, who is a character in several dialogues. Some evidence suggests lifelong tendencies to shyness, withdrawal and effeminacy, for which he was ridiculed by comic writers. He never married.

Plato would likely have had the education that was usual for upper-class boys of his time and place. This consisted first of poetry and music, both of these being understood as character-building rather than career preparation, and then gymnastics. Plato demonstrates an extensive knowledge of poetry and music in the dialogues.

About the age of 20, Plato became an associate of Socrates, though

he may not have been one of the inner 'Socratic circle'. Socrates, already in his sixties, was executed eight years later. So Plato's connection with Socrates was not more than eight years and it was that of a young with a rather old man. Since, in addition, Socrates was not a teacher in any ordinary sense (see Chapter 2), it is misleading to think of Plato simply as his 'student'. The protracted series of civil wars known as the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath occupied the years from Plato's birth until Socrates' death. So, it is clear that Plato's youth was full of traumatic experiences. After Socrates' execution, Plato seems to have left Athens and travelled for a while, first going to Megara and then, possibly, to Cyrene, Italy and Sicily.

Aristotle, who was a student in Plato's Academy, tells us that Plato had some early association with the thought of Heraclitus or with contemporary Heracliteans, such as Cratylus in the dialogue named for him. Plato also seems well informed about some 'extreme Heracliteans' whose views are discussed in the *Protagoras*. Plato was unquestionably influenced by the Eleatic philosophers, Parmenides and Zeno, though he could not have known either of them personally, but he might have known Melissus of Samos, a younger student of Parmenides. It is also clear from the dialogues that Plato was acquainted with Pythagorean ideas and probably with some Pythagorean philosophers then living. Details on the ideas of these philosophers will be found in Chapter 2. He was well acquainted with the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the ideas, practices and achievements of sophists, soldiers, sailors, sculptors, painters, musicians, athletes and craftsmen of his time.

Most versions of Plato's life include voyages to Sicily; a first about 389 or 388, a second in 366 or 365, and a third about 361–360 in which he is said to have been involved in several attempts to influence the course of political developments through instructing or advising rulers. These voyages figure prominently in interpretations of Plato's philosophy as evidence of his commitment to practical political change, of his changing political ideas, and also as evidence for proposed chronologies of his writings. Unfortunately, proof for these voyages that is independent of the *Seventh Letter* is extremely tenuous and the *Seventh Letter*, in turn, cannot indubitably be attributed to Plato himself.

## THE ACADEMY

Although the date cannot be known with certainty, sometime after 387, perhaps following a trip to southern Italy and Sicily, Plato settled in a park called Akademeia and founded what has become known as the Academy.

As an institution, the Academy was not at all like modern schools, colleges or universities. It was not formally organized and was open to anyone who could participate and be self-supporting. There were no regular lectures, internal or external, nor seminars, nor public readings. A lecture by Plato called 'On the Good', reported by several ancient sources, was probably a unique occasion when Plato tried to make philosophy look over-difficult. During Plato's lifetime, the Academy was not divided into levels and no definite doctrines were propounded. On the contrary, it was characterized by intellectual freedom and openness. In addition to their philosophic interests, some Academics were politically active as law-givers, advisors and emissaries for their home cities.

The Academy was not like a school or college in which students acquire knowledge from an instructor, teacher or master. The relationship among members is better indicated by the word that often occurs in Plato's dialogues, *synousia*, which means 'association', 'communion', literally 'being together'. It is an old word for the educational association of elder and younger. In other words, Plato did not act as an authoritative teacher; he seems inclined rather to make suggestions and guide people to thinking on their own. In doing this, he was actually developing the method of questioning (*elenchos*) and guiding a dialogue that Socrates had used into what Plato called 'dialectic'. The primary activity of the Academy was this dialectic, conducted orally. Its aim from the start was the education and training of intellectuals to become 'philosophers' in Plato's sense of the term. Plato's idea of 'philosophy' will be discussed in Chapters 10–12.

## AUTHORSHIP, AUDIENCE AND PUBLICATION

In the 380s, but possibly earlier, Plato began to write literary dialogues, dramatic interactions of the Ideal Philosopher (Socrates) with various serious and interesting opponents. Many others who had known Socrates were also writing Socratic conversations at the time.

Another way in which Plato's Academy differed from modern expectations is that, later in Plato's life, his associates in the Academy began to take part in the composition process by finishing a manuscript for reading at different occasions. During his old age (360–347), some dialogues were written by others in the Academy under Plato's supervision in a specific Academic prose style ('late style') and some 'Socratic' dialogues were also written. These dialogues, although not written by Plato, accumulated among the written texts in the school and later, whether accidentally or deliberately, became associated with Plato's name.

With the possible exception of the *Apology* and an early version of what later became the central books of the *Republic*, Plato never wrote for a general public. This is implied by the limited scope of both hostile gossip and sympathetic detailed knowledge of Plato's ideas and writings outside of the Academy. It is also indicated by what we know about publication. Publication in antiquity meant the dissemination of handwritten copies. There is little evidence that copies of Plato's dialogues existed outside of the Academy during his lifetime. This means that he did not 'publish', but that his writings were meant for use by those in the Academy. Unlike what modern readers usually expect, the *Republic*, for example, Plato's most comprehensive work, took shape over a long period of time, and was probably not intended for widespread distribution. In fact, generally, it seems that the dialogues were not meant primarily to influence public opinion in Athens or elsewhere, as is indicated by the fact that fourth-century authors outside the Academy (including Xenophon, Isocrates and writers of Middle Comedy) do not seem to be well acquainted with them. The dialogues were certainly not 'published' in any sense that is similar to modern publication.

This has led to speculation about what their intended uses were, in light of the limited information we have. Many of the dialogues seem to be, at least in part, philosophic protreptics; that is, writings whose purpose was to turn the attention of the reader towards the practice of philosophy. Some dialogues, such as the *Republic*, are too long to have functioned in that way. Others, like the *Parmenides* or *Sophist*, seem too complicated and to require too much logical attention or skill to have functioned in that way. Such dialogues seem likely to have been written or intended as philosophical exercise books for students in the Academy. From another point of view, the dialogues may have served as exemplars of philosophical writing to be

compared with the exemplary speeches or writings that were regularly produced by sophists such as Gorgias and speech-writers such as Isocrates. In a way, then, they might have served as advertisements for Plato's Academy.

### PLATO'S WRITINGS

Mysteriously, and unlike what is true for any other ancient author, we have every one of the texts mentioned in antiquity as having been written by Plato. This *Corpus Platonicum* consists of 46 dialogues and 13 letters handed down bearing Plato's name. For the most part the *Corpus Platonicum* came together during Plato's lifetime or shortly after. The letters were probably added at a later time. The letters pose special problems that will be discussed in the next section. The most important questions about the dialogues concern their authenticity and the possibility of revisions.

#### Authenticity

Doubts were raised about the authenticity of certain dialogues even in antiquity. Contemporary historical and philological scholarship has led to acceptance of 24–26 dialogues as 'authentic', meaning that they were written by Plato. Of the others, some are considered 'dubious', meaning that there are doubts whether or not Plato wrote them; they are: *Alcibiades* (or *Alcibiades I*), *Minos*, *Theages* and *Cleitophon*. Still others are considered definitely 'spurious', meaning that they were written by someone other than Plato but published as being by Plato; these counterfeit Platonic dialogues are: *Alcibiades II*, *Epinomis*, *Hipparchus*, *Rivals* (or *Lovers*), *Halcyon*, *Axiochus*, *Demodocus*, *Eryxias*, *Sisyphus*, *On Justice*, *On Virtue* and *Definitions*.

#### Revision

A distinctively modern question, about revision, affects questions of authenticity. An 'authentic' dialogue is presumed to be one written by Plato rather than by anyone else and written and completed at roughly the same time rather than having been revised over a period of time. But there is ancient testimony that several introductions to the *Republic* and the *Theaetetus* existed besides the ones in the *Corpus Platonicum*. There is also evidence that Plato regularly revised and reworked dialogues, which would be consistent with the

literary complexity and brilliance of most dialogues as we have them. The *Republic*, in particular, evolved over many years from a 'proto-*Republic*', a utopian social scheme consisting of the argument of the present books 2, 3 and 5.

There is also ancient evidence that members of the Academy revised some dialogues for publication. It would be nice to know exactly what this means. The *Laws*, for instance, seems to be essentially a creation of pupils, an outline of which the aged Plato might have approved. This would be consistent with the absence of Socrates as a character, of dramatic subtlety and literary brilliance, as well as with mistakes in syntax, repetitions, internal contradictions and the dialogue's purely didactic tone. It would also be consistent with school accumulation, which characterizes the Lyceum and other ancient schools, meaning that writings by various authors in that school accumulate and over a period of years or centuries come to be associated with the name of the school's founder.

Revision by Plato implies that the composition of particular dialogues cannot be assigned with certainty to any particular year or period. Revision by others within the Academy implies that some dialogues are *semi-authentic*, undermining attempts to distinguish doctrines that might be said to be Plato's from those which could only be said to be Platonic.

#### Arrangements

Plato did not formally publish his dialogues, nor did he put them into any particular order or arrangement. Later in antiquity the dialogues were arranged in trilogies, by the Head of the Alexandrian Library, Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257–c. 180), and in tetralogies, groups of four, by Thrasyllus, an astrologer and mathematician of the first century BCE who seems to have grouped dialogues, in part, by whether they seemed to him to aim more at refutation of an interlocutor, inquiry into a problem, eliciting an interlocutor's thinking, or demonstrating a point.

Several other ways of ordering have been used. Doctrinal or thematic arrangements, preferred by many modern scholars, follow the practice of ancient doxographers, such as Aristotle's student Theophrastus (327–287) and Diogenes Laertius (third century CE), in reorganizing Plato's writings according to what the doxographer takes to be the dialogues' systematic doctrinal content.

The Academy itself, in late antiquity, utilized a pedagogical

arrangement, an order in which to study the dialogues that would lead to the attainment of Platonic wisdom as they understood it. They began with the *Alcibiades* and ended with *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*.

From the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century a compositional chronology was popular, based on the beliefs that Plato wrote, finished and published dialogues at a particular time and that it was possible to know the order in which Plato wrote them. Dialogues were grouped as 'early', 'middle' or 'late', and this was thought to reveal the development of Plato's thought.

It is also possible to arrange most of the dialogues in a 'dramatic order', following indications of dramatic date given in the dialogues, the date at which the conversation is imagined as taking place. In the dramatic order, the *Parmenides* would come first, when Socrates is a young man, the *Phaedo*, in which he dies, would come last, and eight or nine dialogues would be seen to occur in the last two years of Socrates' life. The fact that many dialogues contain indications of their dramatic date suggests that Plato may have planned such an order at some stage.

Apart from mere curiosity, these arrangements are interesting in relation to features of Plato's that have troubled scholarly readers ever since antiquity. The facts that Plato never wrote a treatise expounding his views and that most of the dialogues do not end in definite 'official' answers being given to their main questions leave readers perplexed about what Plato's views really were. Perhaps indications could be found in his letters.

#### THE LETTERS AND THE HYPOTHESIS OF 'UNWRITTEN DOCTRINES'

Plato's letters are a special and highly charged matter. Although 13 letters were in existence in antiquity, a majority of modern scholars consider only the seventh to be genuine. A good deal of traditional Platonic biography depends on this letter, which refers to Plato's journeys to Sicily and his disillusionment with active politics. A long 'philosophical digression' seems to declare that, because of the limitations of writing, Plato has never and will never write the things about which he is 'most serious'. This digression is one of the foundations of influential ancient and modern esoteric arguments that Plato's true views are not in the dialogues. Instead, they were the 'unwritten doctrines' referred to by Aristotle, imparted only orally to his inner circle of students, and found in ideas attributed to Plato's

ancient students. This is known as the 'esoteric' interpretation, or 'esoterism'.

Esoterism also calls on the evidence of several dialogues in which Socrates criticizes writing. Because written words, unlike spoken, are 'dead', they can say only exactly what they say; they are unable to answer questions or to explain what they mean, so they are inferior to live conversation (*dialegethai*). These criticisms are repeated in the *Phaedrus* (275a–77a) where, however, Socrates adds that a person who had real knowledge would only write to amuse himself and as a reminder of the real knowledge that lives in his thinking and conversing. The *Seventh Letter* (341c) states that 'the things about which he was most serious' have never and will never be written down and that true knowledge can only be communicated via living conversation. This is taken to support belief in an esoteric oral doctrine that would be identical with the 'unwritten doctrines' to which Aristotle refers (*Physics* 209).

However, one can believe that Plato was serious about the inferiority of writing to conversation without making this into a settled doctrine that would freeze the open-endedness and flexibility of thought that he often seems at pains to maintain. And one can well believe that Plato was amused by the ironic literary tour de force of a writing rejecting writing, what a modern scholar, Stanley Fish, described as a 'self-consuming artifact'. There are numerous additional arguments against esoterism. The most significant is that esoterism accepts as the genuinely Platonic philosophy something not clearly found in our primary source (the dialogues that we know to have been written by Plato), but found rather in secondary sources, reports by other and later writers of what Plato's doctrine was. It seems improbable on the face of it that Plato would expend so much time and effort on the dialogues and then express only orally a true philosophy that seems quite different from what the dialogues have to say. This makes the dialogues themselves a largely inexplicable exercise. And the esoteric philosophy of Plato seems to conflate Plato in many ways with the later Neoplatonist, Plotinus (204/5–270 CE).

Moreover, there are good reasons to think that the letter is not genuine. It has been argued that the political developments narrated in it happened later than at the supposed date of the letter and that the supposition of Plato's repeated political involvement in Sicily would require an improbable level of political naivety, a failure to learn from experience, and would be inconsistent with the political

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views found in the dialogues. It has also been argued that the long so-called philosophical digression was put into the letter at a time later than its original composition. Finally, even if the letter were genuine, the philosophical digression need only mean that Plato did not write his views in treatises.

I have already indicated that the *Seventh Letter*, while it may come from Plato's lifetime, is not a reliable source for either of these matters.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Boas, George, 'Fact and Legend in the Biography of Plato', *Philosophical Review* 57 (1948), 439–58. Provides detailed arguments against the conventional biography.
- Guthrie, W. K. C., *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, Vol. 4, pp. 8–31. Gives a clear statement of the conventional biography.
- Plochmann, George Kimball, *Plato*. New York: Dell, 1973. See pp. 11–21.
- Ryle, Gilbert, *Plato's Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966. Chs 1 and 2.
- Thesleff, Holger, *Studies in Platonic Chronology*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1982. See pp. 20–38 for a nuanced version of the conventional biography.
- Woodbridge, Frederick J. E., *The Son of Apollo*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1929; repr. Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1988. Ch. 1 argues for the minimalist biography.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE CONTEXTS FOR INTERPRETING PLATO'S DIALOGUES

Neglect of context is the besetting fallacy of philosophical thought.

John Dewey

Written documents are produced by individuals who live in specific times and places; who speak and write specific languages, act within specific social, political and economic systems and with specific moral, religious and artistic norms. They write, at least in part, out of concerns that are both specific to them and discernible by later scholars on the basis of evidence. Thus context determines the range of a text's possible meanings and illuminates aspects that might otherwise appear bizarre, alien, inexplicable or false.

Some sources of perplexity about Plato's dialogues are distinct from the dialogues themselves. In this chapter we will look at the historical and cultural contexts within which the dialogues were written. This is important because, as literature, the dialogues are deeply enmeshed in their own time and place. Certain facts and details about the generally Greek and specifically Athenian world are assumed on the reader's part. In the next chapter, we will consider the long and complex history of interpretation of the dialogues after Plato's death which has structured the expectations that readers often bring to the texts and the ways in which readers understand certain characters, terms, concepts and arguments on first encounter.

### POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY

Ancient Greece was not a political nation-state. It was a group of city-states generally tied to each other by shared language, literature, religion and art, but politically independent, with their own laws and

histories. City-states warred and allied with each other in shifting configurations. As they became more prosperous and more populous than the meagre Greek soil and local seas could sustain, colonies were established in southern Italy and Sicily, along the Aegean and Black Sea coasts of modern Turkey, Crimea, and on the Mediterranean coasts of modern Egypt, Libya, southern France and Spain.

Citizenship in the Greek city-states was originally limited to adult males of native families. Citizenship, so defined, was fairly small, and citizens seem to have known everything about each other's doings. A man's identity was defined first by his father; so characters in the dialogues are often referred to as, for example, 'son of Ariston', and if a new person was to be met, one would naturally ask who his father was. Persons are also often identified in the dialogues by their (ancient) tribes and (more recent and politically defined) demes.

The city-states' population included many foreign residents (metics, *metoikoi*) and slaves. Slavery was a consequence of conquest in war or, at times, of economic relations, so the slaves in Greek city-states were primarily other Greeks, not persons of different race, ethnicity or national origin.

During the fifth century, the time in which most of the dialogues are set, the city-states were in transition from old monarchies to oligarchies to tyrannies and ultimately to democracies, beginning with Athens in 510. The meaning of 'democracy' in ancient Greece was different in important ways from modern democracy. For one thing, it was direct rather than representative; for another, historical, social and economic circumstances meant that political power often remained in or returned to the aristocrats even when the political system was nominally democratic.

The Greeks' ultimate victory in the Persian Wars that lasted from about 500 to about 448 was both cause and effect of political and economic expansion of their city-states, growing wealth and power which, in turn, led to a civil war. What we call the Peloponnesian War is a creation of later historians, beginning with Thucydides. For the Greeks it was 30 years of off-and-on battles between leagues and individual city-states and ultimately between alliances led by Athens and Sparta respectively. Athens stood for a 'democracy' which was expansionist and imperialist while Sparta stood for extreme conservatism, tradition, militarism, strict social order, but had no cultural achievements.

Athens surrendered in 404. For a short period of time, democracy was suspended and Athens was ruled by 30 members of the

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oligarchic party who came to be called the 'Thirty Tyrants' because of their behaviour. This was a reactionary regime set up by Sparta. The oligarchs were overthrown and democracy was restored in 403.

Most of the dialogues are set during the five years after the Peloponnesian War and many of them involve the war's participants, events or consequences. For example, in the *Laches*, Socrates discusses the nature of courage with two generals, Laches and Nicias, for whom the 'peace of Nicias' period (421–415) of the war years is named. Socrates' exemplary conduct in a military defeat is described in the *Symposium*. He has just returned from fighting at Plataea in the *Charmides*, in which he discusses the nature of temperance with two men who later were major figures in the post-war tyranny at Athens. The *Republic* is set at the home of a man named Cephalus, whose property was confiscated during the post-war tyranny.

Two dubious dialogues in the Platonic corpus are named after Alcibiades, who, like Critias and Charmides, was closely associated with Socrates. He is a minor participant in the *Protagoras* and gives the final speech in the *Symposium*. In 415, Alcibiades, a political opponent of Nicias, convinced the Athenian Assembly to attack the Greek city-states of Sicily. This 'Sicilian Expedition' turned into a disaster. After arriving in Sicily, Alcibiades defected to Sparta and Nicias was put in charge. In 413, the entire army was defeated and captured and a large fleet was destroyed. The disastrous Sicilian expedition left Athens almost completely powerless.

## SALIENT ASPECTS OF ANCIENT GREEK INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

### Transition from orality to literacy

The lifetime of Plato falls at the end of a transition in Greek culture from oral and aural to literate, from dependence on speaking, hearing and remembering words to dependence on written texts. Although we find it strange that Socrates wrote nothing, it was not strange in his time and place. At the same time it is important that Socrates was the last major figure of the oral culture and Plato was the transition figure to the literate culture of the future. It is also important to observe that, with a few noteworthy exceptions, the dialogues present an *oral* world. Oral communication was still normal among philosophers and sophists, not only during Socrates' lifetime, but even during Plato's. Writing was not the ordinary mode of philosophical communication or presentation of ideas, as it is for us.

Origin of arts and sciences

The ancient Greeks invented many of the intellectual practices, the arts and sciences, the learned disciplines, that have defined the subsequent history of Western culture. Both the name and the practice of mathematics, geography, history, politics, economics, rhetoric, poetry, tragedy, comedy and philosophy are originally Greek. Although it is commonplace to think of Plato as a ‘philosopher’, he is, in fact, the inventor of philosophy. The word *philosophia* (philosophy) is not used in documents before the early fourth century. Then it is used prominently by two writers, Plato and Isocrates (436–338). Isocrates’ conception of *philosophia* as a practical training in writing and politics was overwhelmed by Plato’s very different conception. Details are discussed in Chapter 10, p. 146.

The ‘Golden Age’

The period from the final Greek victory over the Persians at the Battle of Plataea (479) to the end of the Peloponnesian War (404) is frequently called the ‘Golden Age of Greece’ because the city-states of Greece reached a pinnacle of political stability and cultural creativity and productivity during this time. It is also called the ‘Age of Pericles’ after Athens’ leading statesman for much of the time. The magnitude, diversity and sheer quantity of accomplishments in the areas of government, tragic and comic drama, poetry, visual art and architecture, mathematics, medicine, natural science, history and philosophy are unparalleled in the history of civilization. The Golden Age was also characterized by the spread of new attitudes and orientations: rationalism, iconoclasm, and the criticism, reinterpretation or rejection of traditional practices, norms and values.

Greek culture as competitive

Another important aspect of ancient Greek culture is unfamiliar but important for understanding Plato’s dialogues. It is essentially competitive or agonistic (from *agon*, ‘struggle’ or ‘competition’). Excellence (*arête*) in human endeavours was believed to develop from competition. Homeric warriors fought for fame, which was understood to be the only lasting thing. Herodotus (*Histories* 8.26.3) has a defeated Persian express his amazement that ‘It is not for money they contend but for glory of achievement!’ The Olympics were a

unifying national event. Plays were written for dramatic competitions. This competitive spirit can also be seen in the habit of orators, poets and playwrights of criticizing each other and vaunting their own superiority. It appears in aspects of the dialogues as well. Plato's Socrates is, among other things, engaging in a successful verbal competition with Protagoras, Thrasymachus, the speech-writer Lysias in the *Phaedrus*, with other speakers in praise of *eros* in the *Symposium*, and at the end of that dialogue Plato has him drink everyone under the table.

#### History of moral ideas

The ideas most frequently discussed in Plato's dialogues – excellence (or virtue, *arête*), justice, piety, courage, temperance, goodness, beauty, wisdom – are words whose usage can be traced back to the earliest times. Because the same or cognate terms of moral praise and blame are used from the earliest written Greek down to the time of Plato, we are able to trace the changes in the range of contexts in which they were used and the sorts of persons and behaviours to which they were applied. Achilles, the strong fighter and fast runner of the *Iliad*, embodies one kind of human excellence and Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey*, a kind of excellence that has more to do with resourcefulness, the clever use of thought and speech. Later the moral vocabulary acquires new definitions as the terms are applied to citizens in the city-states rather than the royal heroes of the monarchical period.

Wisdom (*sophia*), the root of *philosophia*, was an old ideal of human life, but in the earlier lists of Seven Sages, poetic and practical political skill is at least as important as the sort of intellectual skill that the term comes to signify when it grows in *philosophia*. The sophists and Isocrates, therefore, have a strong case for the word's being applicable to them, which Plato is at pains to deny.

There is also, however, a shift from the earlier focus of ethical terms on externals such as deeds and achievements towards a focus on internal features of right action such as the agent's thought or intention; that is, a shift from attention to what one *does* to what one *is*. This is important for Plato's dialogues, with their emphasis both on the inner state of knowing what the right act is and the view articulated by Socrates that virtue is knowledge.

In Plato's own time the meanings of these terms were again undergoing change. Some sophists thought the terms had no natural

(or absolute) meanings, but meant whatever people at a certain time and place chose or even whatever the people in power said they meant. This debate over the roles of nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) is a significant context of many of Plato's dialogues. His Socrates believes that, although opinions may differ about what justice, for example, is, there is a real difference between just and unjust actions, and justice has a nature that can be known. The terms of ethical discussion, therefore, change their meanings as they are exemplified by different sorts of actions under different social and political conditions, and Plato's dialogues, at one level, are contesting these meanings.

Another aspect of the change was from the older adjectival usage (e.g. just, *dikaion*, pious, *hosion*, wise, *sophon*) to abstract substantives (e.g. justice, *dikaiosynê*, piety, *hosiotês*, wisdom, *sophia*). Many of the abstract terms are first attested in Plato's dialogues. This is a change from unreflective use of these terms as descriptions that are taken as non-controversial to awareness and critical reflection on the fact that meanings may differ, and Plato's dialogues constitute an important step in this development.

Besides the moral terms whose history has just been discussed, a number of other ideas are important for understanding Greek thought about ethics as it is discovered in Plato. Two are the inscriptions on the portals of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. 'Know thyself,' (*gnôthi sauton*) probably meant to know your limits, remember that you are a mortal, not a god. 'Nothing too much' (*mêden agan*) advises moderation, the contrary of excess. The term *kalon* is frequently used in the dialogues. It can be translated as physically 'beautiful', practically 'good', and morally 'noble' or 'virtuous'. Traditionally, the Greeks considered physical beauty to be a moral value and associated physical ugliness with moral baseness. The notorious ugliness of Socrates, along with his extreme moral virtue, is used in Plato's dialogues to counteract this traditional association.

In Greek thought, ethics and morals are often associated with the ideas of 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*) and the type of 'life' (*bios*) a person leads. *Eudaimonia* differs in two important ways from our word 'happiness'. It is not a feeling or emotion, like pleasure or joy, that comes and goes; it is a state or condition that a person is in, like health, to which it is sometimes compared in the dialogues. And the happy person is not the sole or best judge of when that condition is attained, as would be the case with feelings of pleasure or joy. *Eudaimonia* is not subjective; it's objective.

## THE CONTEXTS FOR INTERPRETING PLATO'S DIALOGUES

Just as it is obvious that the life of a soldier is different in its daily tasks from that of a farmer or an artisan, so it seems clear that in assessing *eudaimonia* one can distinguish between different life goals or pursuits. The pursuit of wealth, pleasure and fame, which occupies the lives of most persons, emphasizes externals. Plato's emphasis on the philosophic life in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom shifts to an internal focus, although it correlates with external practices such as dialectic.

The theory and practice of education or culture (*paideia*) is another important context in which to understand Plato's dialogues. The prehistoric Greek educational model, found in the Homeric poems, was that of an older man inculcating socially important skills – in fighting and in giving advice – in a youth. Phoenix and Chiron the Centaur were the legendary mentors of Achilles in this way. By the later fifth century, a more prosperous, leisured and politically dynamic period, preliminary education was the province of tutors, from whom boys learned the basics of athletics, music, reading, writing, arithmetic and the memorization of earlier poets as a kind of moral training. A higher education came into being with the sophists (see below, pp. 31–2).

Poetry, like that of Homer and Hesiod, was considered to be a source of knowledge or wisdom, especially in moral matters. Plato's dialogues make use of the poets fairly often. The very large number of quotations from them reveals that Plato knew their poems well. His characters often express the view that poetry is a source of morality, but Plato's Socrates criticizes the poets in the *Republic* and several other dialogues on the grounds that they don't know what they are talking about, their influence can be morally harmful, and, at best, if they happen to say something true, it is because they have been inspired to do so by a god. At the same time, Plato borrows from the tragic poets the use of older myths to provide plot outlines which Plato, like the tragedians, alters to suit his authorial purposes. Plato's criticism of the poets, which has been much debated in the last hundred years, is discussed in Chapter 6.

Plato's relation to the comic poets is profound and ambivalent. On the one hand, he has borrowed uses of characterization, action and dialogue; and he does not seem to be as critical of the comic poets as he is of the more serious epic and lyric poets. On the other hand, his person, his school and his ideas were butts of comic criticism. Overall, since the poets were considered to be the moral teachers of the Greeks and since the core of Plato's philosophic enterprise is to be a

moral teacher, Plato must be understood as a deliberate competitor of the poets and of other would-be teachers, such as the Presocratic philosophers and the sophists, to be a teacher of the Greeks.

### THE PRESOCRATICS

The so-called ‘Presocratic’ philosophers provide another important context for interpreting Plato’s dialogues. The term ‘Presocratics’ suggests individuals who engaged in the practice of philosophy prior to Socrates. The group is fairly large and fairly diverse in many respects, limiting how much we can say about their views with confidence. More important, recent studies suggest that although both Plato and Aristotle looked back to them as predecessors, none of them would have recognized the term ‘philosophy’ as referring to what they were doing. They were participating in a traditional practice of expressing thoughts that might be considered ‘wise’ in prose or poetry.

Although Plato exhibits knowledge of many of the Presocratics, he is neither concerned with them systematically nor interested in the details of all their theories, as Aristotle was. A few – the Heracliteans, Eleatics, Pythagoreans – seem far more interesting to him than the rest, possibly because of the influence of their contemporary representatives.

From the Pythagoreans, Plato seems to have derived an interest in mathematics, and, more specifically, in the ideas that reality has mathematical structure and that numbers are ideas. He also expresses interest in Pythagorean views about the soul: that it is immortal, reincarnated, and that somehow the acquisition of the sort of knowledge represented by mathematical ideas leads to a better future state for the soul. Plato’s interest in Pythagoreanism is attested to in several ways. He is said to have been a student of the contemporary Pythagorean teacher, Philolaos (c. 470–c. 385). The Pythagoreans, Simmias and Cebes (both late fifth to early fourth century), play prominent roles in the *Phaedo*, which includes reference to several specifically Pythagorean ideas.

Heraclitus (c. 535–475) is sometimes referred to as ‘the Obscure’ on account of the complexity of his fragmentary verbal statements. He is usually considered the apostle of change (the idea that change is real and everything changes), pluralism (the idea that many things exist), and of sensation (that our senses give us correct information about the world). Thus in some ways he seems to defend the ordinary

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person's belief that sensation tells us the truth and that the world of many changing sensible things is real. He expresses disdainful criticism of most people's lack of knowledge or understanding. It is said that Plato's view of the sensible realm as constantly changing is derived from Heraclitus. The *Theaetetus* can be read as Plato's settling accounts simultaneously with the sophists as relativists and with Heraclitus. Cratylus in the dialogue named for him, as well as the criticism of extreme Heracliteans that is put into the mouth of Theodorus in the *Theaetetus*, can be read as Plato settling accounts with Heraclitus' contemporary followers.

Parmenides (c. 515–?) is usually considered in diametrical opposition to Heraclitus, as the apostle of permanence, monism (the idea that only one thing exists) and of reason. It is said that Plato's realm of eternal, unchanging Forms derives from Parmenides and it seems clear that Plato favours an Eleatic non-empirical and deductive approach to determining what's really real. On the other hand, Plato seems to be a pluralist rather than a monist and the *Parmenides*, as well as the *Sophist* and *Politicus*, can be read as Plato's settling accounts with the Eleatics.

### THE SOPHISTIC MOVEMENT

The sophists, who appeared in the fifth century BCE, were the inventors of what is nowadays called 'higher education' because what they taught went beyond the basics – athletics, music, reading, writing, arithmetic and the memorization of earlier poets as a kind of moral training. The higher education that they practised included cultural criticism and innovation but was aimed at the acquisition of fame and political influence in the newly democratizing city-states. A prejudicial view of them is contained in the modern use of terms like 'sophistic' and 'sophistical', to refer to deliberately misleading people who use flowery, persuasive language and arguments that seem sound but are not. This view originated in the anti-sophistic polemics that are found in several of Plato's dialogues.

The historical situation is somewhat more complicated. Public reaction to the sophists was actually ambivalent. On the one hand, ambitious or aspiring public men wanted and needed the tools of success that the sophists taught and, then as now, there was excitement about new, innovative and iconoclastic thinking that was associated with them. On the other hand, the same iconoclastic ideas – doubts about the existence of the gods, stable moral values or the

truth – seemed dangerous. Plato’s criticisms of the sophists are more particular and theory-based.

In the simplest terms, the sophists were men who travelled from city-state to city-state, beginning in the middle of the fifth century, giving lessons for pay. The most famous of them were Protagoras (c. 490–c. 420), Gorgias (483–375), Hippias (fifth century) and Prodicus (fifth century). Less famous and influential sophists were Antiphon (480–411), Thrasymachus (c. 459–400) and Callicles (fifth century). Critias (460–403), Euthydemus (fifth–fourth century) and his brother Dionysodorus (fifth–fourth century), though they were not only sophists, engaged in sophistic practices to some extent.

All the sophists taught arts of speech or verbal skills, such as extemporaneous and persuasive speaking and debate. They used oratorical performance (*epideixis*) and public debate for competitive exhibitions of their skill and as advertising for paying students. They pioneered the use of commonplaces (topics, *topoi*) for extemporaneous speaking, debating tactics, and the use of enthymemes (arguments with a suppressed premise) and probabilistic arguments. Some of them taught or practised antilogistic (*antilogikê*) and eristic (*eristikê*), perhaps as a way of training the verbal facility of their students or to exhibit their own.

All the main sophists appear as characters in Plato’s dialogues. Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and Prodicus appear in the *Protagoras*. Thrasymachus is Socrates’ main interlocutor in book 1 of the *Republic*. A dialogue is named for Gorgias and two possibly authentic dialogues are named for Hippias. Dionysodorus and Euthydemus are practitioners of eristic in the *Euthydemus*. Lysias is indirectly criticized in the *Phaedrus*, as is Critias in the *Charmides*. Meno is said to be a follower of Gorgias as Theaetetus has studied Protagoras.

Although we make careful distinctions among verbal arts and their practitioners, ancient Athenians often did not. The historical Socrates was confused with the sophists and one of Plato’s endeavours in the dialogues is to defend him. Plato’s Socrates opposes much that characterized the historical sophists – their interest in persuasiveness, their taking money for instruction, the moral relativism some may have inculcated, and their service in preparing young men for political power without considering whether the individual possessed the intellectual or moral prerequisites to employ political power properly.

## SOCRATES (469–399)

Historically, Socrates was a well-known and notorious character in Athens who inspired an intellectual ‘movement’ that overlapped to some extent with the sophistic movement. A character called Socrates, who aligns in many ways with what we know of the historical Socrates, is the main speaker in most of Plato’s dialogues and a presence in all of the rest of those that Plato certainly wrote. Readers often assume that Plato’s Socrates is to be understood as the historical Socrates, that we learn what Socrates thought by reading what Plato wrote, and thus Plato’s dialogues are taken to be somehow historical. This is incorrect. The Greeks did not have our historical expectations and they did not expect literary characters to be or say or do whatever the historical person might have in reality. Use of the audience’s desire to know what Socrates thought, however, is one of Plato’s literary devices for involving us in his dialogues, about which more will be said in Chapter 4.

For many years, scholars debated the ‘Socratic question’, about who exactly the historical Socrates was, but the historical Socrates is irrecoverably embedded in myth and contrary interpretations. We have numerous testimonies about Socrates and three extensive contemporary sources who knew him directly: the comic playwright Aristophanes (c. 448–c. 385); the general and historian Xenophon (c. 427–355); and Plato. This would seem like a wealth of contemporary information, except that the Socrates who emerges from each author’s works is essentially unlike the others: Xenophon’s Socrates is a sermonizing moralist; Aristophanes’ Socrates is a sophistic charlatan; Plato’s is a sympathetic and heroic ideal of intellectual honesty and morality.

The ‘Socratic movement’ of the later fifth century consisted of younger and older men, Athenians and those who came to Athens to meet Socrates, who were profoundly influenced by Socrates in their lives and activities. Sometimes referred to as ‘minor Socratics’, the group includes besides Xenophon, Antisthenes (c. 446–366), Phaedo (c. 417–?), Euclides (c. 430–360) and Aristippus (c. 435–366), the latter three of whom founded philosophic schools. Writing *Sokratikoi logoi* – Socratic dialogues – seems to have been a minor, literary cottage industry that Plato actually entered into relatively late in the process, though his turned out to be the greatest. In addition to Platonism, therefore, Socrates was the inspiration of several

philosophical orientations that are not as famous today: the ultra-hedonist Cyrenaics, founded by Aristippus; the Megarians, founded by Euclides; the Elean School, founded by Phaedo; and Cynicism, founded by Antisthenes. He even appears sometimes as one of the inspirations of Stoicism, scepticism and Epicureanism. If one takes all the evidence into account, the portrayals in *Sokratikoi logoi* along with the other testimonies, the most reasonable conclusion seems to be that Socrates seemed very different to different people and even those among his auditors who were philosophically inclined interpreted what he was doing in very different ways.

Plato's Socrates is a literary creation, not the historical Socrates. Plato uses verisimilitude, likeness to the historical Socrates, to enhance the impact of his character on the audience. Plato's Socrates is at different moments heroic, ironic, erotic, daemonic, witty, acerbic, memorious, entertaining, interrogative, competitive, inspiring, incisive, pious, critical, inquisitive and exhortative. He is consistently intellectualistic, a defender of traditional values while redefining them. He is capable of embarrassingly plain speaking and equally of elevated, abstract, complex speaking, of argument-making, myth-making, joke-making and storytelling. He ironically disavows possession of knowledge and denies that he practises teaching and engages in politics.

Plato's Socrates is the decisive figure in what was a long ancient Greek competition for leadership in acculturation and education (*paideia*). In earlier times, the leading providers of this had been poets such as Homer and Hesiod and statesmen such as Solon of Athens and Chilon of Sparta. Most recently, the sophists had claimed, as Protagoras does in the *Protagoras* (318e–319a), to teach the art of politics and to make the students good citizens. Plato's dialogues present a new vision of the traditional *paideia*, and seek to replace the traditional poetic sources of moral education. Plato uses his Socrates to participate in the competition. His dialogues define an intellectual practice that is different from and superior to that of the sophists: *philosophia*, philosophy. He embodies that practice in the character of Socrates, who enacts philosophy through what he does and says as well as in what he does not do and say in the dialogues.

Certain aspects of the Platonic Socrates seem consistent with the historical one: his primary interest in ethical and political issues, his professing no doctrines or definite knowledge of anything, use of irony and other forms of humour, ambivalently seductive attitude

## THE CONTEXTS FOR INTERPRETING PLATO'S DIALOGUES

towards attractive young men, and his practice of a vigorous question-and-answer style of conversation. But Plato's Socrates is a complex serio-comic figure, in some ways reminiscent of Don Quixote and Rumpole of the Bailey. Socrates' complex attractiveness has significant imaginative and emotional effects.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the context of the historical development of city-states, constitutional transitions, wars, recent local political history, but especially of the cultural history of developing educational practitioners, forms and messages, Plato, his dialogues and his philosophy should be seen in fundamentally competitive and educational terms. His aims and methods are more those of Greek moral formation than of modern technical philosophy, even though the latter is in many ways an outgrowth of the former.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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**PART II**

**SOURCES OF PERPLEXITY: CHANGE**

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## CHAPTER 3

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLATONISM AND PLATO INTERPRETATION

Classic texts are understood differently in the cultures, languages and issues of later times and places, so it is important to peel back the history of later interpretations from the text we confront. Sometimes, prevailing theories of interpretation reject the contextualism premised at the beginning of Chapter 2 as anachronistically locking the meaning of a text into the past, whereas, on this theory, what makes a great work great is precisely its ability to create new meanings in the minds of readers in other times and places.

It is an undeniable and very interesting fact – indeed, it is part of what qualifies a book for the label ‘great’ – that the great books are understood differently in different times and places, and a good deal of fascinating work has been done in recent decades to understand this ‘reception history’. However, rather than implying that a text has no original meaning that is determinable or important, reception history, along with scholarly study of the context in which a text was produced, actually enables us to better appreciate it in its own time and place. This is historical understanding and it has a value that is independent of, not in conflict with, other forms of understanding.

Having looked at the unfamiliar historical contexts, we turn now to a second external cause of perplexity in the study of Plato. This is an area in which our knowledge has increased substantially in recent years. The history of Platonism and Plato interpretation is a source of perplexity because readers are taught things about the dialogues that are at variance in subtle and not-so-subtle ways with their own experiences. The later ancient, medieval and early modern traditions of Platonism (and Neoplatonism) have blurred the outlines of authentically Platonic thought. To the extent that we know the later traditions, we can recognize later accretions and recover those outlines.

For example, the theory of Ideas, the Idea of the Good, the utopian community and the two-worlds metaphysics are presented as common knowledge despite the fact that, as readers discover, they are not at all clear in the dialogues themselves. One cause of this perplexing experience is the long and complicated history of interpretation of the dialogues.

The intention of this chapter is to provide only a sketch indicating the most important moments, movements and names in what is a long and complex story, the full details of which are still being worked out.

### THE RIDDLE OF THE EARLY ACADEMY

The crucial and surprising fact about Plato's Academy is how little we know for certain. Other than Plato's nephew, Speusippus (c. 410–339), most prominent Academics of Plato's lifetime were non-Athenians. Among them were Aristotle (384–322), who came from Stagira, Eudoxus of Cnidus (c. 408–356) and Heracleides of Pontus (c. 390–310). Two women, Lasthenea of Mantinea and Axiothea of Phlius, are mentioned in some sources. Many were interested in mathematics.

The views expressed by or attributed to Plato's followers are often called Platonism, and Platonism, so defined, has been a permanent feature of the Western intellectual tradition ever since, as will be sketched below. At the same time, however, much of what has been considered Platonism is alien to Plato and a current of anti-Platonic thought has persisted since antiquity. The beginnings of this 'anti-Platonism' are found in criticisms of Platonic ideas expressed by comic poets and others.

### THE OLD ACADEMY

The Academy in the first generations after Plato's death is called the 'Old Academy'. The Academy continued after his death but, as Guthrie says, 'the Academy in and after the last years of Plato's life was tending to lose itself in highly schematic and barren systems of "reality"', reifications of what Plato left fluid and closures of what Plato left open.

Although most dialogues obviously avoid dogmatizing, Plato's successors did not pursue sustained interpretations but simply interpreted them dogmatically. This was due to their own rather different orientations as well as, ironically, to the intellectual openness that

Plato meant to foster. Their orientations were dogmatic rather than dialogical, and systematic rather than open; they preferred mathematical and metaphysical questions where Plato preferred moral and political ones; and they tended in the direction of Pythagoreanism where Plato had been interested in it but had maintained a somewhat playful and ironic distance. So the Academy did not carry on Plato's vision, but reified it into the doctrinal system that has come to be known as Platonism. What was for Plato a theory or vision, for example, about Forms was frozen into a dogma that was criticized, revised and even rejected by some.

Plato's preference for intellectual openness is evidenced by the diversity of opinion and orientation that he tolerated within the Academy. Eudoxus of Cnidus, for example, was a brilliant mathematician and astronomer, but did not accept Forms. Heracleides of Pontus was an Academic and wrote dialogues that were highly thought of in antiquity, but was most interested in physics and astronomy, eschatology and shamanism. Philip of Opus (fl. c. 350), a mathematician and astronomer, was probably the author of the *Epinomis* and possibly of the *Laws*.

Speusippus, Plato's nephew, became head (*scholarch*) of the Academy upon Plato's death and remained so until his own death. He seems to have written much on ethics and some of his ethical views are reminiscent of Aristotle (e.g. happiness as the perfect functioning of one's natural powers, and the virtues as instruments of happiness) or of typically Hellenistic views (e.g. that the goal is peace of mind and that the wise man is always happy). His main philosophic orientation was very different from Plato's; more metaphysical, mathematical, Pythagorean and dogmatic. He gave up Platonic Forms, holding instead that numbers are the first of existing things, independent and, besides sensibles, the only existing things. He may have employed the Platonic method of division in biological classifications.

Xenocrates of Chalcedon (c. 396–314) was a pupil of Plato's from his youth. When Speusippus died, he narrowly won a contested election and served as *scholarch* for 25 years, from 339 to 314, the last *scholarch* who knew Plato personally. He is reported to have taught both Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism, and Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism. Like Speusippus, he was strongly influenced by Pythagorean mathematical and religious orientations.

Apparently Xenocrates was a prolific writer, but little that he wrote survives. Like Speusippus, he was inclined to dogmatism rather

than to Plato's intellectual open-endedness. His special gift seems to have been as a system builder. He may have originated what became the standard Hellenistic division of philosophy into physics, ethics and logic, and he was the first to systematize Plato's doctrines using these divisions. Similarly his doctrine of being and knowledge systematically distinguishes three levels of being – things beyond the heavens, things within the heavens, and the heavens themselves – to which correspond three kinds of cognition – intelligence, sensation and a composite. The notion of 'things beyond the heavens' may derive from the myth about the soul's journey in the *Phaedrus*, but the myth has been frozen into a doctrine and part of a system. Xenocrates also seems to have been profoundly interested in daemons, beings intermediate between gods and humans, reminiscent of Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*.

It would be interesting to know why Aristotle returned to Athens but did *not* return to the Academy and was not chosen as its leader, but we have no reliable information. What is clear is that after Plato's death the Academy transformed his ethically centred, open-ended vision into the dogmatic, systematic, metaphysical dualism known as Platonism. The next generations seem to have been more interested in dialogues that seem dogmatic, such as *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, *Parmenides* and *Symposium*, than in dialogues that are more clearly inconclusive, such as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Protagoras* or *Laches*. The exception to this generalization is the New Academy.

#### THE NEW ACADEMY

The New Academy begins with Arcesilaus (c. 315–240), who became the sixth head of the Academy and took it in a new and sceptical direction that was followed by his successors, Carneades (214–129/8) and Clitomachus (187–109). The earliest sceptics were Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360–270) and Timon of Phlius (c. 320–230), of whose ideas and work we know very little other than that they thought we couldn't know anything for certain. By reviving the dialectic of Plato's 'Socratic' dialogues, Arcesilaus reinvigorated the sceptical and aporetic strand of his Socratic-Platonic heritage, as contrasted with the *Timaeus*-inspired cosmological speculation that had characterized previous work in the Academy.

Scepticism survived to the end of the ancient world and to some extent its survival is owing to the Academy. The term 'academic' in antiquity meant 'sceptical'. We see the influence of academic

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLATONISM AND PLATO INTERPRETATION

scepticism in Philo of Larissa, Cicero (c. 106–43), Aenesidemus (first century CE) and Sextus Empiricus (second century CE), whose voluminous writings survived down to the Renaissance and powerfully influenced the direction of modern philosophy through Descartes, establishing the opposition between dogmatism and scepticism that recurs in the history of Plato interpretation. Nevertheless, the later ancient, medieval and early modern traditions of Platonism and Neoplatonism have paradoxically and perplexingly served to clarify and rigidify an understanding of Platonic thought, in contrast with the Platonic thought of the dialogues, which is allusive and fluid.

### MIDDLE PLATONISM AND NEOPLATONISM

*Middle Platonism*, a new form and distinctly religious of Platonism, is dominant from the second century BCE until the rise of Neoplatonism. Philo of Larissa (159–84 BCE) leads Platonic thought away from the scepticism of the New Academy to a more dogmatic concern with ethical matters. Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 130–68 BCE) held the basic doctrinal agreement of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, worked systematically on the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, theorized about demons, and thought the Forms were ideas in the mind of God. Important later Middle Platonists were Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–c. 40 CE), who tried to reconcile Judaism with Platonism of this religious sort, and Albinus (or Alcinous, fl. c. 149–57 CE), who wrote an *Introduction* to Platonic philosophy and the *Didaskalikos*, a summary of Plato's philosophic doctrines, both of which have survived.

Middle Platonists try to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. For example, they identify Aristotle's unmoved mover with the Form of the Good in Plato's *Republic*, interpret the Platonic Forms as ideas in God's mind (Philo, perhaps owing to Antiochus). This supreme Mind or God is taken as transcending a hierarchy of being and reached through intermediary powers. Direct knowledge of the transcendent Mind is impossible, but a 'negative theology' – knowing what the divine is not – gives an indirect knowledge of God. Direct contemplation may bring a few brief flashes of intuition even in this life. Middle Platonists are also concerned about the source of evil. Is it matter? A by-product of the soul's incarnation? The religiosity of Middle Platonism made it important for the development of Christian thought.

*Neoplatonism* is the name given by modern scholars to a form of Platonism that developed in late antiquity and dominated Platonic thought until recently. Neoplatonists, however, think of themselves not as holding views other than Plato, but as having the true Platonism. The defining figure of what is now called Neoplatonism was Plotinus (205/4–70). His student, Porphyry (234–c. 305), Iamblichus (c. 245–325) and Proclus (412–85) are the other most important Neoplatonists of antiquity. Neoplatonism is different in fundamental ways from authentic Platonic thought. For Neoplatonism the dialogues contain a consistent, coherent philosophy or philosophical system that incorporates Aristotelian and Stoic terms and ideas. It focuses on the more dogmatic dialogues, and privileges certain ideas found in them, though in most cases not elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. These ideas include emphasis on the One (found in *Parmenides*), the Good (discussed only in *Republic*), the Beautiful and the intellectual ascent to it (*Symposium*), and likeness to God as our goal (*Theaetetus*).

For Neoplatonism, there is a plurality of levels of being, arranged in hierarchical descending order, the last and lowest of which is the physical universe, existing in time and space and perceptible to the senses. Each level of being is derived from its superior through a process that is not spatio-temporal. Each derived being is established in its own reality by turning back towards its superior in a movement of contemplative desire, which is implicit in the original creative impulse of outgoing that it receives from its superior; thus the Neoplatonic universe is characterized by an eternal, simultaneous double movement of outgoing and return. Each of us desires and is called to return to the One through an intellectual or spiritual ascent in which we transcend our individual selfhood as we do our spatio-temporal limitations.

Each level of being is an image or expression on a lower level of the one above it. Degrees of being are also degrees of unity; as one goes down the scale of being, there is greater multiplicity, more separateness and increasing limitation – culminating in the atomic individualization of the spatio-temporal world. The highest level of being, Divine Mind and the Forms, and through it all of what in any sense exists, derives from the ultimate principle, the One, which is absolutely free from determinations and limitations and utterly transcends any conceivable reality, so that it may be said to be ‘beyond being’. Because the One has no limitations, it has no division, attributes or qualifications; it cannot really be named, or even properly

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLATONISM AND PLATO INTERPRETATION

described as being, but may be called 'the One' to designate its complete simplicity. It may also be called 'the Good', as the source of all perfections and the ultimate goal of return, for the impulse of outgoing and return that constitutes the hierarchy of derived reality comes from and leads back to the Good. Since this supreme principle is absolutely simple and undetermined (or devoid of specific traits), human knowledge of it is radically different in kind from any other knowledge. The One is not an object (a separate, determined, limited thing) and no predicates can be applied to it; hence it can be known only if it raises the mind to an immediate union with itself, which cannot be imagined or described.

Neoplatonism thus develops trends found in the Old Academy and Middle Platonism; the absence of intellectual openness, of the conversational practice of philosophy, the primacy of ethical and political issues, and engagement with the enviroing community. For these have been substituted rigid systematic dogmatism, treatises, lectures and authoritative responses, the primacy of metaphysical and theological concerns, emphasis on the inner world of the soul. Neoplatonism was something far more theological than was Plato's own thought.

After the death of Plotinus, Neoplatonic schools were established at Athens and Alexandria that taught many influential thinkers of the next centuries, but produced dry, pedantic commentaries and school treatises presenting increasingly complex conceptual systems. Although Proclus' tendency was to systematize others' ideas, he wrote an *Commentary on the Parmenides* that has come down to us and turns that dialogue into the foundation for his *Platonic Theology*. The latter, which survives incompletely in six books, later provided inspiration for many philosophers, including Hegel.

## MEDIEVAL PLATONISM AND PLATO INTERPRETATION

The revival of philosophy in the Middle Ages began in the eighth and ninth centuries, and for the most part medieval Platonism meant Neoplatonism. This is not surprising, since the specifically Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato was dominant in late antiquity, and since many ideas that were important to medieval monotheists found echoes in Neoplatonism. These ideas begin with the centrality of a God who is crucially one and from whom everything that exists derives. Other prominent ideas include: that the world is governed or controlled in some way by the providential Word (*logos*) of God; that

divine ideas are the archetypes of things; that our souls are images of the divine power; that what knowledge we have comes into our minds from a divine, immaterial source rather than from matter and sensation; that reality consists of a hierarchy of beings; that the multiplication of things constitutes their falling away from God; and that return to unity with God is possible and happens through spiritual activity, of which philosophy may be a type. Medieval Platonism was based less on direct knowledge of the dialogues than on Plotinus and Proclus, whose thought was available in several forms, and two books wrongly taken to be about Aristotle, *On Causes* (*Liber de causis*), actually excerpts from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, and the *Theology of Aristotle*, actually a summary of Plotinus. Thus, like Plotinus, medieval Platonism largely ignored the Socratic and aporetic elements of Platonic thought, as well as their literary and dramatic elements, and emphasized dogmatic (and quasi-theological) aspects.

Because of the division of the Western world into Christian- and Muslim-controlled political units, medieval philosophy is distinguished into rather different Christian, Muslim and Jewish varieties, although all three originate in the confrontation between Greek philosophical ideas and sacred scriptures. Philosophy in the Christian world was strongly influenced by Platonic thought from its earliest period, that of the Fathers of the Church.

Among the Greek philosophers, Plato was viewed by early Christians as most congenial to their views, but their Plato was at first the Middle Platonic and then the Neoplatonic Plato because, from the sixth century on, they knew of the dialogues first-hand and most of their knowledge of Plato was from Neoplatonic sources such as Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. The earliest attempts at formal Christian theology were those of the Middle Platonic Alexandrian School of Clement (c. 150–c. 210) and Origen (185–c. 254). Augustine's (354–430) turn to Christianity was determined by his encounter with Neoplatonism and his own view is essentially a Christian Neoplatonism, emphasizing the metaphysics of inner life with truth found by turning inward, the hierarchical structure of reality, and a negative theology. Boethius (c. 475–c. 526), undertook to translate Plato and Aristotle into Latin; but, like the Neoplatonists, he thought their views fundamentally agreed. His translation of Porphyry's Neoplatonic *Introduction* to Aristotle's logic became one of the most influential philosophy books of the next millennium. Neoplatonic ideas are manifested in: John Scotus Erigena (800–77),

who identifies the Neoplatonic One with God; the rationalism and approach to God through reason of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109); Bonaventure's (1221–74) vision of *The Mind's Road to God*; the speculative mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). There are even elements in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who was an Aristotelian in the uniquely medieval way, the product of commentaries by Neoplatonic late ancients, such as Porphyry, John Philoponus (c. 490–570), Olympiodorus (fifth century) and Simplicius (c. 490–c. 560), and Neoplatonic medieval Muslim philosophers, such as al-Farabi, ibn Sina and ibn Rushd.

Just as Christian thought was influenced by ancient Greek philosophy, from its earliest stages Islamic philosophy grew out of the encounter between ancient Greek philosophy and the Qur'an in Alexandria, Gondeshapur (Persia) and Harran (then Syria, now Turkey), to which several Neoplatonists went from Athens when the Emperor Justinian ordered the philosophy schools to close in 529. Translations of Neoplatonic texts, and commentaries on Plato and Aristotle from Greek into Arabic, gave a Neoplatonic cast to Muslim philosophy at its beginnings that appears in major Muslim philosophers who came to influence European philosophers in the thirteenth century. Al-Kindi (c. 800–70), al-Farabi (c. 878–c. 950), ibn Sina (who came to be known in the West as Avicenna, 980–1037), and ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroes, 1126–98) were Neoplatonist Aristotelians and, like Plotinus, considered Plato and Aristotle to be in fundamental agreement.

Although it seems surprising today, medieval Jewish philosophy grew up within the Muslim intellectual tradition because Jews were given greater social, personal and intellectual freedom in Muslim countries than in Europe, where Christians were more anti-Semitic and often considered Jewish thinkers as Arabs. Jewish intellectuals wrote in Arabic as well as Hebrew and a Judaeo-Arabic language in Hebrew letters. Like Christian and Muslim philosophy, Jewish philosophy reflects the tensions between philosophic reason and the text of sacred scriptures; but medieval Jewish philosophy tended a bit more to the mystical. Solomon ibn Gabirol (Avicebron, c. 1022–70) and Isaac Israeli (c. 850–950) utilize Neoplatonic ideas. Moses ben Maimon (known as Maimonides, 1135–1204) accepts negative theology, a Platonic cosmos and eternal Forms, and the notion of God as the sole source of all genuine knowledge, of which human reason can only hope to gain a remote glimpse. Neoplatonic ideas also influenced medieval Jewish kabbalists, such as Isaac the Blind, in

seeing the world as emanated by God through thought into individuals, for whom mystical experience provides a way to reunite with the divine thought from which we come.

The speculative mysticism of Dominican Meister Eckhardt (1260–1327) also exhibits Neoplatonic influences in its path of inward self-discovery, its goal of liberation from self in what transcends the self, namely God, and in the notion that the goal of rational life is living in and from the absolute One, identified as God. These ideas were developed by his students: Henry Suso (1295–1365) a Dominican famous for his visions, ecstasies and austerities; and John Tauler (1300–61), another Dominican, who counselled the turn inward from the world to God, who dwells within everyone, and who claimed that the ultimate vision of God's essence is attainable in this life for those who perfect themselves. For this emphasis on individual responsibility, Tauler was considered a congenial figure by Luther and other Reformers.

#### RENAISSANCE PLATONISM

Like its medieval parent, Renaissance Platonism is essentially Neoplatonism. Nicholas of Cusa (1400–64) studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, and was ultimately a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. He rejected the dominant Aristotelian scholasticism in favour of mystical ideas such as the 'learned ignorance' of the negative theology that goes back to Plotinus. God is a Unity that transcends our rational capacities, the Word of God is a kind of Plotinian 'world soul' such that God is both the centre and the circumference of the universe.

During a church council in the mid-fifteenth century, Italians came to know the Greek Neoplatonic philosopher George Gemistos Plethon (1355–1452), who reintroduced the study of Plato's dialogues to Europeans. Cosimo de Medici attended his lectures, returned home to Florence, and founded a Platonic Academy, headed by Marsilio Ficino (1433–99). Ficino translated Plato from Greek into Latin, as well as the Hermetic Corpus, and the writings of the Neoplatonists Porphyry, Iamblichus and Plotinus. Following suggestions laid out by Gemistos Plethon, Ficino tried to synthesize Christianity and Neoplatonism.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) was a Neoplatonist and humanist who synthesized Neoplatonic philosophy, the distinctly Renaissance blend of literary and civic humanism, Aristotelianism,

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLATONISM AND PLATO INTERPRETATION

Averroism (a Neoplatonic form of Aristoteleanism) and mysticism. He learned Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic and was among the first Christians to learn and appreciate the Jewish kabbalah as well as the Chaldaean Oracles and the writings of the ancient mystic Hermes Trismegistus. His *Oration on the Dignity of Man* is among the clearest statements of an essential Neoplatonic principle, the Great Chain of Being, and its corollary, that when we philosophize, we ascend the chain of being towards communion with God.

In France, Descartes (1596–1650) borrowed many of the insights for which he is most famous – including the argument ‘I think, therefore I exist’ – from the Christian Neoplatonist, Augustine. In England, Henry More (1614–87), like Augustine, found the remedy for scepticism in Neoplatonic texts, and the ‘Cambridge Platonism’ he founded depends on Platonic Forms existing behind perception, which are images of the divine within the human soul and an *imprint* of God within man. Thus, reason can lead beyond the material world, because it is in itself semi-divine and the means of approaching God. Similarly, the rationalism of Spinoza (1632–77), for whom all things flow eternally and necessarily from God, and Leibniz (1646–1716), for whom nature is the complete ‘chain of being’, owes a good deal to Neoplatonism.

But during the same period, the texts of Plato’s dialogues were collected and translated into Latin and then into vernacular languages. This was the first step in what turned out to be a long process of recovery of genuinely Platonic thought as distinct from its Neoplatonic interpretation.

### EARLY MODERN AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF PLATO

Neoplatonism controlled the understanding of Plato until, in the eighteenth century, a process began that has slowly and by stages distinguished between the philosophy to be found in the dialogues and the Neoplatonic interpretation.

The rediscovery of Proclus by the great German Idealist G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) had an important influence on his thought and, through him, on the whole history of nineteenth-century idealist philosophy. His view that all aspects of reality, including those we experience as disconnected or contradictory, are ultimately unified in the thought of a single all-encompassing consciousness and the dialectical unfolding of the Idea is the most influential modern expression of Neoplatonism. Hegel’s contemporary, F. W. J. von

Schelling (1775–1854) was strongly influenced by the Neoplatonism of Plotinus himself. Idealism posited an absolute Mind, like the Divine Mind of Plotinus, distinct or cut off ('absolute') from individual human consciousnesses, and absolute Ego, each of which divide themselves into individual phases. Similarly, the process of development of the world is conceived as the history of the absolute Mind.

As the rationalist idealism of Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza had become the German idealism of Hegel, Fichte and Schelling, so the latter grew into the 'absolute idealism' of F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), who thought that individual things are not really real, only ideas, and John Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925) in England. Josiah Royce (1855–1916) in the United States was also an absolute idealist. Neoplatonic influence can also be seen in the French philosophers Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941), the forerunners of existentialism.

Though modern philosophy continued to reflect Neoplatonic views in various ways, the recovery of authentic Platonic thought in fact began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It has three main steps: recovery of the aporetic and Socratic Plato; recognition of the difference between Plato and Neoplatonism; and undertaking to find a Plato who is neither sceptical nor a dogmatic Neoplatonic. Once Renaissance scholars had access to all of Plato's dialogues, they began to realize that most of the dialogues are not dogmatic and that Plato's Socrates is in many ways reminiscent of the sceptical New Academy. Important figures in this recognition were the Florentine humanist politician Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540), the German religious reformer Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), the Italian humanist scholar Mario Nizolio (1498–1575) and the French sceptic Michel Montaigne (1533–92).

The second step in recovering a more authentic Plato was the demise of the Neoplatonic interpretation. This came about partly as humanists began to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit classical texts. An important case was that of Dionysius the Areopagite, whose Neoplatonic interpretation of Christianity had been assumed to date to the time of St Paul. When Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) demonstrated that this was a mere legend, Neoplatonism began to lose its legitimacy as an interpretation of Christianity and of Plato.

The final step was to begin the quest of a Plato who is neither

sceptical, i.e. has a positive teaching, nor Neoplatonic, i.e. the positive teaching is not Neoplatonism. The Introduction by Jean de Serres (Ioannes Serranus) to the 1578 Stephanus edition of Plato's dialogues distinguished sharply between Academic scepticism, Neoplatonic systematization and the philosophy of the dialogues themselves. His lead was followed by a series of historians of philosophy, who were, unlike earlier philosophers and theologians, more interested in whether he really held the views ascribed to him than in whether those views were right. Their names, like Serres', are unfamiliar: Thomas Stanley, *History of Philosophy* (1655–61); Gerhard Voss, *On philosophers and sects of philosophers* (1658); Jacob Brucker, *Critical History of Philosophy* (1742–4) and the *Zedler Encyclopedia* (1741).

Once Plato's philosophy had been detached from the Neoplatonic interpretation of it, interpreters realized that many aspects of the dialogues don't seem to fit together. There seem to be inconsistent views expressed on the same issues in different dialogues; for example, the soul is sometimes partless, at other times tripartite. Technical terms are used inconsistently; for example, when talking about Forms, sometimes we find *eidōs*, sometimes *idea*, sometimes both, sometimes neither. The theory of Forms itself seems to be absent from some dialogues and appears quite differently in different dialogues. To some influential interpreters, differences such as these seemed to be superficial features of a stable, unified, dogmatic, but not Neoplatonic, underlying Platonic philosophy. This has been called Platonic 'unitarianism', its most famous and influential exponents were Paul Shorey (1857–1934) and Harold Cherniss (1904–87).

The most widely accepted response to these problems from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, however, was the 'developmental' approach, which began from the seemingly reasonable theory that Plato's views developed over time and that we could identify 'early', 'middle' and 'late' dialogues and doctrines. Plato's intellectual development could be determined by reading the dialogues in the order in which they were written. The order of composition is called 'Platonic chronology'.

The most persuasive evidence offered for the developmental hypothesis was stylometry, statistical analysis of variations in unconscious elements of a writer's style from his last writing – for Plato this is assumed to be the *Laws*. When computers came along, scholars were able to look at the entire corpus of Platonic texts rapidly and mechanically rather than depending on tedious manual counting.

Unfortunately, computer-assisted statistical analysis was the undoing of stylometry, because it does not support neat division into three periods. By the end of the twentieth century, only a group of 'late style' dialogues is considered to exist, and claims about early, middle and late doctrines are declining in acceptance.

A subset of developmental interpreters of Plato in the last half of the twentieth century pursued 'Socratic philosophy' by restricting their set of dialogues to the 'early Socratic' ones in which, on the developmental hypothesis, Plato was expressing views more akin to those of the historical Socrates. Unfortunately for the Socratic philosophy movement, when stylometry was shown to be inadequate and the only one of the three developmental 'periods' that seemed to hold up was the 'late' one, its basic premise was falsified.

#### CONTINENTAL PLATONISMS AND MODERN ANTI-PLATONISM

Besides the varieties of ancient Platonism, an ancient current of anti-Platonic thought ran from Epicureans and Peripatetics and poets of Old and Middle Comedy through Roman satirists, such as Lucian (120–80), to Fathers of the Church such as Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375–444), John Chrysostom (349–407), Theodoretus of Syrus (c. 393–c. 457) and Gregory the Great (540–604). Some attacks were personal: Plato was said to be fat, to behave strangely, or to be a pederast. Other criticisms related to his supposed political involvements and his writing. But the most serious were attacks on elements of what was taken to be his philosophy: the practice of philosophy itself; the subtle (some said vacuous or sophistical) dialectical arguments in the dialogues; and specific ideas, such as the theory of Ideas, the Idea of the Good, the community of women, and the philosopher rulers. Anti-Platonism has had renewed life.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) criticized the spiritual weakness of Plato's idealism and, like his follower, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), blamed it for what he believed was the dissolution of philosophy into particular sciences, the reduction of the proper study of being to vapid metaphysics, and the reduction of everything to mere ideas. On Nietzsche's view, Plato turns out to be nihilistic and the source of what has become a fatal visual prejudice in Western philosophy.

Another anti-Platonic current is epitomized in the argument of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, by Karl Popper (1902–94). Written in reaction against Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, Popper

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considered Plato's *Republic* to be the rejection of the sort of 'open society' envisaged by liberal democrats and the foundation of all fascism. This generated a vigorous debate that lasted from the 1940s to the 1960s.

In the 1950s, too, an esoteric view of Plato began to be presented, on which the true Platonic doctrine is found not in the dialogues, but in oral teachings that were handed down in the Academy. Because the principal exponents of this view, Konrad Gaiser (1929–88) and Hans-Joachim Krämer (1929–), taught at the University of Tübingen, this is sometimes known as the Tübingen view. The Tübingen view has been to some extent revised and most clearly and forcefully articulated by Thomas Alexander Szlezák.

### PLATO THE SWAN

A story is found both in the late ancient commentator Olympiodorus and in the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*. Just before his death Plato saw in a dream that he had become a swan and, leaping from tree to tree, he frustrated the attempts of the bird-catchers to hunt him down. If the bird-catchers are interpreters, the dream suggests that no one will ever give the final and definitive interpretation of the dialogues.

The history sketched in this chapter shows that among the many ways Plato's dialogues have been received and understood over the centuries, two nodes, two Platons, stand out: a dogmatic, systematic (and for a long time Neoplatonic) Plato; and the anti-dogmatic, sceptical, aporetic or Socratic Plato. But if we set these post-Platonic interpretations and receptions aside, what remains is a Plato who is neither dogmatic nor systematic, whose dialogues permit a dogmatic and systematic interpretation but also a sceptical one. To this extent post-Platonic traditions have blurred the outlines of authentically Platonic thought. Thus, a third Plato should be added to the two Platons found in most of the interpretive tradition, a Plato whose writings and whose conception of philosophy was dramatic and non-dogmatic. This view will be developed in the following chapters.

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## CHAPTER 4

### DIALOGUE FORM

The texts written by philosophical authors are of different kinds. Treatises, meditations, essays, letters, poems and dialogues are formally different in literary structures and the ways in which philosophical ideas and arguments are presented. Different kinds of texts require different canons of assessment and different strategies of interpretation. Treatises, essays and letters typically present their claims and evidence more explicitly and directly, while meditations, poems and dialogues may communicate more implicitly and indirectly.

The dialogue form itself is the most important cause of perplexity to those readers who are looking for Plato's doctrines. With few exceptions, every dialogue is the story of a conversation about what we nowadays call philosophic or more generally intellectual questions, almost always of a social and political sort. Ever since antiquity, this has frustrated interpreters, who have been more interested in the truths that they think Plato has discovered than in what they have believed was the (mere) literary form in which those beliefs were articulated. But Plato would not have recognized and surely would not have been interested in the distinction between form and content, the two being inextricably bound together. Plato's written philosophy *is* the dialogues. In this chapter we consider the linguistic and literary structures and techniques that Plato has deployed. To interpret the dialogues properly the reader needs to appreciate linguistic characteristics, literary structures and the thoroughgoing interpenetration of the dramatic and the philosophic.

The most important single point – something readers should always observe – is the difference between what happens *in* the dialogue and what effects Plato means this to have on the audience – between, for example, what Socrates means when he speaks to an

interlocutor and what Plato means when he makes Socrates speak to that interlocutor. We should no more assume that Plato means literally whatever Socrates says than we should assume that Cervantes or Shakespeare mean literally whatever Don Quixote or Hamlet say.

#### SOURCES AND MODELS

Although the details are not well known, it is clear that Plato's dialogues as written texts in which characters converse have several sources and predecessors. One is the 'mimes' (*mimoi*) of Sophron, a Sicilian and contemporary of Euripides, of which a few fragments survive. We cannot confirm ancient reports that Plato made the mimes famous in Athens or that when he died, a copy of them was found under his pillow. They seem to have been dialogues written in prose but with enough rhythm that some considered them poetry. Mimes were partly serious, partly comic, representing scenes of ordinary life, unlike the heroic settings of epic and tragedy. They contained numerous proverbs and colloquial forms of speech, and they may have been performed as private comedies. All of these traits can be found in Plato's dialogues.

Another source for Plato was the comic and tragic dramas that were first presented in dramatic competitions that were part of religious festivals called Dionysia and Lenaea. From the old comic writers, Cratinus (c. 520–423) and Eupolis (c. 446–411), Plato has borrowed the bitter criticism of contemporary politicians and public figures, as he has borrowed also themes and plots from his contemporary, the most famous ancient Greek comic writer, Aristophanes (c. 448–385). Plato also owes much to the tragic poets, Aeschylus (c. 525–456), Sophocles (c. 497–406) and Euripides (c. 485–406).

Plato's dialogues are the greatest exemplars of what was at the time a sizeable literature of the *Sokratikoi logoi* mentioned in Chapter 1. Evidently modelled on the conversational behaviour of the historical Socrates, these dramatic or narrative prose writings, in which characters discuss moral and philosophical problems with Socrates, appeared at the turn of the fourth century BCE. The main examples that have survived are Plato's dialogues and the Socratic works of Xenophon. Fragments of *Sokratikoi logoi* by Antisthenes (446–366), Aeschines of Sphettos (389–314), Phaedo (fourth century), Euclides of Megara (450–380) and Aristotle survive.

## DIALOGUE FORM

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PLATONIC DIALOGUE

Each dialogue is a story, but of a special kind. Each has a discernible plot and identifiable moments, and many dialogue plots also represent and reinterpret traditional stories. Some stories are narrated by Socrates or another character and are thus presented to us as having taken place in a past time. Other dialogues are presented in a directly dramatic form, as if they were scripts of a play, taking place in present time. The stories are special in that they consist predominantly of conversation about a philosophic or intellectual question between two or several people.

Often persons are present who participate little in the conversation. Socrates, on the other hand, is the leading character in most dialogues and a participant in all the others except for the *Laws*. Like Socrates, nearly all the other characters in Plato's dialogues are names that belonged to historical persons about whom we have more or less information. This information shows that Plato has chosen characters in many cases because there is a connection between who they were (or what they thought or did) and the topic his fictional character is going to discuss with Plato's fictional Socrates.

Almost all of the dialogues take place in a particular setting. The space and time settings, too, are borrowed from the real world and chosen so as to provide an additional dimension to the dialogue's conversation. Similarly, the conversation topics themselves are historically contextualized rather than abstract perennial questions.

Although the dialogues are all conversations about philosophical topics, they exhibit a great deal of variation in a number of ways. Considered by length, measured in Stephanus pages, some dialogues are short, such as *Crito* (11), *Ion* (12) and the *Euthyphro* (14). Some are of medium length, such as *Lysis* (20), *Laches* (23), *Apology* (25), *Meno* (30), *Euthydemus* (35) and *Parmenides* (40). A large group is fairly long: *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Protagoras*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*, *Cratylus* and *Phaedo* are all between 50 and 60 Stephanus pages. Then there are *Theaetetus* (68), *Timaeus* (75) and *Gorgias* (80). The *Republic*, at 294 pages, is very long. The even longer *Laws* (345), although widely accepted, I believe is unlikely to have been written by Plato.

The dialogues also differ in the degree to which they appear to teach something or answer their main question. The apparently didactic dialogues are *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*;

perhaps also *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Most dialogues explicitly do not arrive at an answer to their central question. These apparently inconclusive dialogues include *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Meno*, *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Theaetetus* and *Hippias Minor*. Dialogues can also be differentiated in terms of the density and difficulty of the arguments found in them. In dialogues such as *Ion*, *Crito* and *Euthyphro*, the arguments are clearer than the notoriously dense and difficult argumentation of dialogues such as *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*, *Theaetetus*, *Timaeus* and the second part of the *Parmenides*.

Overall argument structure or pattern is another dimension in which the dialogues vary. Many dialogues have a similar core structure: basic question, then various answers are proposed and refuted. Though more or fewer answers can be tried and the length of the refutations can vary enormously, this pattern describes *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Meno*, *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Hippias Major* and *Theaetetus*. If we generalize to include all dialogues in which the interlocutor's view is refuted, then *Ion*, *Crito*, *Republic* Book I, *Parmenides* Part I and *Hippias Minor* would be included. But there are quite different argument structures as well: a long funeral oration in the *Menexenus*; a series of speeches on love in *Symposium*; several speeches followed by a discussion of good speaking and writing in the *Phaedrus*; a lecture on cosmology in the *Timaeus*; didactic question and answer in the *Republic*, *Sophist* and *Politicus*.

At least one dialogue, the *Critias*, is an unfinished fragment. Two groups of dialogues have internal dramatic connections, making it seem that Plato might have intended them to be read as trilogies. The *Republic*, *Timaeus* and *Critias* are a set of speeches planned to deal with the way a city should be organized, the nature and origin of the universe and humans, and then Athens' ancient history (*Timaeus* 17, 27). The *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Politicus* are linked by internal chronological references – 'Let's meet again tomorrow' (*Theaetetus* 210) and 'We've come at the proper time by yesterday's agreement' (*Sophist* 216) – and an overlapping cast of characters. A third trilogy is hypothetical. Because Socrates ticks off the three names (*Sophist* 217a) and because it is clear that Plato considered the philosopher to be a personally and socially preferable life-model to that of the sophist or the politician, some interpreters have speculated that a third dialogue was planned, the *Philosopher*, but that for some reason Plato didn't write it.

## LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PLATONIC DIALOGUE

Plato's dialogues are widely considered to be the richest and most artful written Attic Greek. Plato utilizes an unequalled vocabulary, diverse and impeccable grammar and syntax. Notoriously among beginning students of Greek, he is also the master of a unique aspect of Greek, the particles, a group of small words that add slight, but important, shades of meaning or emphasis to other words, phrases and sentences, much in the way that tone of voice or gesture can change the literal meaning of words.

Plato's mastery of Greek is so great that his characters speak in a variety of local and regional dialects. He so perfectly imitates the very different rhetorical habits of several sophists (e.g. Lysias in the *Phaedrus*, Prodicus and Hippias in the *Protagoras*) and the poetry of other writers (Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, Simonides in the *Protagoras*) that modern experts disagree about whether Plato has quoted an otherwise unknown fragment or has just made something up in perfect imitation. A wide variety of styles is discernible in Plato's writing, from the colloquial style of casual conversation to a semi-literary conversational style, a rhetorical style, and an emotive style. Socrates is often intellectual in style, but he and other narrators are sometimes historical in recounting things, at other times mythical, legal or ceremonious.

It was already recognized in antiquity that Plato uses the polyvalent or polysemic language of poetry. It is a fact that words have more than one meaning or reference in a language; it is a poetic strategy to select words so that their multiplicity of meanings creates a multiplicity of meanings for the poem. In the *Charmides*, for example, Socrates calls Charmides and Critias at different times *miaros* (161b, 174b). Idiomatically, the word means 'rascal' and Socrates means to playfully, but somewhat seriously, complain that his interlocutors are not following the rules. Literally, however, the word means 'polluted', 'stained with blood', which is what the historical Critias and Charmides were, as leaders of the post-war tyranny. Plato's first readers would have known this; so, for them, the *miaros* communicated two meanings and functioned at two levels, between characters *in* the dialogue and between author and reader *of* the dialogue. Much irony in the dialogues works in the same way. Irony is discussed in Chapter 7.

Just as words usually have more than one meaning, sentences,

paragraphs and entire texts can have more than one meaning. The distinction between denotation and connotation refers to a word's literal meanings as opposed to emotions or associations that it may arouse. So, the linguistic field of semantics (the study of meaning) is distinguished from pragmatics (the study of uses of words in different contexts) and from syntax (the rules governing the structure of well-formed or meaningful sentences). Meaningful sentences can be of several types besides the simple informative. Questions and commands, for example, are meaningful, but do not primarily give information. Sentences can be expressive of feelings, desires and preferences, and they can be persuasive. Some sentences go beyond saying something and actually *do* something. These are called performatives, of which 'I promise to be there at eight' is an example. Saying 'I promise' *makes* a promise; it is the act of promising.

All these terms and distinctions may help to clarify a perplexing aspect of Plato's dialogues. It seems obvious that some sentences in the dialogues are informative, as when Socrates begins his retelling of the *Republic* with the statement, 'I went down to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston.' However, recalling that the dialogues are all stories, whatever else they are, two observations can be made about this sentence: (1) it is informative only *within* the literary world of the dialogue, that is in the one-sided conversation between Socrates and his fictional auditor; and (2) Plato as an author may use terms such as 'Piraeus', 'Glaucon' and 'Ariston' to mean something more or other than what they denote. Even 'went down' might prefigure the liberated prisoner's return to the Cave or the philosopher's descent from contemplation to political rule. A first important point, then, is that Plato's language may have more than one meaning. This is not a surprising thing to say about a writer of imaginative literature, of drama or fiction.

The dialogues contain not only informational or assertive sentences and passages, but also exhibitiv and performative ones. Exhibitiv language shows something to be the case, as distinct from saying *that* it is the case. Showing Meno as repeatedly preferring material things and being unable to think about immaterial things is different in language from saying that he is a man of materialistic values. It is also more complex and powerful in its impact on the audience. Similarly, *showing* the sophists to be pompous and vain and their speeches to be flowery but vacuous is different from saying that this is so. Assertive and exhibitiv uses of language are distinct from its performative use. Plato has mastered, in a way unequalled in

the philosophical literature, the ability to bring ideas to life in the minds of his readers by the interaction between the philosophical and literary aspects of the dialogues, between the assertive and the exhibitiv uses of language. This is discussed further on pp. 70–1, 140–2 and 154–8.

#### LITERARY TECHNIQUES OF THE PLATONIC DIALOGUES

Besides his mastery of the language itself, a fundamental fact about Plato's dialogues is the astonishing number and frequency of distinguishable literary devices that he uses. Simply as a writer, Plato set a standard of literary inventiveness that has seldom, if ever, been matched in the subsequent history of Western literature. The list of specific literary tropes and devices Plato uses is enormous. Among the most important are: use of personification (as when the Laws cross-examine Socrates in the *Crito* 50–4); imagined conversations (e.g. Protagoras' head is imagined as popping up from Hades to berate Socrates in the *Theaetetus* 171); stories within stories (e.g. the myths told by Socrates); similes; analogies; metaphors; and images. Myths and stories are discussed in Chapter 6.

Plato uses imagery often and to very powerful effect. It enriches the dialogues and has influenced much of later Western thought. The human soul is imagined as a chariot pulled by powerful horses and guided by a charioteer (*Phaedrus*). The state depicted in the *Republic* is actually an extended image drawn for the purposes of seeing more clearly the nature of justice in the human soul. Magnetic rings in the *Ion* are an image of how a poet inspires a rhapsode. In the *Republic*, the sun is an image for the Idea of the Good, the Divided Line is an image for the kinds and levels of cognition, and the Cave is an image of the human pre-philosophical condition of ignorance. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates uses a ball of wax and an aviary as images for what knowledge is in the soul. The statesman or politician is imaged as a weaver of citizens in the *Politicus*.

The dialogues also contain many images of Socrates himself: as a gadfly (*Apology*); a bust of Silenus (*Symposium*); a prophet (*Euthyphro*); an intellectual midwife (*Theaetetus*); a sorcerer and a stingray (*Meno*). Socrates is compared to the legendary characters Sciron and Antaeus (*Theaetetus*), compares himself to Heracles (*Apology*), and is implicitly compared by Plato to Theseus and other legendary heroes by Plato in the *Phaedo*.

These images, metaphors, tropes and devices lend continuing

freshness and interest to Plato's writing, but they also serve more serious purposes. They make the writing persuasive just *because* it is entertaining. They create specific intellectual effects by playing on our emotions. Having Socrates presented as a hero makes philosophy seem more heroic and desirable than if the philosopher is represented as sitting quietly, alone in a library thinking deep thoughts. And although the Divided Line asserts the inferiority of images to sense objects, mathematical entities and Forms, it *is* an image. This is exemplary of Plato's procedure.

Several other important literary techniques – verisimilitude, digressions and irony – are discussed elsewhere in this book.

### LITERARY AND RHETORICAL STRUCTURES

The most obvious structural difference among Plato's dialogues is between direct dramatic dialogues, which read as if they were scripts, and narrated or reported dialogues. About two-thirds of the genuine dialogues are direct dramatic; the rest narrated. Among the narrated ones, some are reported by Socrates himself, others at second or third hand, and in some cases many years after they allegedly took place.

Dramatic and fictional writing in modern languages has usually been organized so that the climax, the point of highest interest or decisive events, occurs near the end, where the story's motivating problem is solved in some way. The story structure 'rises' to its high point near the end. Plato's dialogues are stories focusing on problems about what something like justice, virtue or knowledge is. If they were rising stories, we would get the answer to that question at the end. In most dialogues, we do not get the answer at the end. This is not a problem and it does not require a theory of 'aporetic' dialogues, as is sometimes supposed.

Instead, Plato seems to have given most of his dialogues what has been called a 'pedimental' structure; that is, like the triangular architectural structure of the upper part of Greek temples that rise to their high point in the middle (see Fig. 1).

Pedimental analysis explains why the theory of knowledge as recollection is placed in the middle of the *Meno*, why the theory of poetic inspiration is at the centre of the *Ion*, and why the most important epistemological and metaphysical ideas in the *Republic* are in the central books. It also suggests that the particular initial question – Can excellence be taught? What is justice? – may not be what Plato

## DIALOGUE FORM

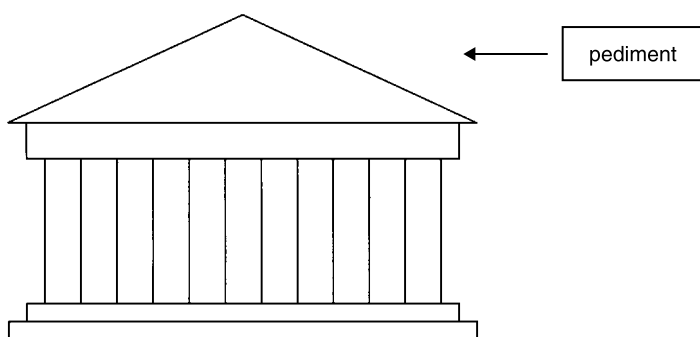


Fig. 1 A pediment

considers the most important point or that the question needs to be dealt with at a level higher than that at which it initially arose.

This pedimental structure is related to another structure, a pedagogical one, of the encounter between the philosopher, Socrates, and a non-philosopher or inadequate philosopher. The pedagogical structure has four key moments. First, the philosopher elicits the non-philosopher's thinking about the subject. Next, the philosopher refutes this thinking and brings the non-philosopher to the experience of doubt or *aporia*. Then, the philosopher presents an idea or insight that reorients the conversation, suggests a way to overcome the doubts that brought the previous discussion to a halt, and restarts the discussion on a higher conceptual or philosophic level. Finally, the conversation returns to the original issues or level of conversation. The *Euthyphro*, for example, begins by discussing the piety of Euthyphro indicting his father and Socrates' indictment for not believing in the city's gods. Then it rises to consider piety conceptually as a part of justice, but ends back at the practical level where Euthyphro fails to reconsider his conduct.

The variety of literary and rhetorical structures that Plato deploys is large. The combinations in which they are deployed are innumerable. Plato's dialogues rarely seem like a dreary repetition of the same terms, techniques or patterns.

### DRAMATIC ASPECTS OF THE PLATONIC DIALOGUE

Drama, as defined by Aristotle, has a beginning, middle and end, and it focuses on characters and their development through

confronting emotionally freighted problems. The problem of a play is ordinarily something practical, such as love, hate, disease, death, a threat averted or not. Ideas arise more or less explicitly in the speeches, thoughts and actions of the characters, but the play is not explicitly *about* the ideas. In this respect, Plato's dialogues are a special case because, although the conceptual problems arise from the characters' practical or existential situations, the concepts themselves are made into the explicit focus.

In composing the dialogues, Plato follows the dramatists in using passages of identifiable types to build a story structure with a recognizable rhythm, although, as with all other literary strategies, he uses this one in quite diverse ways. The story as a whole, like the drama, is built around a central 'contest of speeches' (*agon logon*). Like the drama, the dialogues usually begin with a prologue, an opening scene of expository narrative, dialogue or monologue in which the scene is set, the characters introduced, and the central issue introduced. Like the dramas, too, the dialogues exhibit alternation between dialogue that moves the discussion along and passages in which the preceding discussion is commented on by Socrates or a narrator; in the plays, this would be done by the chorus. And the dialogues include lively passages of *stichomythia* (speeches, stitched together), line-for-line dialogue that sharpen the issue, followed by more relaxed and reflective passages.

Far more than dramas, however, Plato utilizes verisimilitude of characters and settings. Verisimilitude causes the nearly irresistible urge to suppose that the dialogues are transcripts of conversations that actually took place, rather than what they are, carefully crafted fictions. The dialogues have action, both conversational and, in some cases, physical, including stage business. A local setting is often more or less carefully drawn so as to enhance, alter or add nuance to the dialogue's total effect. Several are in named gymnasiums in known locations; others are in someone's home, the entry-way of a law court, a courtroom, a prison cell, a meadow beside a brook in the shade on a hot summer day, at a military demonstration, or the public reading of a book. In most dialogues, too, Plato provides indications of a recent historical event, a time of day or of the year, or connection with an external event (a festival, banquet, trial, execution, funeral, sophistic or military public display), and these are often important in understanding the dialogue as a whole. The courthouse setting of the *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, like the prison setting of the *Crito* and *Phaedo*, heighten

both dramatic intensity and the philosophic seriousness of the themes discussed.

As in any literary text, who and what the characters are is crucial for the reader's understanding. But many of Plato's characters, like Socrates, pose a special problem: they are both fictional and historical; they are named after and in identifiable ways modelled on real figures of the recent Athenian past, but they are also changed to suit Plato's purposes; and, of course, all of the words they speak are Plato's. This complicates and deepens the dialogues and needs to be fully explicated in each case. Plato takes pains to characterize his dramatis personae by means of style; and whether they are historical or fictional, their physical, emotional, moral and intellectual dimensions, and life histories, all of which Plato may carefully indicate, may be significant. We need to be aware of who is historical and who is fictional, and of their relations to each other outside the dialogue on either level, because this provides background for the central question of their dialogical interactions. The careers of the historical Laches and Nicias, for example, as well as those of Lysimachus and Melesias give an ironic depth to the discussion of courage in the *Laches*, just as the careers and emotional attachments of the speakers in the *Symposium* clarify their views of Eros. Plato's characters have been constructed so as to take dramatic advantage of their personal and historical individuality.

However, Plato also uses his characters as types of life, of occupations, of beliefs, of degrees of intellectual seriousness, ability, courage and persistence. So we are listening to the types of views people have and the types of reasons they give or have for believing them – sophists, politicians, religious nuts, soldiers, schoolboys, mathematicians and various persons who take themselves to be philosophers. The decisive character is Socrates, the new philosophic hero whom Plato means to replace traditional heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus as well as more recent heroes such as Protagoras or Pericles. Even the names that Plato has chosen for the casts of his dramas, whether historical or purely fictional, may have a meaning that provides additional significance to the dialogue. The wrong-headed Euthyphro's name means 'right-minded'. The name of the intellectually disinterested Cephalus means 'head'. Agathon, beside whom Socrates wants to recline in the *Symposium*, means 'good'. The name of Meno, who never stays on course, means 'remain'.

Each dialogue has a plot, the story that is being told. The story in a Platonic dialogue always centres on some kind of oral and intellectual transaction between the characters rather than on their actions. This is true even though the characters' actions figure, sometimes prominently, in the dialogues in other ways, and even though Plato sometimes makes a point of having his characters act in certain ways or do certain things. Looked at synoptically, many of Plato's dialogue plots represent or reinterpret traditional stories, as tragic dramas often did. The *Protagoras*, for example, is framed so as to remind readers of Odysseus' visit to Hades in the *Odyssey*, and Socrates' role of calming the fear of death in the minds of his associates in the *Phaedo* is explicitly connected to the traditional story of Theseus saving the 14 youths and maidens from death in the labyrinth.

A less obvious structure that Plato has borrowed from earlier poets and playwrights and adapted to his own purposes is the building of each dialogue out of five types of structural units: question and answer; discussion or conversation; reported dialogue; dialogue approximating to monologue; and monologue or continuous exposition. This results in recurrent patterns, as well as great variety, in the dialogues.

The dialogues vary a great deal in the amounts and significance of physical action. In the *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates' descriptions of the behaviour of the various sophists he finds at the home of Callias make the reader envision a comic scene: Protagoras walking back and forth, being followed by a 'chorus' of admirers who part when he turns and reform behind him as he walks the other way; Hippias enthroned and answering questions authoritatively; and Prodicus wrapped up in sheepskins and blankets (*Protagoras* 315b). At the same time, these actions prepare the reader to see the sophists and their followers as slightly ridiculous. Other actions also require attention and thought, such as Alcibiades' drunken entry in the *Symposium* (212d), the repeated shouts interrupting Socrates' defence in the *Apology* (20e, 21a, 27b), the struggle over who will sit next to Charmides in the *Charmides* (155c) and Socrates' making of geometrical drawings in the sand in the *Meno* (82–5).

It is important that Euthyphro is at the law court having just indicted his own father, because it tells the audience that he acts impiously, whatever he may think he knows about piety. Meno's name-calling and Anytus' veiled threat against Socrates (*Meno* 94e)

## DIALOGUE FORM

provide an ominous and political tone to the *Meno*, which would otherwise appear to be a calm inquiry into the nature of virtue and the acquisition of knowledge, while simultaneously exhibiting the bad nature of the characters. Similarly, among dialogue narrators, the excessive, slightly mad imitation of Socrates on the part of Apollodorus (*Symposium*) and the fact that Antiphon (*Parmenides*) is now interested only in horses lend an air of distance and uncertainty to the narratives that we are about to read.

## FUNCTIONS OF THE DIALOGUE FORM

Why did Plato write dialogues? We cannot know what was in Plato's mind, but we can reflect on the many functions the dialogues perform, because the multiplicity add up to a text far more extensive and diverse in its effects than what is achieved by the more usual philosophical treatise. These functions may be thought of as different frameworks or interconnected ways to look at the dialogues. They will be introduced briefly here and developed more fully in later chapters.

### Doctrines and arguments

This is the sole framework used by most interpreters, from antiquity to the present, who want to discover Plato's doctrines and arguments. Doctrines and arguments may be pursued for historical reasons, to know what Plato really thought; or they may be pursued for systematically philosophic reasons, to determine what the truth is, which it is supposed that Plato had or about which he may be wrong. It is obvious that views and arguments about various questions are put forward in the dialogues, but it is not obvious that Plato endorses any particular views or arguments and, more importantly, doctrines and arguments are not the *only* elements in the dialogues that can be considered philosophically important.

### Invention of a new intellectual medium

As is generally recognized, Plato has invented dialogue as a distinctly philosophic medium. What is less well known is that he invented philosophy as a discrete form of intellectual activity. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 11, but the reader should realize from the

beginning that Socrates' frequent talk about philosophy is Plato's creation of philosophy as a new art and science.

Replacement of traditional and sophistic education

One function of this new art and science is to provide an education (*paideia*) that is an alternative both to the traditional literary and poetic education and to the recent and rationalistic sophistic education. Like sophistic education, philosophy is presented as something beyond the traditional preliminary studies of literature, music and gymnastics. Like the sophistic, too, philosophy is rationalistic, intellectual, universalistic, and uses highly crafted words. Like the traditional education and unlike the sophists, however, philosophy as a form of education is to be local, personal and supportive of traditional values in a redefined sense.

Redefinition of traditional moral terms

In many dialogues, the conversation turns on the question of what some moral or political excellence is. Uncritical traditional understandings of those terms are played off against morally relativistic or sceptical understandings connected to the sophists. Plato means to criticize traditional meanings, but at the same time both to retain and to redefine traditional terms, such as courage, *andreia* (*Laches*), justice, *dikaiosynê* (*Republic*), temperance, *sôphrosynê* (*Charmides*), excellence, *arêtê* (*Meno*, *Protagoras*), piety, *hosiotês* (*Euthyphro*), friendship, *philia* (*Lysis*), love, *eros* (*Phaedrus*, *Symposium*) and knowledge, *epistêmê* (*Meno*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*). In fact, he redefines the entire intellectual vocabulary in a rationalized but not sophistic way.

Reinterpretation of traditional arts and practices

By and within the dialogues, traditional arts and practices are reinterpreted as philosophy. Instead of the poets, the traditional sages, the *sophoi*, the political man and the sophist, Socrates is presented as the true poet, the truly wise man, the only one who practises the true art of politics (*Gorgias*), the 'heart of the city' (*Euthyphro*), and the only one whose speeches are able to make an Alcibiades ashamed (*Symposium*).

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### Reenactment or retelling of traditional stories

Socrates and other characters very often refer explicitly or implicitly to legendary and Homeric stories. These are often more than casual references. Plato is consciously reenacting older stories, a regular feature of Greek dramatic writing that facilitated cultural innovation within a context of cultural stability. By using the names of Socrates and other historical characters and the plot of a traditional story, Plato gives the story a new meaning. Thus, for example, the *Crito* reinterprets the embassy to Achilles (*Iliad* 9.363), the *Phaedo* reinterprets the story of Theseus, the legendary hero of Attica, the *Protagoras* revises Odysseus' journey to Hades (*Odyssey*, Book II) and the *Apology* revises the story of Heracles' Labours.

### Replacement of traditional or contemporary cultural heroes

At the same time that a traditional story is being retold, of course, since Socrates is usually the main character, the dialogues implicitly replace traditional cultural heroes with 'Socrates', that is, the Philosopher. The Philosopher is the hero of mind rather than body, but Socrates is also presented in the dialogues as physically heroic in war, unaffected by drinking, and self-controlled about sex (*Symposium* 215–22), because of his mental power, we are given to believe. He is historical rather than mythic or legendary, though Plato mythologizes him, and he is the hero of prose rather than poetry, at which he often, though ironically, sneers.

### The Platonic corpus as a whole can be looked at as a literary whole

If we exclude the *Laws*, then the corpus can be seen as unified by the single character who appears in all the dialogues. Then the dramatic order commences with the *Parmenides* and ends with the *Phaedo*, and we might construe the whole as Plato's new, prose epic of the life of mind, called 'Socrates'. See the chart of the dialogues in dramatic order on pp. 72–3.

### Dialogue as imitation or image of philosophy

As many interpreters have recognized, Plato didn't write treatises expounding his philosophical doctrine. He wrote only dialogues, and the dialogues are images and imitations of philosophy, as he

conceives it, that both exhibit the practice and elicit the reader's participation in that practice with a strange power.

#### INTERPENETRATION OF THE DRAMATIC AND THE PHILOSOPHIC

Philosophy as it has been described and practised in the Western tradition differs from drama in aims, methods and principles. Ordinarily, philosophic texts are quite distinguishable from dramatic; but in Plato's dialogues they coincide. The play's meaning is philosophic and its philosophic teaching is dramatic.

The dialogues, as seen in this chapter, are literarily and dramatically rich documents whose core is vivid conversations typically arising from human existential problems but evoking philosophic concepts and theories. Philosophic treatises, essays, commentaries and meditations are organized attempts at the direct communication of philosophic thinking. They state what the author thinks with the intention of getting the reader to understand and agree with it. They speak to and call upon the reader's intellectual abilities primarily, and only secondarily, if at all, the reader's imagination or emotions. Philosophic treatises also permit (or even encourage) disinterestedness in assessing the claims and arguments put forward.

Plato's dialogues are not like that. If they are attempts to communicate theories, concepts and doctrines that are Plato's own, they do not do so directly, but only indirectly through the mediation of all the literary and dramatic machinery discussed in previous sections. The dialogues borrow and transform materials from myth, legend, drama, history, poetry, rhetoric and philosophic prose to create a new kind of communication that is more powerful and effective than any of them singly because it draws the reader into the rational argument and into the world of rational ideas by imaginative and emotional means. Stories and myths, irony, humour, play, inversions of reader expectation, and authorial anonymity are all Platonic strategies that have intellectual effects, but, more significantly, effects on feeling and imagination. Irony is not merely a trick that, once solved, becomes a key enabling us to decode Plato's encrypted message.

The literary and dramatic aspects of the dialogues elicit our adherence imaginatively and emotionally as the arguments do rationally and in correlation with them. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 9, the dialogues break down the fact-fiction barrier. They

blur the line between the historical and fictional Socrates, between the world within the dialogue and the world in which we live. They often 'leave' the reader in the dialogue's intellectual world rather than returning to the reader's world of origin. Pedagogically, the hearer is invited to recognize himself, actually or potentially, in the figure on the stage.

In a sense, therefore, the dialogues are deceptive. What Gorgias wrote about tragedy, as recorded by Plutarch (*On the Fame of the Athenians* 5, 348c) is also true of Platonic dialogue: it is 'a deception in which the deceiver is more justly esteemed than the non-deceiver and the deceived is wiser than the undeceived'. The dialogues, in other words, use fiction to deceive us into grasping the truth as Plato sees it. The drama is his argument. As I understand that a particular (kind of) person thinks this and is refuted, I see not only that this interlocutor is wrong, but more importantly that, to the extent I am like him in my beliefs or my life, I am wrong, too. And argument is also drama. Beliefs and arguments like these are really – not just logically – connected to persons and behaviours like those, which have consequences in the world that range from merely making oneself ridiculous, to tyranny, stifling dissent, and even to the unjust execution of the innocent.

The dialogues are also provocations. As Socrates tries repeatedly to provoke Theodorus into conversing with him (*Theaetetus* 169), Plato tries to provoke us into engaging in philosophical discussion with ourselves, each other, and the dialogues. As Socrates tries repeatedly to get Euthyphro to realize that indicting his father is wrong and that he does not know what piety is, so Plato tries to get us to realize that we also do wrong out of ignorance that can be overcome if we will 'begin again' (*Euthyphro* 15c), as Euthyphro will not. As Socrates tries to convince the jurors that the life spent in dialectical thought about ethical matters is the only life fit for a human being (*Apology* 38a), so Plato tries to provoke us and turn us away from our practical and materialistic concerns toward theoretical and conceptual ones.

The thoroughgoing interpenetration of philosophy and drama means that in reading Plato's philosophic dramas we give up the ordinary philosophic role as spectators of a theory and become participants in the drama. But since the drama is a philosophic drama, a drama of ideas, we become participants in philosophy and in the ideas expressed; we imitate the behaviour exhibited in the drama.

CHART OF DIALOGUE THEMES, DRAMATIC DATES, SETTINGS, NARRATIVE DEPTHS AND INTERLOCUTOR TYPES

Title	Principal themes	Dramatic date	Narrative depth	Settings	Interlocutor types
<i>Parmenides</i>	The Forms and Being	450	Narrated by Antiphon 50 years later	Home of Pythadorus	Philosophers
<i>Protagoras</i>	Teaching, virtue and the sophists	433–432	Narrated by Socrates to a ‘companion’	Socrates’ bedroom, then home of Callias	Sophists, eristics
<i>Charmides</i>	Moderation and self-knowledge	432–429	Narrated by Socrates to a ‘friend’	Gym of Taureas	Sophist-politician, youth
<i>Philebus</i>	Pleasure and intellectual life	After 427	Direct dramatic	None given	Intellectual follower of sophists
<i>Laches</i>	Courage and teaching	424–418	Direct dramatic	Outdoors at military exhibition	Generals
<i>Lysis</i>	Friendship	Unknown	Narrated by Socrates	A new gym by the city walls	Schoolboys and their admirers
<i>Hippias Major</i>	The beautiful or noble	421–416	Direct dramatic	Street in Athens?	Sophists, eristics
<i>Symposium</i>	Love, forms and knowledge	416	Direct dramatic and reported by Apollodorus	House of Agathon	Poets, intellectuals and the like
<i>Ion</i>	Inspiration	Before 412	Direct dramatic	Street in Athens?	Poets, intellectuals and the like
<i>Republic</i>	Justice and ideal state, Forms, philosopher, education	411	Narrated by Socrates	Home of Cephalus in Piraeus	Sophist, intellectuals
<i>Timaeus</i>	Origin of the universe	411	Direct dramatic	Unspecified	‘Philosopher’ who leads

<i>Critias</i>	Early Athens and Atlantis	411	Direct dramatic	Unspecified	Philosophers
<i>Phaedrus</i>	Love, rhetoric and writing philosophy	411–401	Direct dramatic	Bucolic stream-side scene outside Athens	Orator
<i>Euthydemus</i>	Eristic and teaching true wisdom	407–405	Mixed, direct and narrated by Socrates	Lyceum, a gymnasium	Sophists, eristics
<i>Gorgias</i>	Rhetoric, philosophy and statesmanship	405	Direct dramatic	Home of Callicles	Sophist, politicians
<i>Cratylus</i>	Language and etymology	405	Direct dramatic	Unspecified	Heraclitean ‘philosopher’
<i>Meno</i>	Virtue and knowledge by recollection	403	Direct dramatic	Street in Athens?	Politicians (sophists indirectly)
<i>Theaetetus</i>	Knowledge, philosophy and Socratic midwifery	400–399	Text by Euclides is read aloud long after conversation	Somewhere in Athens	Mathematician, intelligent youth, sophist (indirectly)
<i>Euthyphro</i>	Piety and justice	400–399	Direct dramatic	Outside law court	Religious fundamentalist
<i>Sophist</i>	Sophistry, being and non-being	400–399	Direct dramatic	Unspecified public setting	Eleatic ‘philosopher’ leads
<i>Politicus</i>	Statesmanship in theory and practice	400–399	Direct dramatic	Unspecified public setting	Eleatic ‘philosopher’ leads
<i>Apology</i>	Socrates’ defence of the philosophic life and mission	399	Direct dramatic	Law court	Politicians, orators
<i>Crito</i>	Political obligation	399	Direct dramatic	Socrates’ prison cell	Aristocratic friend
<i>Phaedo</i>	The soul and Forms	399	Narrated by Phaedo long after conversation	Socrates’ prison cell	Pythagoreans and other ‘philosophers’

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### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## CHAPTER 5

# ARGUMENTS AND IDEAS, VISION AND DOCTRINES

### ARGUMENTATION

Certainly one of the most striking features of Plato's dialogues is that they are full of opinions being stated by interlocutors, reasons being given, and then opinions and reasons subjected to criticism and refutation. All of this argumentation seems central to what Plato is doing and yet it often perplexes readers for several reasons. Although arguments and conclusions seem to be so important, arguments are often hard to follow. It is hard to know, for example, exactly what reasons are being given or what argument is being criticized and on exactly what grounds. Worse, as readers delve deeper, the arguments apparently presented by Socrates, Plato's philosophic hero, often seem flawed. Many arguments seem to commit the *ad hominem* or other basic logical fallacies, such as deliberately using a term equivocally. If the reader assumes that Plato's own views are being presented in the dialogues, it is frustrating that conclusions are often explicitly absent or, if conclusions are found, it seems difficult (or damning) to attribute them to Plato himself. The most notorious case, already discussed, is the 'closed' society apparently idealized in the *Republic*. Other problematic cases are the doctrine of Forms (*Parmenides*, *Phaedo*), the Idea of the Good (*Republic*, *Philebus*), censorship of poetry (*Republic*), and the repeated indications that excellences such as courage somehow consist in knowledge rather than action (*Meno* 77c–78b, *Charmides* 174d), that no one ever willingly does wrong (*Protagoras* 345–6, *Meno* 77) or that it is worse to do than to suffer wrong (*Gorgias* 475).

Further problems present themselves. In order to learn Plato's philosophy, are arguments the only things to study? Are they the most important? Can they be properly evaluated apart from their

dialogical settings? These lead to the more detailed question, How can the premises and conclusions of the arguments be identified? The ultimate question about the arguments is, Are the ideas and the arguments to be taken as Plato's ideas and arguments? And, if not, then as what? Was Plato trying to construct a doctrinal system? And, if not, then what was he trying to communicate?

In answer to these questions, first, arguments are important; but they are not the only important aspect of the dialogues. If your purpose is to grasp Plato's philosophy, the arguments should be studied in their full dialogical context. Proper identification of premises and conclusions usually depends on the dialectical interaction between Socrates, or another conversation leader, and an interlocutor. So, arguments and their apparent conclusions cannot be immediately attributed to Plato as his own. As with Plato's own views, the dialogues are open-ended, rather than dogmatic.

Later in this chapter, discussion of specific kinds and aspects of the argumentation in the dialogues will help readers grasp better what is going on: a particular kind of refutative argument, the dialectical argumentative process as a whole that is used in most dialogues; and a specific kind of 'rationalism' that underlies this process. The kind of argumentation that characterizes the Platonic dialogues is different in some of its structures and more extensive in its kinds than the argumentation that has been the norm in later philosophy. Also readers should be aware of a strongly deductive tendency in the reasoning. Despite its deductive quality, however, the argumentation deployed in the dialogues is neither as conclusive nor as dogmatic as modern expectations. It supports a vision rather than a doctrinal system.

#### ELENCHOS

In many dialogues a specifically Socratic kind of argumentation is found. It is sometimes called *elenchos* or Socratic *elenchos*, after the Greek term that Socrates uses in some cases, meaning 'cross-examination' or 'refutation'. The overall structure is something like this:

1. Socrates asks about something moral, political or epistemological. He asks, for example, 'What is justice?' or 'What is piety?' More exactly, he asks 'What in the world *is* justice?', 'What in the world *is* virtue?', for which the Greek would be *ti pote esti ê arêtê*.

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2. He elicits from his interlocutor an answer to that question, an account of what justice or piety is.
3. He may then ask the interlocutor for clarification or ask critical questions that force the interlocutor to explain more clearly what he means.
4. The refutation proper:
  - a. By asking questions, Socrates elicits the interlocutor's agreement to one or more new and evidently related propositions. For example, 'Virtue is some one thing, isn't it?'; 'It's the opposite of vice, correct?'; 'Is virtue something good or not?'
  - b. Further propositions may be deduced from these propositions or from these propositions in conjunction with the interlocutor's original statement.
  - c. Eventually, a conflict or contradiction is uncovered among the set of statements to which the interlocutor has agreed regarding his account of virtue, justice or piety.
  - d. Although the interlocutor is permitted to change any statement to which he has agreed, the implication is that there is an inconsistency in his views. Since inconsistent views cannot be true at the same time – for example, one and the same thing cannot be and not be, one and the same act cannot be both pious and impious – the inconsistency is taken to show that the interlocutor's view of the matter cannot be correct.

Here is an example of a simple refutation about piety from the *Euthyphro*. Euthyphro has already agreed that all pious acts present some one Form or Idea of piety.

SOCRATES: Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea (*eidōs*) which makes all pious things to be pious. Do you not recollect that there was one idea (*idea*) which made the impious impious, and the pious pious (*hosia*)?

EUTHYPHRO: I remember.

SOCRATES: Tell me what is the nature of this idea (*idea*), and then I shall have a standard to which I may look, and by which I may measure actions, whether yours or those of any one else, and then I shall be able to say that such and such an action is pious, such another impious.

EUTHYPHRO: I will tell you, if you like.

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SOCRATES: I should very much like.

EUTHYPHRO: Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.

SOCRATES: Very good, Euthyphro; you have now given me the sort of answer which I wanted. But whether what you say is true or not I cannot as yet tell, although I make no doubt that you will prove the truth of your words.

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

SOCRATES: Come, then, and let us examine what we are saying. That thing or person which is dear to the gods is pious, and that thing or person which is hateful to the gods is impious, these two being the extreme opposites of one another. Was not that said?

EUTHYPHRO: It was.

SOCRATES: And well said?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates, I thought so; it was certainly said.

SOCRATES: And further, Euthyphro, the gods were admitted to have enmities and hatreds and differences?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, that was also said.

SOCRATES: And what sort of difference creates enmity and anger?

Suppose for example that you and I, my good friend, differ about a number; do differences of this sort make us enemies and set us at variance with one another? Do we not go at once to arithmetic, and put an end to them by a sum?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: Or suppose that we differ about magnitudes, do we not quickly end the differences by measuring?

EUTHYPHRO: Very true.

SOCRATES: And we end a controversy about heavy and light by resorting to a weighing machine?

EUTHYPHRO: To be sure.

SOCRATES: But what differences are there which cannot be thus decided, and which therefore make us angry and set us at enmity with one another? I dare say the answer does not occur to you at the moment, and therefore I will suggest that these enmities arise when the matters of difference are the just and unjust, good and evil, honourable and dishonourable. Are not these the points about which men differ, and about which when we are unable satisfactorily to decide our differences, you and I and all of us quarrel, when we do quarrel?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates, the nature of the differences about which we quarrel is such as you describe.

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SOCRATES: And the quarrels of the gods, noble Euthyphro, when they occur, are of a like nature?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly they are.

SOCRATES: They have differences of opinion, as you say, about good and evil, just and unjust, honourable and dishonourable: there would have been no quarrels among them, if there had been no such differences – would there now?

EUTHYPHRO: You are quite right.

SOCRATES: Does not every man love that which he deems noble and just and good, and hate the opposite of them?

EUTHYPHRO: Very true.

SOCRATES: But, as you say, people regard the same things, some as just and others as unjust – about these they dispute; and so there arise wars and fightings among them.

EUTHYPHRO: Very true.

SOCRATES: Then the same things are hated by the gods and loved by the gods, and are both hateful and dear to them?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: And upon this view the same things, Euthyphro, will be pious and also impious?

EUTHYPHRO: So I should suppose.

SOCRATES: Then, my friend, I remark with surprise that you have not answered the question which I asked. For I certainly did not ask you to tell me what action is both pious and impious: but now it would seem that what is loved by the gods is also hated by them. (*Euthyphro* 6e–8a; trans. Jowett)

The rules governing dialectical interchanges have been well summarized by Samuel Scolnicov. The interlocutor's answer to the question Socrates raised is accepted as a hypothesis, the truth of which is being examined. In the *Euthyphro* passage above, the hypothesis is that piety is 'what the gods love'. All premises must be introduced or accepted by the interlocutor, who must also agree to all steps and must answer to that effect at every step. Euthyphro accepts not only that there is some one *idea* that all pious acts exhibit, but also that pious and impious are opposites and that one loves what one considers right and hates what one considers wrong. Each premise must express the interlocutor's own belief rather than a proposition detached or detachable from the set of beliefs that defines him. Euthyphro accepts, though Socrates probably does not, that the gods have disagreements. The conclusions are reached *only* on the

assumption of the truth of the hypothesis, the interlocutor's view that is presently under consideration. Until the hypothesis and its implications are examined as thoroughly as possible, no arguments are allowed to be presented that are incompatible with it. Considerations external to the position examined are as a rule brought in only towards the end of the elenchus.

A few special strategies will facilitate an understanding of the refutations. First, be alert to simple statements at the outset that are easily overlooked but crucial premises. Examples include 'Virtue is the opposite of vice', 'All pious acts are pious because of some shared character', and 'Virtue is beneficial'. Second, sometimes the inconsistency of the interlocutor's assertion depends on Socrates' going back to a premise agreed to far earlier in the dialogue.

Several aspects of these argument structures are noteworthy. Socrates is not asking about the meaning or definition of a word (nominal definition); he is not asking what the term 'justice' or 'virtue' means. He is asking about what they are, their natures or essences (real definition). The question *ti esti* in Greek means 'What is it?' This is difficult to realize because many translations and publications about Plato and Socrates describe them as looking for the meanings of words. And it is important to realize because among Plato's opponents were sophists who suggested that excellences such as justice were conventional rather than natural. Socrates' question and his refutative strategy, correctly understood, undercut the conventional point of view from the beginning.

Moreover, Socrates' refutations are personal. The intellectual question arises from a concrete situation involving the interlocutor, the interlocutor's beliefs and the actions that express them. Sometimes that action is on stage in the dialogue. Euthyphro disagrees with others in his family who say that he is acting impiously by indicting his father. Protagoras claims to teach virtue. Gorgias claims to teach rhetoric. In other dialogues the personal aspect is more evident to the audience than to the interlocutor. In other words, the Socratic elenchus contains an important pragmatic and emotional component lacking in the Eleatic elenchus.

The logic of the refutation, however, is that if your view is inconsistent – with your other views or with your actions – then it cannot be correct. Your deeds (*erga*) are implicated as well as your words (*logoi*). Socrates exhibits inconsistencies not only among the interlocutors' statements, but often inconsistencies between what they

say and what they do, between their words and their deeds. It is a refutation, then, not just of an argument, but of a person.

This personal aspect of the refutations in Plato's dialogues has led some to object that all the arguments are essentially fallacious *ad hominem* arguments. They show only the inadequacy of an individual person's reasons for thinking that a belief is true rather than that the belief is in itself untrue. Only Euthyphro's belief that piety is what the gods love has been refuted; not the idea itself. The answer is, *in* the dialogue many arguments are technically fallacious, or at least limited in what they prove. However, part of the pedagogic function and success of the dialogues is that they inspire us to do better than the interlocutor did.

A third aspect worth noting is, as just said, that the refutations are overtly destructive rather than constructive. They show that the interlocutor's account of the matter under discussion is incorrect, rather than what the correct account of the matter is. Although this may seem a negative feature, if we read the dialogues looking to learn what Plato thought, then his taking care *not* to tell us his opinion could be construed as teaching us to think and philosophize on our own rather than teaching us a doctrine to accept without thinking it out on our own.

A few dialogues seem to be more 'constructive' in the sense that an answer to the central question appears to have been authoritatively given by the end and there is no claim that all answers have failed and we must begin again. These would be, first and foremost, the *Timaeus*, *Sophist* and *Politicus*. Although Socrates is present at those dialogues, he is not the leading speaker. It is often assumed that this non-Socratic leading speaker is Plato's mouthpiece and that, therefore, these are Plato's more dogmatic statements of his views. Since Socrates is present, however, another interpretation seems more likely. Plato may have meant for us to see a more didactic style, the sort of thing indulged by members of the Academy after his lifetime (perhaps even before his death); Socrates' nearly silent presence is meant to suggest that didactic presentation is not the sort of thing The Philosopher in Plato's sense does. Moreover, Timaeus' cosmological narrative is emphatically said to be a likely story (*mythos*) rather than a reasoned account (*logos*).

Perhaps, too, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Philebus* and *Republic* might be considered more constructive, in each of which Socrates is the leading speaker. The *Phaedo*'s main question is whether the soul is immortal and Socrates presents a number of arguments for that

conclusion. The *Symposium* concerns the erotic drive and Socrates relates the theory he learned from Diotima about the ultimately epistemic nature of *eros*. The *Republic* is superficially the most constructive and comprehensive of the dialogues, but we have reason to think that the ‘ideal’ community is both a satire on utopian thinking and an ironic treatment of oligarchic views. The *Philebus* deals with core Socratic issues about the good life and the role of pleasure or knowledge in it. Socrates is more systematic, direct and didactic, and less dialogical, here than anywhere else.

Overall, the solution to the problems about flawed arguments and unacceptable conclusions is to keep in mind that elenchus is a process for eliciting and assessing views of interlocutors, not for asserting or demonstrating views of Socrates or Plato. It is also true that Plato makes paradoxical and ironic *use* of fallacy. Unacceptable conclusions, like logically false ones, can follow validly from incorrect premises and part of the point of a dialogue or dialectical encounter can be, ironically, to exhibit just this. An easy example is the *Hippias Minor*, which concludes that the good person rather than the bad is the one who would voluntarily do wrong. A more controversial example is the argument of the *Republic* about a perfectly just community necessitating lies to children about where they came from and censorship of poetry.

#### DIALECTIC

‘Dialectic’ is an important and perplexing term that is related to argumentation in Plato’s dialogues. The final stage in the education of philosopher-rulers in the *Republic* is called dialectic. Dialectic as an intellectual practice is often contrasted with debate or sophistic practice. In several dialogues (e.g. *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*) Socrates explains dialectic as an intellectual process of ‘collection and division’ and elaborate dialectical ‘divisions’ are explicitly carried out in *Sophist* and *Politicus*.

The word ‘dialectic’ transliterates the Greek *dialektikos*, which, like the word *dialogos* for dialogue, comes from the verb *dialegethai*. This family of words is used quite frequently in Plato’s dialogues. The ordinary meaning of *dialegethai* is ‘to converse’, but in Plato it acquires the more specialized meaning ‘to discuss’ in the sense of arguments about something that go back and forth between participants, as opposed to the one-way argument-giving that characterizes oratory. This is ‘dialogue’ in the basic Platonic sense, a text in which

two or more participants reason with each other, as distinct from an orator's uninterrupted monologue. Dialectic, then, is a rational conversational process that can be exemplified by Socrates asking the questions that constitute the refutations described in the previous section.

But dialectic can be understood both in the narrower sense of the elenctic arguments just discussed and also in a wider sense that includes other types of passages, like Socrates' stories and monologues, because these passages are part of the overall conversational interactions between Socrates and his interlocutors that constitute the dialogues. This leads to a question, to be discussed below, about different *kinds* of argumentation in the dialogues.

Dialectic is also a process that mirrors the natural human activity of inquiry and problem-solving. We experience a problem, something that we want or need to understand, but don't. So we begin to think about the problem, gather information, perhaps do research, at each step asking whether we now understand and whether the information we have gathered or the ideas we have developed resolve the problem with which we began. If so, our inquiry ceases; if not, we continue. John Dewey presents a model like this as a new epistemology explaining how human knowledge results from interactions between the inquirer and the world. Socrates describes the internal process of human thought as 'the soul's silent dialogue with herself' (*Theaetetus* 189–90).

Dialectic is also a particular *way* of problem-solving: seeking higher unities in thought by going beyond the antinomies, the seemingly irreconcilable opposition or incommensurability from which the problem originated. For example, we say that an individual thing, a chair, flower, poem or person is 'one'. But isn't that strange? None of these individuals is the same as another, but each of them, nevertheless, has the same character of being 'one'. The answer might be that each of them is a unity. But what is this 'unity'? It's not a 'thing' like the others; in fact, it's not a 'thing' at all. It's an idea or concept in which each of the physical things somehow shares or participates, or of which each thing partakes. Their shared ideal or conceptual character of unity thus transcends their differences as physical things and is at a different level of reality.

Many dialogues contain passages like the one quoted above, in which Socrates asks his interlocutor to explain what makes different pious acts instances of something – piety – that is one and the same. The answer he seems to be looking for is that famous entity, the

Platonic Form or Idea. But how can these many pious acts be both the same, each of them pious, and also different individual acts? How can the Form be both dispersed somehow among the instances and yet whole and unchanged in itself?

The domain of Ideas, distinct from the domain of physical things, would include not only piety, justice, courage and moderation, but also numerical Ideas like one, two and three, and geometrical Ideas like point, line, plane and triangle. Here, too, there are antinomies. One, two and three are different from each other but the same at an ideally higher level since they are all numbers. The Ideas of piety, unity, linearity and triangularity are all different from each other but the same at a still higher ideal level since they are all Ideas. So dialectic is a conceptual or, more broadly, intellectual practice that works towards a comprehensive grasp of the relations between things and their defining Ideas, and among Ideas as constituting a domain distinct from that of things.

As already mentioned, dialectic is the special and final skill that is to be taught to the philosopher at *Republic* 531–5, where the point is that the philosophers ought to be the rulers of the perfectly just city because they alone truly know what justice is, so that they alone will know how to arrange things in a truly just way. Similarly, in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere, the philosopher is defined by the possession of knowledge. This is itself an ideal that may guide us; but dialectic as actually practised in the dialogues is explicitly open-ended. Socrates is always willing, or insistent, that interlocutors consider new arguments even when a matter that seems to be a Platonic doctrine is at issue. For example, after Meno has agreed that virtue must be knowledge, Socrates immediately suggests that they may have been wrong to agree to this (*Meno* 89). We will look more closely at open-endedness below.

Finally, it should be noted that while dialectic is sometimes presented as the characteristic philosophic method, there are several other philosophic ‘methods’ presented as well. A ‘method of hypothesis’ appears in the *Phaedo* and *Meno* and a method of induction (*epagôgê*) from examples is often used in narrower cases to infer a general rule – say, that all virtuous acts are beneficial – from examining a series of cases, each one of which is found to be beneficial.

PLATONIC vs ELEATIC 'IDEALISM' AND 'RATIONALISM'

The sketch of dialectical reasoning above exhibits one aspect of a kind of 'idealism' that is found in Plato's dialogues. The theory presented is that things in the world have the characters they have – characters that we perceive through our senses and refer to in speech – not in themselves and not from the physical world at all. Rather, these characters derive from ideal entities, in a way that is never clearly or satisfactorily explained in the dialogues, though several illuminating metaphors are used. Sometimes it is described as sharing or participating (*methexis*); other times as imitation (*mimêsis*); and sometimes things are said to be images (*eikônes*) of Forms.

The theory can be called 'idealism' because things derive what reality they have from ideas, rather than possessing it independently as most people think, and because ideas are more real than things. It is the basis of a recurrent pattern of individual inferences a reader may find puzzling. Here is an example:

In his speech in the *Symposium* (194–7), Agathon says, among other things, that love (erotic desire, *eros*) is beautiful and good. Socrates cross-examines him and gets him to agree that *eros* is of something rather than of nothing; that it's the desire to possess something that the desiring one doesn't already possess (since otherwise it makes no sense to desire its possession), and then draws the conclusion that love can't be beautiful, if it desires the beautiful or good. Agathon replies, 'Probably not.' Socrates' response: 'Nay, replied Socrates, I would have you consider whether "necessarily" is not rather the word. The inference that he who desires something is in want of something, and that he who desires nothing is in want of nothing, is in my judgment, Agathon, absolutely and necessarily true' (trans. Jowett).

Notice the word 'necessarily'; the conclusion is 'absolutely and necessarily true', Socrates says. 'Necessarily' means that the conclusion cannot fail to be true, if the premises are true. It is a very strong claim. Socrates can make it because of the particular way that he (which means, of course, Plato) has constructed the argument. The premises (P) can be stated as follows:

- P1 Love is desire to possess something beautiful.
- P2 Desiring to possess can only have as its object something that the person desiring doesn't presently possess.

So, (conclusion), love doesn't possess beauty; that is, love isn't beautiful. The necessity arises from the nature of P2, which amounts to a statement of the nature of 'desire'. Just as anyone who is a 'bachelor' *cannot* be a married man, simply on account of what it is to be a bachelor in the first place, so, in this argument, love *cannot* be beautiful consistent with what desire is and with the proposition, asserted by Agathon, that love's object is beautiful. In essential respects this is a deductive argument: it is based not on empirical observations about the ways things happen to be in the world at a given time or place, but on the natures of things, relations among ideas, and meanings of terms. When you look closely, the arguments made in the dialogues are often deductive in these ways.

In writing dialogues full of deductive arguments, Plato makes his Socrates follow the approach, powerfully articulated by Parmenides, that the reality of things depends on conceptual (or rational) consistency. If it is self-contradictory to think something, then that something cannot be real. It's not just that there *are not* square circles, there *cannot* be, because the very idea is contradictory. Similarly, there *cannot* be married bachelors. The argument is a strictly deductive one; if the premises are true and the argument form valid, the conclusion *must* be true. The approach can be called 'rationalism' because knowledge is derived from reason alone, without any sensory or empirical information.

Platonic and Parmenidean rationalism differ in important ways, though. Parmenides drew the most extreme conclusions from this kind of reasoning; that multiplicity, diversity, change and motion are unreal. Plato's Socrates, however, uses the deductivist approach to generate what can be called an idealist account of the world in which multiplicity, diversity and motion are all granted a measure of reality, while ultimate reality is reserved for entities of an entirely different sort, Ideas. For an Eleatic, as Plato's Parmenides in fact argues (*Parmenides* 130–1), participation (*methexis*) is impossible. But on a Socratic or Platonic interpretation, the difficulties (*aporiai*) about participation require a different hypothesis about reality, that there is more than one kind of it.

It perhaps goes without saying that this is a highly rational way to convince someone or get one's ideas across. The Eleatic Zeno probably invented dialectical refutations; but the Socratic *elenchus* in Plato's dialogues has an important individual focus and emotional impact which the Eleatic version lacks. Similarly, the rationalism on view in Plato's dialogues is, like Eleatic rationalism, holistic, aimed

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at grasping the whole of reality. But unlike Eleatic rationalism, it recognizes the complexity of the world and projects a vision while remaining open-ended, accepting the fallibility of actual human reasoning and that the situational conceptual limitation of actual human reasoning makes conclusions always conditional.

### THE VARIOUS KINDS OF ARGUMENTATION IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

Plato has also made Socrates and other leading interlocutors use forms of argumentation other than deductive dialectical arguments. Other uses of language are deployed to communicate with the reader or audience. In this respect Plato is perhaps less rational than he is often supposed to have been, because these other kinds of argumentation evoke sympathy for and acceptance of his views by imaginative and emotional means. The use of imaginative and emotional tools to elicit our adherence was discussed in the previous chapter.

Fables, myths and stories, discussed in Chapter 6, are types of emotional and imaginative argumentation. Irony and humour, discussed in Chapter 7, and play, discussed in Chapter 8, also evoke positive feelings toward Plato's Socrates, his life and his views, as well as rejection of other characters, their practice, lives and beliefs. Likewise, many of the paradoxical qualities of the dialogues discussed in Chapter 9 and Plato's carefully constructed, perfectly maintained anonymity and indirect manner of teaching, discussed in Chapter 10, enhance the reader's conviction through the imagination and emotions.

### OPEN-ENDEDNESS

Arguments are at the heart of Plato's dialogues, and arguments, as has been said, lead to conclusions. However, it is perplexing to readers how often, at the end of a dialogue, no final conclusion is drawn about the subject discussed. Twenty-four dialogues are usually considered genuine, but the vast majority of them explicitly do not conclude with an agreement between Socrates and his interlocutor about the answer to the question they have been discussing. At the end of the *Cratylus* (440d; trans. Reeve), Socrates says, 'If you happen to discover the truth, you can share it with me.' Similarly, 'we . . . are unable to discover to which one of existing things the law-giver gave this name temperance' (*Charmides* 175b, trans. Sprague), and 'We have not discovered, Nicias, what courage is' (*Laches* 200a;

trans. Sprague). Out of the 20 dialogues in which Socrates is the leading speaker, only five can be said to give us an official or agreed answer to their basic question: *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Republic* and *Symposium*. The missing doctrines pose a dilemma for readers who want or expect Plato to tell them what he thinks.

Some readers, perplexed by this, have thought that the lack of an explicit conclusion must be a superficial mask for an official answer that is hidden in the text so as to be discoverable only by those who know how to find and interpret the clues Plato has left behind. The sceptics of the New Academy thought the message of the inconclusive dialogues was that Plato, through Socrates, was teaching us to doubt all conclusions and suspend judgement. In fact, the inconclusiveness of these dialogues is consistent with things that Socrates often says about the importance of an argument seeming sound not only today but in the future, about considering all arguments, and about never letting the discussion come to an end, as well as with his characteristic perplexity and his repeated statements that he doesn't know the answer to some important question but that he wants to inquire together with someone.

A simpler and more straightforward explanation is that Plato didn't *want* to give the reader an authoritative answer. If he had wanted to do so, he could have. He was an excellent writer and others before him had composed prose treatises about philosophic topics. He chose not to do so. Why? We do not have access to his mind, so we cannot know. Perhaps he really believed that he didn't know the answers to these questions; perhaps he knew, but considered it better for us to think through the problems and come to the answers ourselves; perhaps, as the writer of the *Seventh Letter* says, he thought that the truth about these 'most serious matters' could not be put into writing like other subjects. Perhaps he had different reasons or combinations of reasons in different cases. Whatever the truth might be about his intentions, however, the evidence shows that the dialogues are open-ended as to their conclusions and even as to the premises from which conclusions can be drawn.

The individual arguments and the argumentation of a dialogue taken as a whole are not intended to produce certainty in the mind of the reader or finality about a conclusion; they are deliberately left open, so as to provoke thought. Better stated, the dialogues are intended to provoke perplexity about a matter the reader may have previously thought clear, and doubt about views that the reader may have held dogmatically beforehand. Like his Socrates, though in

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writing rather than in live conversation, Plato wants his dialogues to stir us up; they are deliberately, calculatedly provocative. They don't teach us a doctrine or dogma about how things are, but they are intended to provoke us into thinking about the issues raised.

### VISION: NEITHER DOGMA NOR DOUBT

Arguments and ideas *are* important in the dialogues, and certain ideas occur so often that it is difficult not to believe that somehow they are Plato's own. While these ideas recur enough for us to be morally certain that they were of great interest to Plato, they seem not to have been settled doctrines that he wanted to propound in writing. The dialogues, then, teach us *neither* settled doctrines *nor* a sceptical frame of mind; they communicate, instead, a vision that is neither dogma nor doubt, simultaneously providing rational, dialectical, intellectual exercise and a familiarity with the range of views people have.

It's not that Plato doesn't want readers to think, for example, that there is another and more important reality beyond or behind the perceptual one; it's that he doesn't want to propound that. He wants us to be introduced to the ideas, to be shown the reasons that could be adduced in support of them, the arguments that seem to support them, and the arguments that defeat other ways of thinking about things. For all these reasons, it is not appropriate – if you're trying to understand Plato's thought – either to assess the arguments in abstraction from their dialogical setting or to insist on their meeting modern logical standards.

Modern readers expect a philosopher to have doctrines. But these expectations do not confer necessity on Plato to have met them. Plato, in part because of the example of Socrates' garrulity, expects both more and less of rational conversational argumentation. He expects more in the sense that it should go on endlessly and open-endedly; and he believes that this improves us; that it is both intellectually and morally good for us. He expects less in the sense that he does not expect a final conclusion to be reached. An advantage of this approach is that he avoids the dilemma of dogmatism or scepticism. Another advantage is captured in A. N. Whitehead's famous remark about the history of Western philosophy being a series of footnotes to Plato. Plato tosses out hundreds of fascinating ideas that have singly been promoted into major doctrines by later philosophers, but he weds himself to none.

The dialogues simultaneously assert and deny what are sometimes taken to be Platonic doctrines. The dialogues both do and do not tell you what Plato thinks. The senses in which they do and do not are interestingly related to Plato's operational rationality, holism, complexity, vision, open-endedness (fallibility), situational (conditional) conceptual limitation.

How, then, should the reader approach the arguments and their conclusions? Are they Plato's doctrines and arguments? The answer is that the arguments are always to be approached seriously, which means analytically, looking for the premises that do (or sometimes don't) support the conclusion, and this as an exercise both in understanding argument and presenting an idea to be taken seriously, though never finally. Arguments and their premises are always subject to revision; they are open-ended. Arguments are also to be taken dialectically, which means that the arguments and their apparent conclusions are to be taken in light of the dialogical situations in which they occur, in light of Socrates' interlocutors, their prejudices and limitations, and in light of Socrates' own agenda to move from ungrounded certainty to doubts and then to a higher level of philosophic comprehension.

We are to take Plato as neither the dogmatist nor the sceptic he has been made out to be so often in the past, but as a philosopher whose thought transcends the dichotomy of dogma or doubt. Doubt has a constant use, but it is neither an end to be sought, as it was for the sceptics, nor the end of philosophic endeavour. What Plato teaches in the dialogues is, instead, a vision of how things are and how we ought to be. The vision will be discussed in Chapter 11.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Appendix, pp. 149–55, presents types of argument and discourse as matrix schemata.

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## CHAPTER 6

# FABLES, MYTHS AND STORIES

The problem addressed in this chapter is the supposed opposition between philosophy and poetry, or literature more generally. An ‘ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ is premised in *Republic* book 10 (607b) and many today still believe that there is some fundamental difference of aims, methods, principles and modes of communication between them. On this view, philosophy aims at truth rather than mere persuasion using deductive rather than merely persuasive arguments, univocal terms and categorical assertoric propositions rather than metaphorical and polysemic language, and it is expressed in treatises, a quite different form of writing in which clear and distinct points are propounded by means of consecutive arguments (in two senses) rather than in stories, plays or poems, the exact meaning of which always remains open to interpretation, though they are pleasant to read. Often, however, a good story is truer than an accurate one.

### THE PROBLEMS ABOUT MYTH, POETRY AND WRITING

There seem to be problems about myth, poetry and writing. Are myths and stories contradictory presences in a philosophical world predicated on reason and logic that should be ignored as window-dressing or explained away? Or, assuming that there is an essential opposition between them, do myths and stories accomplish things that reason cannot? Do Plato’s myths provide dimensions or completions of rational accounts that reason cannot by itself attain? Are stories essentially irrational? Are they suprarational? Socrates criticizes imitative poetry as deceptive, dealing in falsehoods, and contrary to the desirable intellectual formation of citizens and especially of philosophers. But isn’t the author of the dialogues in which

such things are said, like the writers of comedies and tragedies, an imitative poet? At *Phaedrus* 274–8, Socrates criticizes writing as dead, not real knowledge, and the sort of thing a serious person, a lover of wisdom, would engage in only as play and relaxation and as a reminder of the real knowledge that exists only in living discourse (*logos*). But isn't the author of the dialogues a writer par excellence?

Socrates often insists on clarity, precision and logical inferences. He also criticizes images, imitation, attention to sensation, and the influence of emotion, certain kinds of poetry and poets. This leads readers to see Plato as a philosopher who, like many other famous philosophers in the Western tradition, is an apostle of a kind of reason that stands in opposition to emotion and imagination. In these passages, he seems to devalue images, imitation and storytelling.

Having arrived at this point in understanding, readers are then perplexed by the frequency and seeming significance attached to stories in the dialogues. Some readers assume, though they may be unaware of doing so, that a rational explanation or account (what is called a *logos* in the dialogues) is quintessentially the philosophical alternative to the earlier mythical forms of explanation (*mythos*) and that Socrates' apparent rejection of imitative poetry in *Republic* and sneering at it in *Protagoras* is Plato's candid view, despite being in contrast with his own (and Plato's) frequent *use* of poetry. Socrates' critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*, and Socrates' criticism of imitative poetry in the *Republic*, doesn't seem consistent with the fact of Plato's having written such finely crafted dialogues that are themselves undeniably imitative poetry.

Fables, myths and stories are frequent in the dialogues and they have many uses. It is important, too, that the dialogues in essence *are* stories and that they borrow features from Greek tragic and comic poetry. Rather than being an alien presence or a contradiction of his philosophic intentions, poetic writing and stories enhance Plato's philosophic communication by their elicitation of our imaginative and emotional involvement, as well as our intellectual involvement with his ideas.

#### FABLES, MYTHS AND STORIES ARE FREQUENT IN THE DIALOGUES

In our language, fables, myths and stories can be distinguished from each other in a variety of ways. A fable is a short, fictional account or folk story, embodying a moral. A myth is something a bit grander, a

legendary or traditional story accepted as having explanatory power or as quasi-history. Story, more generically, is a narrative telling the details of an act or a course of events. Stories can be fictional or factual (as in a ‘news story’). We tend to distinguish sharply between fact and fiction, however: a factual narrative, or history, is virtually by definition not a fictional narrative. Ancient Greek usage differed from ours in two ways. First, they did not distinguish between fables, myths and fictional stories; each of them could be called a *mythos*, a term Aristotle uses for the ‘plot’ of a drama. Second, the boundary between *mythos* and *logos* (a factual or scientific account) is more fluid. Timaeus himself describes the cosmological account he gives in the *Timaeus* as an image (*eikôn*), a likely account (*eikôs logos*), and a likely story (*eikôs mythos*). So, here, all accounts that are not intended as scientifically, factually or philosophically precise and logical will be referred to as myths or stories.

The crucial fact is that there are *many* stories of different kinds and lengths in the dialogues. We can distinguish different types among them. In the *Gorgias* (523–4), *Republic* (614–21), *Phaedo* (107–15) and *Phaedrus* (248–57), Socrates tells eschatological myths; that is, stories about what happens to the soul after a person dies. In these stories, recurrent themes are that the soul goes to judgement, is rewarded or punished for its deeds during incarnate life, and may be reincarnated accordingly or even, if it lived the life of a philosopher, escape from the unpleasant experience of further incarnations. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates says that the violent and unjust may return as wolves or hawks; those who practised civil and social virtue may return as bees, ants or moderate humans. Philosophers, whose souls are pure at death, may not return at all, but go to reside with the gods, who are pure. The myth of Er (*Republic* book 10) tells of a man who goes to the afterworld and comes back to report what he observed. The souls, after judgement, and reward or punishment, are given the opportunity to choose their next life; but ominously, Er reports that most souls chose in accordance with the habits they developed in their previous lives and therefore chose badly. Only Odysseus displayed much wisdom, after the terrible sufferings of his voyages home to Ithaca, choosing the lot of a common person, rather than the king he had been.

Other Platonic stories are more psychological, telling about the nature and functions of the soul. In the *Phaedrus* (245–6), the human soul is likened to a chariot pulled by two horses and guided by a charioteer. It may follow in the train of a god and rise to see the true

realities that lie beyond the edge of the cosmos or it may fall to earth. In the *Protagoras* (320–22), the sophist tells a story about the origin of virtue among humans from the gods.

A number of Platonic myths are social and political. Three are found in the *Republic*. The legendary story of the ring of Gyges is retold by Glaucon (359–60) to suggest that people would not be just if they believed they wouldn't be caught. In book 3 (414–15), Socrates invents a story that will be told to the citizens of the city they are dreaming up to ensure that citizens remain in their assigned roles. The story, usually called either 'the myth of the metals' or 'the myth of the earth-born', is that all citizens alike were born from earth. Some are of strong iron, so their natural job is to do the hard work; others, of silver, are naturally suited to guard the city; and still others, of gold, are to be its rulers. In the *Politicus*, Plato uses bits of various earlier myths to create a new one, told by the Eleatic Stranger (268–74), about a supposed Golden Age and the periodical turnings of the universe, as well as a myth Plato seems to have created about 'the good shepherd' as the cosmic model for the earthly statesman.

Stories about love and sex are found in the *Symposium*, where speeches are given in praise of erotic love (*eros*). Aristophanes' myth (189–93) is that originally three sexes existed: male, female, and hermaphrodite. We were double beings, split in half by the gods for presumption. Now we go through life looking for our 'other half', and this is what the erotic love drive is. Diotima, in Socrates' speech, tells a story of the birth of *eros* (203–5) as the offspring of *Poros* and *Penia*, Abundance and Need, that explains why Love is poor, rough and distressed, but also bold and resourceful, always in pursuit of wisdom, and thus a philosopher.

Some of the Platonic myths are geographic and national. Pretty much the whole of the *Timaeus* is a creation myth and the *Critias* a retelling of the myth of Atlantis, the lost island, in legendary conflict with Athens. Long segments of eschatological myths, such as the one near the end of the *Phaedo* (109–13), are also geographical.

#### THE USES OF MYTH

Plato's use of myth is so frequent and, it seems, so different from the critical attitudes towards poetry and literature that are sometimes expressed in the dialogues that interpreters have often tried to find a single explanation for his use of myth. The myths have *many*

functions, however, not just one, and the functions are not mutually exclusive.

At the simplest level, the myths are entertainment; they are delightful to read. At the same time, their placement in the dialogues is such that they often provide the reader with a bit of intellectual rest after the strenuous exercise of the arguments. Socrates sometimes uses stories as a means of getting a recalcitrant interlocutor to co-operate. The little story he tells Meno about the 'priests and priestesses whose care it is to be able to give an account of their practices' (*Meno* 79a) is of this sort. Sometimes myths seem to present in visual or imaginative form a point already (or soon to be) made discursively. The eschatological myths near the end of the *Republic* and *Phaedo* are examples.

Often myths seem to present difficult ideas in more understandable form. The story of the soul's journey through the heavens in the *Phaedrus* visualizes complex questions about personality types, among other things. The various stories Socrates tells about the reincarnations of the soul can be seen as imaginative representations of a theory about spiritual improvement and decline similar to the morphology of the state and soul in *Republic* book 8. The story may assist or enable the reader to see ideas in a larger format or in motion or action.

Sometimes, a myth replicates a dialogical theme. For example, the story of Boreas and Oreithyia, the beautiful daughter of Athens' legendary king Erechtheus carried off by the North Wind, is briefly told early in the *Phaedrus* (229). The dialogue as a whole story is clearly an attempt by Socrates to carry Phaedrus away from his infatuation with rhetoric and bring him to philosophy.

Traditional myths are retold with modifications. The birth of Eros, already mentioned, and origins of Aphrodite are told in the *Symposium*. Plato's interpretation of a story about swans singing at death (*Phaedo* 84–5) has become our popular saying about swansongs. There are references to Proteus (to whom sophists are compared as always changing shape), the Dioscuri, Heracles and the Hydra in the *Euthydemus*, to Daedalus, Epeius, Olympus, Thamyrys, Orpheus and Phemius in the *Ion*, to the battle of the gods and giants in the *Politicus*, and to Daedalus and Tantalus in the *Euthyphro*. Achilles, Heracles, Tantalus, Dardanus, Zethus and Pelops are mentioned (*Hippias Major* 293a) as exceptions to a proposed definition. Socrates sometimes likens himself and at other times is likened to numerous heroic and legendary characters.

## FABLES, MYTHS AND STORIES

In some ways, the stories told or retold in the dialogues bear comparison with the famous images of the Sun, the Divided Line, the Cave, the Ladder of Loves, and the city as image of the human soul. Like those images, these stories are often extended over several Stephanus pages. They give visual expression to ideas that could be or have been expressed discursively; they present something to the imagination rather than to intellect, to intuition rather than cognition. As images and stories, they also elicit emotional responses, which rational expositions rarely do. The dialogues in their contained stories instantiate how fiction can be philosophically positive and productive.

In sum, fables, myths and stories are kinds of argumentation in addition to the more direct kinds of arguments discussed in the previous chapter.

## THE DIALOGUES AS STORIES

Not only do the dialogues include stories, however; they *are* stories. Each one of them is a fiction. This is difficult for beginning readers to believe because we know from historical sources that Socrates, Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Thrasymachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Critias and Laches, who appear as characters in dialogues, were real people. We know that events such as Agathon's victory (the occasion for the dinner party in *Symposium*), Socrates' trial (*Apology*) and execution (*Phaedo*) really happened. And we know that places such as the gymnasia (*Philebus*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*), the houses of Callias (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*), Agathon (*Symposium*), and Pythadorus (*Parmenides*), where dialogues take place, were real places. We know that many other dramatic details of the dialogues correspond to real situations, too.

Nevertheless, the conversations and all the circumstantial details of time, place and action are the product of Plato's art. No dialogue is a transcript of any actual conversation, not even the speech of defence that constitutes the *Apology*. Although this may seem puzzling, it is important to know that the ancient Greeks were not interested in historical accuracy in the way we are. It was an accepted part of ancient dramatic writing to use real characters giving speeches that were made up by the author. It was even accepted in the history writing of Herodotus and Thucydides. Besides this, the directly dramatic dialogues read like scripts of plays and details of many indirect dialogues indicate that they are fictional.

In other words, Plato constantly uses a literary device called verisimilitude, discussed in Chapter 4; he deliberately employs aspects of the dialogues to make them seem true to the reader. Nevertheless, they are fiction; they are themselves stories.

From this fact some surprising consequences follow. First, properly speaking, *every* idea and *every* theory presented in a Platonic dialogue is fictive. In other words, at the immediate dramatic level, all of the theories about the nature of goodness, reality, truth and knowledge that the dialogues bring to our attention are fiction. Irony will be discussed in the next chapter, but for now it is worth noting that a fictional theory of truth is ironic and in that way delightful.

A second consequence of the dialogues being stories is that the stories that are told in the dialogues are all stories within stories. And when Plato has his Socrates tell the diners in the *Symposium* what he was taught by Diotima, that narrative – the core of the dialogue where the theory of ‘Platonic Love’ is laid out – is the middle of a nest of stories within stories. Apollodorus tells us, the audience, what Aristodemus, who was actually present at a dinner party long ago, told him that Socrates said that Diotima had told him. There is a peculiar pleasure and affective capacity of such literary art. The audience is enabled to contemplate the story with intellectual seriousness but emotional distance mediated by the imaginative milieu.

Since each dialogue is a story, it can be viewed as a mythic whole with an overall shape or plot. In this respect, as noted in Chapter 4, Plato often follows the convention of Greek tragedy in taking the shape of a traditional story and retelling it in his own way to make his own points about what is true and what is important. Thus the *Phaedo*, with its 14 philosophers in Socrates’ cell, can be viewed as reinterpreting the story of Theseus going to Crete to save the 14 Athenian youths and maidens from the Minotaur. The *Apology* revises the story of Heracles’ Labours. The *Crito* reinterprets the embassy to Achilles from the *Iliad*. The *Protagoras* revises Odysseus’ journey to Hades as Socrates’ descent into a Hades full of sophists. On the one hand, as retellings of old stories, the new stories acquire an added dimension of interest. On the other hand, Socrates emerges from these reinterpretations as the revision of the traditional heroes. The Philosopher is the new Theseus, the new Heracles, the new Achilles and the new Odysseus.

One other feature of the dialogues as stories is worth noting. The dialogues as stories in which philosophic theories are discussed present in sensible form realities that are intelligible rather than sensible.

Thus, as stories, the dialogues instantiate and enact Plato's vision of reality as having two levels. Plato's two-level vision is discussed in Chapter 11. Enactment is discussed in Chapter 10.

#### THE DIALOGUES AS TRAGEDIES AND COMEDIES

The main forms in which fiction was written in ancient Greece, besides epic, were tragedy and comedy. The ancient Greek national epics were Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The former is the story of the Achaean (Greek) warrior, Achilles, and the results of his anger at King Agamemnon. The *Odyssey* tells the story of Odysseus' 10-year journey home from Troy to Ithaca. Achilles is the hero of physical speed and strength, whereas Odysseus is a 'wily' character who uses thought and words to attain ends that, like those of Achilles, are practical. Stories from the Trojan War, as well as from legend and history, provided plots for Greek tragic playwrights.

Ancient Greek tragedy is usually described as a kind of drama characterized by seriousness and dignity, involving a conflict between a noble or royal character and some higher power, such as the law, the gods, fate or society. The tragedies show how humans are at the mercy of fate or how they bring about their own downfall through some kind of ignorance or character flaw. Because Socrates is a dignified character, because the themes of the dialogues are serious problems that relate to the human condition, because Socrates is taken to have met an 'unhappy' end, and because the dialogues so often end badly (the truth is not discovered, the erring interlocutor does not recognize his error and change his ways, Socrates fails to improve most of those with whom he converses, and then is indicted, tried, convicted and executed), the dialogues can be viewed as tragedies.

The comedy of Plato's time, known as 'Old Comedy', built stories, as comedy still does, around stock characters, such as the Demagogue, the Fool or the Warmonger. It mixed political, social and literary satire, and included direct attacks on real persons, invective, and burlesque extravagances. The comedies are full of personal, political and sexual jokes, asides, teasing banter, satire, blunder, slapstick, irony, parody, abuse, name-calling, puns, wordplay, caricature, hyperbole and understatement.

The traditional plot of these comedies is in many ways the reverse of tragedy. The protagonist, usually an ordinary person, tries to deal with a problem in his life. Since the Assembly won't end a war, a

citizen tries to make a private truce with the enemy. Two servants try to get rid of a steward who treats them badly. A son tries to get his litigious father to give up lawsuits. These are the plots of three surviving comedies by Aristophanes: *The Acharnians*, *The Knights* and *The Wasps*. The plot of the play shows the protagonist's escape from the problem and an improvement in his circumstances. The reversal of fortune is from bad to good; the 'falling' action characteristic of tragedy becomes 'rising' action leading to a happy ending.

An ancient story about Plato's first career as a playwright is unsupported by biographical evidence, but it is not necessarily false. Obviously he learned a lot from the playwrights, but it is difficult to say whether the dialogues are more tragedies or more comedies. Plato's characters are simultaneously noble and ordinary. Although they are the ordinary wealthy free men of fifth-century Athens, with problems to confront, Plato makes them more than ordinary as representatives of values, beliefs, attitudes and life practices: the Philosopher, the Sophist, the Poet, the Eristic, the Religious Zealot, the Eleatic.

His plots are neither the purely rising plots of comedy nor the purely falling plots of tragedy. As discussed in Chapter 4, they are pedimental, rising from concrete and existential beginnings to an abstract and conceptual high point near the middle and then descending back to a more concrete and existential level near the end of the dialogue. That is, the plots of the dialogues are both rising and falling.

Most Platonic dialogues can be read as a story about two different characters. On the one hand, each is a story about the title character who encounters Socrates – Crito, Lysis, Laches, Protagoras, etc. – but each is also a story about Socrates. If we step back and look synoptically at the Platonic corpus as a whole, however, it can only be about Socrates, the one character who participates in every dialogue. The corpus as a whole recounts the exploits of the new, philosophic hero, Socrates, from his early encounter with Parmenides to his execution.

The endings of Platonic dialogues are occasionally, like the *Phaedo*, quite sad. Some are, at least superficially, rather funny. As Euthyphro runs away rather than begin again, Socrates' parting plea to him is ironic and funny: 'What a thing to do my friend! By going you have cast me down from a great hope I hope, that I would learn from you the nature of the pious and the impious' (15e; trans. Grube). Several end in a sombre way, as the *Protagoras* does, with

Socrates simply parting from his interlocutor. Others end with a serious exhortation, as when Socrates urges Callicles ‘to abandon that way in which you put your confidence and your exhortations; for your way, Callicles, has no value whatever’ (*Gorgias* 527e; trans. Helmbold). The *Phaedrus* ends with a prayer. But, when considered carefully, the endings, like the characters, are neither simply happy successes nor simply sad disasters. The endings are both sad and happy. Even though Socrates’ last statement is funny, it is sad that neither we nor Euthyphro learn what piety is and sad, perhaps tragic in its way, that Euthyphro will not learn. As Phaedo himself says of the dialogue he is about to narrate (*Phaedo* 59a; trans. Grube), ‘I had a strange feeling, an unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and pain.’ Socrates later remarks the pleasure and pain are ‘like two creatures with one head’ (60b). Like these strange experiences of pleasure and pain, Plato’s dialogues are strange mixtures of the comic and the tragic that induce thoughtfulness.

Technically, Plato’s dialogues use elements of tragedy that Aristotle identified in the *Poetics*. Interlocutors have flaws; there is recognition of this and a reversal in how they are viewed. The emotions of the audience are aroused in a productive way, though on the whole the dialogues have more to do with the audience’s thoughts than its emotions. In Plato’s new, philosophic, drama, what is at stake is not wealth, fame, or power, but wisdom, excellence and *true* happiness. And they are defined in terms of intellectual comprehension. So the story concerns someone who thinks he is wise conversing with Socrates and encountering a reversal through his own lack of knowledge, revealing himself as ignorant and in conflict with himself.

Overall, though, the dialogues may owe more to the comedies than to the tragedies on account of their extensive use of humour, irony, playfulness and staged effects. In the last scene of the *Symposium* (223), just before dawn, having sat up all night drinking, Socrates is proving to Agathon and Aristophanes that the expert tragic poet would also have to be the expert comic poet. By general consent, the poet who fits this description is Plato himself.

#### SOCRATES’ CRITIQUES OF POETRY AND OF WRITING

The critiques of poetry and of writing, therefore, are not to be taken simply nor at face value, as many do. Some poetry *is* problematic from the standpoint of acculturation of citizens to a social life

in which the community is to be more highly valued than the individual, whether or not it is to be censored. Some poetry *does* turn the souls of the gifted away from the kind of rigorously intellectual formation Plato has in mind for the happiness of an individual in a society, whether or not it ought to be permitted.

However, the censorship of poetry in the *Republic* and the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* are elements in stories and need to be interpreted in terms of their place and role in the story, rather than extracted and assessed as if they were positive pronouncements made by Plato speaking directly to us in a treatise or essay. First, we must keep in mind that the ideal city of the *Republic* is presented as an image of the soul. The censorship is expressed as a provision for a perfectly just city. It is Socrates' modified, luxurious city, rather than his simple city. Rather than what Socrates really thinks a perfectly just city is, then, the city that occupies the central books of the dialogue seems to be the sort of thing you would get if you took pure and simple social justice and projected it onto a rich and complex community. In other words, it is a satire on utopian thinking. The justice found in it is apparently derived or descended from what was at the time an oligarchic slogan to 'mind one's own business', or 'do what is one's own'. This suggests that the 'ideal city' is actually a satire of the specific kind of utopian thinking indulged in by oligarchs of the sort who later came to power in Athens under the Thirty Tyrants, like Plato's relatives Critias and Charmides. In the *Charmides* both interlocutors articulate the idea of 'minding one's own business', but Socrates refutes the idea to their evident consternation, and concludes that if we *did* have a community in which everyone performed those functions with respect to which they had expert knowledge – a utopia of knowledge – it would not be beneficial (174–5).

So censorship is the kind of thing one is led to when one reflects on justice under these circumstances and with these interlocutors. It's the sort of thing a Critias in the *Charmides* would accept. It is also an ironic expression of Plato's belief that *his* poetry should supplant that of the traditional poetic teachers of the Greeks. Our awareness that Plato is himself a consummate poet should make us chuckle rather than feel uncomprehending moral or aesthetic outrage. It is part of Plato's sophisticated deployment of humour.

The *Phaedrus* develops from an initial encounter in which Phaedrus wants to recite to Socrates a speech by Lysias that paradoxically urges a youth to grant sexual favours to an older man who does not

love him rather than to one who does. Socrates' enterprise, as already mentioned, is to turn Phaedrus from rhetoric to philosophy. The critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* is to be understood as a response to Phaedrus' memorizing rather than thinking, and memorizing a written speech rather than engaging in and remembering live conversation. More important, the speech that he memorized indulges in a paradox that is individually self-aggrandizing and sophistic as opposed to the socially motivated speech-writing of Isocrates, who is mentioned with some approval later, and it defends a morally repugnant thesis. The critique of writing is the sort of thing to say to Phaedrus in order to turn him protreptically from his love and practice of rhetoric to philosophy. It's not that there are no dangers in writing, then, but it's also not a wholesale – and self-contradictory – rejection of writing.

#### PLATO AND MYTH

The use of myths is an integral part of Plato's overall strategy in several different ways. Stories entertain and delight readers. Plato has always been more popular with readers than most other major philosophers because of this. As all teachers know, someone who isn't paying attention is less likely to learn than someone who is. Moreover, the emotional and imaginative aspects of the dialogues serve as forms of argumentative support for Plato's thought that is additional to the rational and discursive arguments. The stories further his programme of replacing the teachings and intellectual modalities of other social teachers by dramatizing his invention, *philosophia*, the open-ended practice of rational discussion of the most important issues. Myths and stories enable the dialogues in which they occur to make large-scale points, like the superiority of philosophy, in addition to and by means of their overall plot.

So, the problems about inconsistency between rationality and myth-making and about criticism of writing need not be worrisome. Rational explanation is not really inconsistent with use of myth. Moreover, Socrates' rejection of poetry is less inclusive than is usually thought, it is part of a specific educational polemic, and it is ironic. Similarly, Socrates' critique of writing is part of a specific protreptic approach to Phaedrus. It is inconsistent with writing dogmatic treatises, but not inconsistent with Plato's writing non-dogmatic, non-systematic, literary-philosophic dialogues.

Myths do not produce rational or propositional knowledge in

readers, but they can produce a visual, imaginative or intuitive understanding of the same subjects, that clarifies or supplements that knowledge. Through the use of character, plot, action, metaphors and dialogue, they can induce a new or changed way of understanding things, which is an essential point of Plato's philosophy. Because they are dramatic stories, they prepare the reader to grasp the dramatic story that is at the heart of Plato's philosophy. For Plato, in part, philosophy *is* a story, the story of the individual's path to wisdom; the stories enact that. Myths are thus both enactments and envisionings of Plato's philosophic point. The mythic aspects and the mythic character of the dialogues are essential to their open-endedness and their indirect mode of instruction.

Here is just one example of the complex philosophical gain for Plato from presenting his philosophy in fictional dramatic dialogues. It is chronologically possible that Socrates met and conversed with Parmenides at Athens in about 450, as Plato imagines it in the *Parmenides*; but there is not a single piece of historical evidence that this really happened. On the other hand, as a dramatization of ideas, it is brilliant, a conceptual tour de force to have a simple theory of Ideas presented by a youthful Socrates and then criticized by one of the theory's inspirations, who authoritatively exhibits the theory's weaknesses while assuring Socrates (and us, the readers) that a theory of this sort is necessary if human thought and speech are to be possible and then demonstrates in mock dialectic the kind of systematic deductive exercises that would prepare one's mind to work out eventually the details of such a theory.

Aristotle wrote that 'the lover of stories is also a kind of philosopher' (*Metaphysics* 982b19) perhaps because he understood how extensively Plato had exploited this principle. It is a difficult but important task for the reader to remain aware that what is being read is a story, whatever else it is.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## CHAPTER 7

# IRONY AND OTHER FORMS OF HUMOUR

We are accustomed to think that the truth, the ways things are, is simple and straightforward, even though we may not know the truth yet. The combustion of gasoline vapour makes the car's engine work. An as-yet unknown sequence of biochemical events causes some persons to catch a disease, while others exposed to the same germs do not. This is a simple and linear model of the way things are and it works well enough for a large range of cases that are important to us.

But in other kinds of cases, particularly those having to do with human moral, political and psychic life, the truth is often not linear, simple or straightforward. Even in the physical realm, significant non-linear or differential responses to forces can be found. For example, by vastly increasing flow through a narrow pipe in order to get more water, eddies are created that resist the flow. A river floods, destroying homes and businesses, but the flood water deposits silt on fields, thus enriching their soil. In such cases, where something bad happens, but afterwards something good occurs that couldn't have happened (as we then realize) without the bad preceding event, we might say that the good outcome was 'ironic'. Irony in events is distinct from but related to irony in words, which raises problems about the uses of language and the nature of meaning. The ironic effect in either case comes from a complex, multi-causal input, and the effect can be different from or even contrary to what one expects. In other words, although we unreflectively assume that the truth is straightforward, it is often ironic.

IRONY

Irony in speaking or writing is a literary device or trope, which gives a specific kind of turn to the meaning of the words used. Basically, it is a form of speech in which the real meaning is concealed or contradicted by the words used. For example, saying 'I love it' when you hate it or 'There's certainly a crowd here today' when the room is empty. Irony comes in many shades. In its simplest form it is saying the opposite of what is meant. It is deliberate, but superficial, dissimulation. In a hostile mode, irony can be a false statement which intends to mock. More subtly, it can be saying something that is true in one sense, but false in another.

In mild forms, irony is a cultivated use of understatement or overstatement. But it is not the simple opposite of candour or non-dissembling and it is not sarcasm, though it is often mistaken for sarcasm. Ironic speech is for cases in which the speaker's intended meaning is different from the superficial or literal meaning of what is said. There is an incongruity between what the words are expected to mean and what the speaker actually does mean. Verbal irony, in which a writer or speaker says one thing and means something entirely different, is distinct from dramatic irony, in which a reader or audience member perceives something that a character in the story does not, a reality concealed from the character and contradicting what the character believes. In any case, though, irony involves the perception that things are not what they are said to be or what they seem.

Plato uses irony frequently and in diverse forms. The historical Socrates was notorious for his irony and interlocutors in the dialogues sometimes complain about it as well. Some scholars have claimed that the Platonic dialogue is an essentially ironic form of thought. Those who do not get it, both characters in the dialogues and readers, are perplexed or frustrated; those who do get it are delighted. Thus irony often coincides with the pleasure-giving character of other and simpler forms of humour (puns and wordplay, caricature, satire, slapstick). One problem that may arise about irony comes from the false assumption that irony is a simple opposite of candour or non-dissembling.

Irony is a particularly frequent and perplexing species of Plato's use of language with multiple meanings. Readers often recognize irony in Plato's dialogues. To be more accurate, they recognize some

of it, but not all; and they recognize it as something, but not always as irony. Even having recognized something as irony, readers often don't know what to make of it, how to grasp the meaning of what they are reading in light of their recognition that this or that is ironic. Readers are not wrong to be confused. Irony is very complex. The problem is the expectation that meaning is simple and unequivocal. Irony, however, is something of which there is not just one unequivocal meaning, but two (or more) meanings, sometimes conflicting with each other. To interpret the dialogues properly, the reader needs to recognize the bivalence or polyvalence given to particular statements, dialogical moments or situations, and dialogues as wholes.

Socrates proposes to become the student of the religious nut, Euthyphro, in order to learn what piety is. He addresses characters who have just demonstrated their foolishness or ignorance as 'O Most Wise'. 'What a godlike state of mind you're in, Hippias, if you go to the temple at every Olympiad so confident about your soul's wisdom' (*Hippias Minor* 364a). Of the eristics, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, he says, 'I had never in my life seen such wise men' (*Euthydemus* 303b). He says to Cratylus (*Cratylus* 384b):

If I'd attended Prodicus' fifty-drachma course . . . there'd be nothing to prevent you from learning the precise truth about the correctness of names straightaway. But as I've only heard the one-drachma course, I don't know the truth about it.

This is verbal irony, of which there is a good deal in Plato's dialogues.

There is also dramatic or situational irony, which derives from contrast or contradiction between what the situation seems to the actors to be and what the audience knows it to be. A situation in which what was believed, expected or hoped for is the opposite of what actually happens. This is sometimes called 'Platonic irony' because it is between Plato and the reader, as distinguished from 'Socratic irony', which is between Socrates and his interlocutors. Dramatic irony in the dialogues is based on the audience's truer knowledge of what the future will bring, which contrasts with a character's lack of knowledge about that outcome.

It is ironic for Socrates to discuss justice with someone (Cephalus, Polemarchus) whose property was unjustly expropriated after the civil war, as it is to discuss temperance with characters who were legendarily intemperate (Critias, Charmides), as it is to discuss piety

with a religious zealot (Euthyphro) or virtue with a character (Meno) who, according to Xenophon (*Anabasis*. 2.6.21–4), was notorious for his vices. For the audience, the delight in such recognitions nourishes attitudes Plato wants us to acquire: that there is a connection between a person's words and deeds, that ignorance of the sort presented in the dialogue correlates with the character's misdeeds, that knowledge of the subject is important, and hence that Socrates is a model for emulation both in his pursuit of knowledge and in his behaviour, in contrast with that which is known of the interlocutor. The character Protagoras claims that he teaches virtue; but it turns out that he cannot explain what virtue is without contradicting himself. Socrates discusses self-control with two individuals who were, in their historical lives, notoriously violent and lacking in self-control. Socrates discusses the nature of justice in the soul and society in the home as someone who was unjustly victimized by the Thirty Tyrants in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War.

#### IRONIES IN THE DIALOGUES

Here are three famous but relatively straightforward cases of Socratic irony. Since he knows nothing, Socrates often denies that he teaches anyone. It is true that he does not teach in the way the sophists do, propounding truths to be learned and taking money for it. But he does teach in a different sense of the word, both by his exemplary conduct and way of life and by his guiding his interlocutors to experience their own lack of knowledge and need to inquire. A second example is Socrates' disavowal of politics. It is true, in one sense, that he does not practise politics. That is, he does not practise politics in the way that Anytus, Critias, Callicles and other political interlocutors do, by speaking in the Assembly, standing for office, or participating in political clubs. But if politics is understood in a quite different way, then, as Socrates says in the *Gorgias* and implies in the *Apology*, he is the only one who practises the true art of politics.

Third, Socrates often and famously claims that he is ignorant or does not have any knowledge of the subjects about which he questions his interlocutors. It is true that he does not possess precise or certain knowledge – for example, of the nature of the virtues – but he does know some things about them. For example, he knows that they are good and that they benefit their possessors. Moreover, Plato makes it clear to us that Socrates often enacts the virtues in

clear contradistinction from his interlocutors, who think they possess such knowledge and virtue, but fail to act accordingly.

All three cases are intended by Plato to work in the way this third one obviously does. The irony is meant to bring several things to our minds without saying any of them directly. Socrates' denial of knowledge suggests the actual ignorance of the interlocutor and his own knowledge, by means of the *hidden* point that there is a way of understanding knowledge, teaching and politics that is different from and truer than the ways in which these terms are usually understood.

Two special ways of framing ironic speaking are worth noting: conditional and reverse irony. A conditional is an 'if . . . then' statement. The 'if' clause is called the antecedent; the 'then' clause is called the consequent. Socrates' irony about becoming the student of Euthyphro or being the student of Prodicus is conditional because, if the antecedent were true, then Socrates would believe the consequent. That is, if Euthyphro *were* knowledgeable about piety, then Socrates *would* want to learn from him; if Prodicus *had* knowledge, Socrates *would* be his student. But, in both cases, the irony is that Socrates does not believe the antecedent, and Plato's use of the conditional irony indirectly and amusingly tells us that this is so.

Reverse irony is the type most prevalent in the *Apology*, where Socrates says what he actually believes to be true, but what his audience is bound to understand as ironic or dissembling. Reverse irony *provokes* the hearer by immediately generating *aporia*. What is true of reverse irony is actually true of all the irony in Plato's dialogues: it serves to induce perplexity as a goal. From this vantage point, it can be seen that there is something ironic in Socrates' insisting on arguing only from his interlocutors' views and then refuting those views but never making positive claims of his own and supporting them by his own arguments. This very thing was perceived as his *eirōneia* by his contemporaries, and it was provoking to them.

Here is another example of irony. The phrase 'do one's own', famously given as the ultimate brief definition of justice in the *Republic*, recurs as an account of temperance in the *Charmides* and of justice in *Alcibiades* (111–13). In fact, this was a political slogan of the conservative, anti-democratic politicians, among whom were the historical Critias and Charmides, Plato's own relatives, and participants in the repressive government that ruled Athens after the Peloponnesian War, a later response to which by the restored democracy was the trial and execution of Socrates.

## IRONY AND OTHER FORMS OF HUMOUR

There are several reasons why Plato deploys irony so much. First, in line with Plato's use of verisimilitude in character depiction, because Socrates was well known for his irony. We may imagine Socrates' reasons for using irony to be Plato's as well: because irony is delightful to those who get it and a sting, a provocation to those who don't. The sting subserves the Platonic and Socratic intention of inducing perplexity. The ambivalence of ironic statements may lead readers to become active searchers, which is an essential part of philosophy as Plato conceives it.

Irony is also a strategy of indirection and of concealment, for Plato as for his Socrates. Values and judgements are communicated indirectly, as has been seen and, by concealing beliefs that they may have had, the impetus is transferred to the interlocutor and the audience to inquire for themselves. A final reason for irony is that the truths Plato seems to believe most deeply are, in fact, ironic and replicate the structure of irony as a literary device. That is, they can have an ironic character when stated in words. Things are not what they seem, and seeming is not being. The 'real world' isn't really real, if to be 'real' means to be permanent and unchanging.

## OTHER FORMS OF HUMOUR

Plato deploys many kinds of humour besides irony, and in many places, though often getting the joke depends on knowing the Greek language, literature or history. Taken as a whole, though, Plato makes philosophy fun as well as serious, play as well as work. Puns and wordplay, of which there are a great deal, are rarely translated because of the intrinsic difficulties of doing so. Besides puns, obscure words and meanings, clever rhetorical phrases, oddly formed sentences and telling character names are common types of Platonic wordplay.

Having refuted Simmias' idea that the soul is a *harmonia*, Socrates says, 'Harmonia of Thebes seems somehow reasonably propitious to us. How and by what argument, my dear Cebes, can we propitiate Cadmus?' (*Phaedo* 95a; trans. Grube). Simmias and Cebes come from Thebes, of which Cadmus and Harmonia were the legendary founders, so Socrates makes a complex pun involving legendary and contemporary Thebans and their theories. The end of the speech by Lysias that Phaedrus reads makes a sexual pun that can be roughly translated as, 'I think this speech is long enough. If you are still longing for more . . . just ask' (*Phaedrus* 234c; trans.

Nehamas and Woodruff). It is also a joke, though with a serious point, when Socrates later tells Phaedrus that writing is a drug (*pharmakon*) for memory and wisdom (274e). Socrates' opening speech in the *Meno* (70a–b) is also a joke. For Socrates to say that wisdom has left Athens and gone to Thessaly is a bit like a contemporary saying that civility has left London or Boston and gone to dwell in Beirut or Baghdad.

On a broader scale, scholars have often taken the preposterous etymologies of the *Cratylus* as evidence that the dialogue as a whole is humorous. And, despite the weighty seriousness with which the *Parmenides* has often been taken in the history of Platonism, it has sometimes been considered largely humorous.

Another form of humour is caricature, in which the subject is depicted satirically so as to exaggerate its distinctive characteristics in a comical or grotesque way. Caricature indirectly comments on political or social matters. The speeches of Prodicus and Hippias in the *Protagoras* (337–8) caricature their well-known rhetorical styles. The Eleatic Stranger of *Sophist* and *Politicus* caricatures Platonic or Socratic; this is dialectic as practised incorrectly, in part because too seriously, by a *faux*-philosopher.

Satire, writing that mixes a critical attitude with wit and humour in an effort to improve human beings and institutions, is part of most Platonic dialogues. Ridicule, irony and exaggeration, frequent in the dialogues, are elements of satire. Because satire relies on an implicit moral code that will be understood by Plato's audience, its effect is to provide indirect support for views or values not directly stated. The *Euthydemus* satirizes the practice of eristic sophistry as the *Republic* does utopianism.

Parody is a particular form of satire that imitates another work of art in order to ridicule it. Socrates' interpretation of Simonides in the *Protagoras* (342–7) parodies sophistic poetry interpretation. Socrates' introduction of the theory of recollection in the *Meno* (81a–e) is stylistically a parody of Gorgias' oratorical style, as the speech that Phaedrus recites (*Phaedrus* 231–3) is probably a parody of Lysias. The *Menexenus* looks like a parody of Pericles' funeral oration as it appears in Thucydides.

Farce is comedy characterized by broad satire and improbable situations, which aims to entertain the audience by means of unlikely and extravagant – yet often possible – situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humour of varying degrees of sophistication, and a fast-paced action. The scene when Socrates and Hippocrates

## IRONY AND OTHER FORMS OF HUMOUR

arrive at Callias' house (*Protagoras* 314b–c) turns momentarily to farce when the doorkeeper slams the door in their faces, thinking that they're more sophists. Alcibiades' drunken entrance in the *Symposium* (212–13) also has elements of farce in his exaggerated reaction to realizing that he is sitting near Socrates.

Plato's dialogues even include scenes of slapstick humour, physical comedy that relies on exaggerated or violent behaviour to elicit laughter. In the *Charmides*, the fact that everyone wants to sit on the bench next to the beautiful Charmides leads to this:

each one of us who was already seated began pushing hard at his neighbour so as to make a place for him to sit down. The upshot of it was that we made the man sitting at one end get up, and the man at the other end was toppled off sideways. (155c)

Like Old Comedy, the dialogues mix political, social and literary satire. They include direct attacks on real persons, use of invective (Socrates is called names by Meno and others) and burlesque extravagances (Protagoras walking in the court followed by a 'chorus' of admirers). The dialogues contain many personal, political and sexual jokes, asides, teasing banter, satire, blunder, slapstick, irony, parody, abuse, name-calling, puns, wordplay, caricature, hyperbole and understatement.

## THE USES OF HUMOUR

Humour in Plato has many uses, some more philosophically significant than others, and often the different uses coincide in a particular passage. Since Plato's writing is dramatic even when it is comic, one function of humour and irony is sheer entertainment, providing pleasure for the audience; the pleasure of the joke and the additional pleasure of having understood something more intellectually demanding. This has no special philosophical meaning, but does demonstrate Plato's mastery of his medium. Similarly, irony and humour often serve to enliven or restore a conversation that is tiring or difficult. Like irony, there is humour *in* the dialogue, humour that the characters hear and appreciate, and humour that is audible only to us as the readers or audience.

Irony and humour are also used for directly philosophic purposes, as has already been indicated. Some jokes make philosophic points. In the *Republic*, for example, Glaucon asks Socrates to explain the

Good as he has done the virtues and Socrates agrees jokingly to describe only the ‘interest on the principle’ or ‘offspring’ (507a, *ekgonos* and *tokos*) of the Good. But it turns out, shortly thereafter, that the offspring of the Good is the sun, so Plato has used this little joke to provide entertainment; but he has also used it to introduce indirectly the distinction Socrates is about to make between the visible and the invisible and suggest that the visible depends on the invisible, which is therefore more real and important.

Another example is the passage already mentioned in the *Protagoras* (343–6) where Socrates, as Protagoras insists, interprets Simonides. Socrates’ presentation satirizes the way sophists interpret poetry, but part of the satire is Socrates’ finding in Simonides several views that are Socrates’ own in other dialogues: a distinction between being and becoming – the former divine, the latter human – the necessity of knowledge for happiness, and the Socratic paradox that no one knowingly does evil.

It has been argued, off and on, since the Reformation that the *Republic* is an extended joke, simultaneously a satire and a playful projection of utopia that we are meant to laugh at but not ignore. The *Apology* is in some ways a parody of the sophist Gorgias’ speech, *Palamedes*. The entire *Cratylus* is, from one point of view, an extended joke because Plato has assigned the Heraclitean theory to Hermogenes, who was actually a Parmenidean, and the Eleatic theory to Cratylus, who was really a Heraclitean. Similar bits of philosophic humour in role reversal are found in Plato’s having made an Eleatic ‘stranger’ claim that negation is otherness in the *Politicus*, since a genuine Eleatic would deny the existence of otherness, and having made Parmenides himself defend what amounts to a pluralist position in the *Parmenides*.

It might seem strange that Plato would engage in such large-scale jokes as these. However, it is well to remember that the comedies of Aristophanes, funny as they are, are not only funny. They are also serious attacks on individuals such as the demagogue Cleon (*Knights*), on the war as a public policy (*Lysistrata*), on other social ills such as the influence of sophists (*Clouds*) and excessive litigation (*Wasps*), and on utopian thinking (*Birds*). Plato’s dialogues are comedies of this sort; but they have a positive proposal to make besides the criticisms.

All of this suggests that one can read in the dialogues a sort of contrapuntal music of humour and seriousness. Irony and humour, then, are at once indirect expression and concealment of Plato’s thought.

WHAT TO MAKE OF IRONY AND HUMOUR

So, what should a reader do about irony and humour? First of all, be alert to it. Look for it. There is a great deal to be found in the dialogues. Having found it, enjoy it; have the fun that Plato meant you to have. But take it seriously, too, which Plato also meant you to do. As indicated earlier in this chapter, Plato has deployed humour and irony both for entertainment purposes and for education, both to amuse and to induce thought, indeed to lead thought beyond the superficialities and simplicities of ordinary thinking to deeper and more complex truths. At the most general level, there is something wrong with the lives, practices and beliefs of the sophists, politicians, poets, and even self-styled ‘philosophers’, at whom he pokes fun. But there is also a constructive correlate to the criticism, a serious alternative proposal. It is called philosophy.

One specific guideline with respect to irony is to consider in each case the *aporia* to which it points or leads. Remember that, for Plato, the experience of *aporia* is itself a necessary and valuable step in one’s philosophical development. So, take the ironic statement or situation seriously in the sense of looking to see the reality that is indicated by it in a given context. If you don’t understand it, try to figure it out by asking yourself what sort of belief or attitude on Socrates’ part would cause this particular instance of irony or humour to make sense in its dialogical context. Remember that making sense of irony means recognizing the duality of meanings, one of which is often the higher and better alternative to an ordinary meaning.

For example, consider Socrates’ ironic claims of ignorance. First, they should be understood differently in different situations. Denying that he knows *arêtê* (*excellence*) in the *Meno* is not quite the same as denying that he possesses *sophia* (*wisdom*) in the *Apology* or denying that he knows what *hosion* (*piety*) is in the *Euthyphro*. The denial in each case is both true and false, but the details and implications vary.

Socrates cannot give an account of piety and impiety that shows what all pious and impious acts have in common. On the other hand, Socrates doesn’t mean that he knows nothing whatsoever about *arêtê*. He knows – that is, he is able to show by argument – that certain ways of thinking about it cannot be correct, because they are self-contradictory. He knows that piety is among the virtues. He is also confident that, whatever else may be true of the gods, they

cannot do wrong or be inconsistent. He also seems quite clear that it is impious to indict one's own father, so he knows that some acts are and others are not pious. Having been challenged by Meno to say how *arête* is acquired, Socrates uses the ironic denial to shift the subject of the conversation to the nature of *arête*, which Meno has been presupposing that he knew, and it may have a similar effect on the reader, who may learn that, logically, it doesn't make sense to ask about whether something (excellence, for example) possesses a characteristic (being teachable, for example) unless you first know what that something really is.

In the *Apology*, Socrates' denial is true in that he does not possess the more-than-human wisdom that many, such as politicians, suppose themselves to possess. They declare their policies will improve people but they can't explain why what they say is true. Socrates does not deny possessing all wisdom. In fact, he goes on to assert that he possesses a human wisdom that, ironically again, consists in knowing that he doesn't know. He knows that certain acts are wrong, such as not doing what you know is right through fear of death (28b) or breaking the law and trying ten generals at once (32b). The ironic denial is meant to focus the attention of the jurors – and of Plato's readers – on the questions that are different and more important than whether Socrates is guilty of the specific charges. In what does wisdom really consist? And what is the best kind of life for a person to live?

Read the dialogues, therefore, not in spite of, but *through* their pervasive ironies and other forms of humour. By becoming sensitized to the various kinds, levels and scopes of Plato's use of irony, you will both understand better Plato's project and begin to realize the nature and extent of ironies in the world of your own daily existence. Ironically things unseen really *are* more stable than things seen, those who claim to possess knowledge and expertise often really are ignorant or pretenders, and those widely supposed to be the noblest often really *are* corrupt. Things are not what they seem, and this turns out to be a metaphysical proposition as well as a social one.

Irony and humour are specific forms of playfulness in the dialogues. In Chapter 8 we look at play and its sister, seriousness.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## CHAPTER 8

# PLAY AND SERIOUSNESS

Philosophy deals with serious matters, the highest good, the mind or soul, the nature of happiness, knowledge and truth; and it deals with them in serious ways, by analysing ideas, giving evidence, making and criticizing rational arguments. What could be further from this than the light-hearted fun and relaxed enjoyment of play? Besides the stories and jokes discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, a more general cause of perplexity in reading Plato's dialogues is their strange mixture of play and seriousness. The problem is that readers may presuppose that play and seriousness are mutually exclusive, that where one is the other cannot be. For Plato, they rarely seem to be separate.

### THE TERMS 'PLAY' AND 'SERIOUSNESS' AND THEIR RELATIONS

In the thought and writings of Plato, Aristotle and other ancient philosophers, 'seriousness' (to be serious, *spoudadzo* and the serious person, *spoudaios*) is a significant term in discussions of ethics, morality, the nature and pursuit of happiness. 'Seriousness' means *moral* seriousness. 'Play' can be used to describe many things but when it is used in relation to seriousness, it means 'lacking in moral seriousness'. This marks the usual distinction between youth and adulthood, when we (are supposed to) get serious about the things we do. There is nothing objectionable about young people failing to exhibit the moral seriousness that is appropriate for adults. But the contrast between play and seriousness may also mark a distinction, often ignored both then and now, between the many persons who *use* moral terms – who *talk* about 'justice', 'courage', wisdom' and 'moderation' – but do not really know or care about these things and the few persons who do. Although they may present a 'serious' demeanour to others, these individuals are not really serious; they're

just playing at being serious, pretending to be serious. They don't walk the talk. So the appearance of seriousness may mask a reality that is not serious. Similarly – and this is a cardinal point for understanding Plato – the appearance of play may be the face of perfect seriousness.

As in many other cases, Plato takes an existing usage and transforms it by redefining – or defining rationally – the central terms. True moral seriousness, for Plato, is the constant pursuit of right action through the constant pursuit of knowledge. This is not something that is expressed as a doctrine; it is exhibited. That one's superficial words or behaviour are playful need not reflect the underlying state. At the same time, superficial seriousness, seriousness as a pretence that does not derive from the real pursuit of knowledge and right action is to be criticized and rejected. In Plato's dialogues, however, there is much more to be said about play and seriousness. As is often the case, Plato's dialogues recognize a difference between a superficial meaning of a term and a deeper meaning of the same term and, as is also often the case, the dialogues suggest inversion of ordinary or popular identifications. What is the difference? And how do the dialogues suggest it?

#### THE IDEAS OF PLAY AND SERIOUSNESS IN THE DIALOGUES

The ancient Greek word 'to play' (*paizein*) comes from the word for 'child' (*pais*), and although it is not primarily a moral term, it indicates the opposite of the seriousness expected from adults. As when we say, 'You're kidding' or 'Don't kid around', it is implicated in situations where candour is required or desired. Other terms for play are also used, but it is recognized that play is legitimate in some situations whereas something else – seriousness – is required in others.

Play and seriousness are terms and concepts that are used frequently and in diverse ways in the dialogues. The terms are sometimes deployed in ordinary ways, as it is when Socrates says that children's lessons in arithmetic, geometry and other studies prior to dialectic should take the form of play; dialectic, by implication, is 'serious' (*Republic* 536e). But the terms are also deployed in more complicated ways. Socrates is criticized in the *Gorgias* by the harsh Callicles and in the *Republic* by the ferocious Thrasymachus for playing at philosophy when he should be doing the more mature and serious thing, engaging in politics as they do. While the superficial

message is that philosophy is childish play and politics is serious, grown-up work, the contrast between the attractive Socrates and the unattractive Callicles and Thrasymachus delivers the message to readers indirectly that Socrates' play is more serious than the others' work.

This idea appears in Socrates' critiques of other practices. For example, he says, perhaps ironically, that the trick questions of the eristics, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, are play (*Euthydemus* 278b). In the *Republic* (602b) painting and poetry, indeed all *mimêsis*, are *paidia*, not *spoudê*, play not seriousness. Similarly, all mimetic art is a kind of *paidia* (*Sophist* 234b).

Plato often mixes play and seriousness. A playful surface may mark a point of deep seriousness and often an apparently serious surface marks a playful point. Agathon describes (*Symposium* 197e) his speech on *eros* as combining play with *spoudê*. Socrates says of those who have accused him, 'If, then, they were intending to laugh at me . . . there would be nothing unpleasant in their spending their time in court laughing and jesting, but if they are going to be serious, the outcome is not clear except to you prophets' (*Euthyphro* 3e; trans. Grube). At *Apology* 20d he tells the jurors, 'Some of you will think I am playing' and at 27a he imagines his accuser as thinking, 'Will the wise Socrates realize that I am having a good time (*charientizein*) and contradicting myself?' In the *Gorgias* 500b, he asks his interlocutor to say only what he really thinks, 'Callicles, please don't think that you should play with me either.' The cosmology of the *Timaeus* 59c–d is described as a 'likely story' (*mythos*) and 'a reasonable and sensible form of play'.

Socrates criticizes writing at length (*Phaedrus* 174–8) as the wrong way to seriously pursue knowledge, and ends with the observation that the only reasons to write would be as play or relaxation after the strenuous and serious work of dialectical pursuit of knowledge and that the writing would serve only as a reminder for those who have attained knowledge of the knowledge they have attained, but would not constitute knowledge. This, too, of course, is playful; for Plato is himself a serious and painstaking writer. Here he playfully makes his hero criticize what amounts to the manner of his own existence.

#### SOCRATES' PLAYFULNESS

Not only is the term used in the dialogues, but Plato's Socrates is also a very playful character. Socrates was often accused of always

playing, never being serious (e.g. at *Symposium* 216e and *Protagoras* 336d, according to Alcibiades, and at *Theaetetus* 168c, according to Theaetetus). He often says that what he's been engaging in is play (e.g. *Phaedrus* 278b, *Republic* 536c), but the playful surface usually masks a serious point that can be discovered with a little thought. Socrates' recurrent uses of myths and stories is both playful and serious.

He jokes with Phaedrus about being in 'ecstasy' over the speech of Lysias that Phaedrus has just recited, and, in case we might miss it, Plato has Phaedrus reply, 'Come on, Socrates. Don't joke (*paizein*) about this' (*Phaedrus* 234d). Socrates playfully begins his first speech in the same dialogue with invocations.

Come to me, O you clear-voiced Muses, whether you are called so because of the quality of your song or from the musical people of Liguria [a playful etymology], 'come take up my burden' in telling the tale that this fine fellow forces upon me so that his companion may now seem to him even more clever than he did before. (*Phaedrus* 237b; trans. Nehamas and Woodruff)

After nearly 100 Stephanus pages of inquiry into the nature of justice in the *Republic*, when they are finally about to say what it is, Socrates invokes the playful idea that they are hunters trying to capture the elusive quarry. 'Aha! Glaucon, it looks as if there was a track, and I don't think our prey will altogether escape us' (432d; trans. Grube).

Socrates playfully, but seriously, refers to himself as a gadfly (*Apology* 30e), and describes his love of arguments as a disease (*Theaetetus* 169b) and then playfully continues,

I am more of a fiend for exercise than Sciron and Antaeus [legendary roughnecks]. I have met with many a Heracles and Theseus in my time, mighty men of words; and they have well battered me. But for all that a terrible lust (*eros*, sexual desire) has come upon me for these exercises.

He tells Phaedrus that he has no time for mythology because he hasn't yet succeeded in obeying the Delphic inscription's order to know himself (*Phaedrus* 229e–30a) and later in that dialogue (261d) refers to Zeno of Elea as 'the Eleatic Palamedes'. Palamedes was a one of the heroes who went to fight the Trojan War. He is said to

have been responsible for knowledge of counting, currency, weights and measures.

Socrates' frequent statements that he has no knowledge (e.g. *Meno* 71a, *Apology* 20d–e, *Phaedrus* 235c) are ironically playful, as is his proposal to become Euthyphro's student (*Euthyphro* 5a). Both the first and the last lines of the *Apology* (17a, 42a) are denials of knowledge. Socrates presents an inquiry into the nature of knowledge as playing a question-and-answer game with Theaetetus (*Theaetetus* 146a). Playing with the terms 'misanthropy' and 'philanthropy', he coins the term 'misology', 'hatred of argument', to describe the dangerous state people often get into when they have a few experiences of their arguments being shown to be unacceptable (*Phaedo* 89d).

Even as he is about to die, he can't resist a playful but serious remark about the difficulty they will have burying him. Crito asks,

How shall we bury you?

In anyway you like, said Socrates, if you can catch me and I do not escape you. And, laughing quietly, looking at us, he said: I do not convince Crito that I am this Socrates talking to you here and ordering all I say, but he thinks that I am the thing which he will soon be looking at as a corpse, and so he asks how he shall bury me. I have been saying for some time and at some length that after I have drunk the poison I shall no longer be with you but will leave you to go and enjoy some good fortunes of the blessed, but it seems that I have said all this to him in vain . . . (*Phaedo* 115d–e; trans. Grube)

Socrates even exhibits playful behaviour in the dialogues. In the *Phaedo*, for example, he strokes Phaedo's hair (89a–b) and says he will cut off his hair in mourning if the argument dies. He reports that in the prison while awaiting his execution he has been writing poetry (60c–61b).

Of course, all this is Plato writing for his audience. So, it might even be said that Plato is playful in relation to the audience, as he is in some of his character choices, speeches and role assignments.

While Plato's ideal philosopher, Socrates, is frequently playful, his interlocutors are often 'serious' characters who turn out to be far less than ideal. Examples are everywhere: Euthyphro; the speakers other than Socrates and Aristophanes in the *Symposium*; Critias in the *Charmides*; Protagoras and the rest of the sophists in the *Protagoras*;

## PLAY AND SERIOUSNESS

Thrasymachus and Cephalus in the *Republic*. Since Socrates is The Philosopher, the message given indirectly is that to be a philosopher, to practise philosophy in the right way is to be playful as well as serious. A corollary of this provides a reason for doubting that Timaeus or the Eleatic Stranger is meant to replace Socrates as the ideal philosopher: their lack of playfulness. This contrast, between the playful character who is Plato's serious hero, and the serious characters who represent various ways of being ignorant and failing to do right, suggests the idea that instead of a simple opposition between play and seriousness, Plato considers what philosophy is, what Socrates does and he himself does, as serious play.

### THE DIALOGUES AS PLAY

Besides discussions of play and Socrates' enacted playfulness in the dialogues, in thinking about what Plato is doing remember that the dialogues *are* plays, plays that Plato has put on for us. No matter how much it may seem a mere formality in some cases, each dialogue is a direct or an indirectly narrated play, in which characters interact with each other in ways dominated by talk. Thus the term 'play' as applied to Plato's dialogues, like the term 'perplexity' discussed in the Introduction, is a double entendre. Each one is playful and each one imitates philosophy – fictively and dramatically – with the intention of revealing to the audience the truth about philosophy and inducing philosophy in them. The play doesn't so much *tell* us as *show* us this truth.

Then, too, play is a way to practise and learn to do serious things – as we know that the play of children is their work, in which they learn the social and physical skills they will need in order to develop into adulthood. Similarly, Plato's plays, the dialogues, involve us, readers and students, in the true philosophic activities of logical argument, organized reason-giving, careful analysis, critical and rational reflection on matters that are the most serious for human beings and citizens. When we work to understand the arguments Socrates and his interlocutors put forward, we are at the same time actively thinking through the issues. This thinking-through for ourselves *is* philosophizing, in Plato's sense of the term. Thus, the play is serious, since, like children's play, through it we develop skills and habits that we can then better utilize in non-play situations. It's like practising a sport or a musical instrument in order to perform better in competition. Studying Plato's dialogues is practice for the real-life

philosophizing that he calls on us to do about the moral, political, scientific and religious realities of our own time and place.

Thus, in making the dialogues playful in the multitude of ways he has done, Plato indirectly overturns and inverts our ordinary ideas about play and seriousness, as he also does our ordinary valuations of various adult occupations, such as the practices of law, politics and philosophy. The ordinary contrast between play and seriousness turns out, on reflection, to be too simple. There is what might be called mere play, morally unserious play, frivolity. Mere play can be opposed to mere seriousness, unreflective. And then, transcending both of these categories, there is another category, serious play, of which true philosophy is, for Plato, the perfect example.

Finally, Socrates' playful seriousness suggests that it is philosophically serious to maintain a playful attitude towards even the most serious things, even in the face of death. The pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis* (992b) rightly says, 'The most truly wise man is playful and serious at the same time.'

#### THE SERIOUSNESS OF PLAY AND THE PLAY OF SERIOUSNESS

Thus, instead of the usual opposition between play and seriousness, Plato suggests that when it comes to philosophy, play and seriousness coincide. He inverts the usual idea that, for adults, work, politics and the life of action are serious whereas engaging in philosophic speculation would be inappropriate and childish play. Philosophy which pursues true happiness is what is truly serious; and the pursuits popularly thought to be serious display either pretence or an ignorance that is comic in its mistaken identification but tragic in its consequences.

The fact that Socrates' statements are frequently playful, but that their playful surface masks a serious point that can be discovered with a little thought, is one of Plato's many complex strategies for the dialogues to accomplish with respect to the reader what Socrates often talks about: eliciting thought and thus turning the soul around.

As discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, there is a great deal of play and humour in the dialogues, along with the more serious discussions, dialectical examinations and refutations for which they are best known. The humour and play not only provide intellectual rest and relaxation within more demanding passages, but also, because the dialogues *are* plays, set up a rhythm or alternation. Play in the

framing leads into a serious discussion, that is interrupted from time to time by more playful sections, as well as being punctuated by various more specific types of play and humour.

Paradoxically, however, a passage that seems weighty and serious often has a playful side as well; and often an apparently playful or humorous passage, on reflection, turns out to make quite a serious point. This is a specific form of play, on Plato's part: playfully sounding serious and sounding playful when he is serious. The reader should be alert not only to playful statements and situations, but also to exceptionally serious statements, which may be playful precisely in their unusual and excessive but merely superficial seriousness.

The digression on philosophy and politics in *Theaetetus* exemplifies apparent seriousness that is actually, partly, a joke. The 'philosopher' of the digression is not Plato's philosopher, Socrates. But there is a serious point in the digression: the difference between practising philosophy and practising politics. The 'perfectly just' city of the *Republic* is another joke that makes a number of serious points: a serious belief that justice consists in a right ordering of parts in both souls and states, despite the 'royal lie' to be told to children about their origins in the earth; the paradoxical definition of justice as 'minding your own business'; the moralistic censorship of poetry and music; the governmental eugenic breeding programme.

A number of the 'philosophic jokes' discussed in Chapter 7 are further examples of Plato's playful seriousness. The Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, like the Parmenides who ponderously leads a young Aristotle through the eight deductions in the latter part of the *Parmenides*, implicitly defends a pluralism that is the opposite of what the historical Eleatics defended. The poet Simonides is turned into a defender of Socratic ideas. The best part of these jokes is that, for the most part, serious scholars and interpreters have missed the joke and taken them as simply serious. Parmenides, Timaeus and the Eleatic Stranger are taken as simply alternative mouthpieces for Plato, despite the fact that Socrates is present in each case.

Thus, to interpret the dialogues properly, the reader needs to recognize that quite beyond the many jokes and ironies, the dialogues contain a great deal of play inextricably intertwined with seriousness in ways that complicate the process of interpretation but also enrich what we can learn. Ignoring play enables some readers to freeze Plato's thought into doctrines, but somewhat ridiculously to miss the point.

Additionally, the reader should always remember to keep a playful attitude towards the ideas and arguments. We learn through play. On the other hand – the inversion of meanings that characterizes much of Plato’s philosophy – philosophy teaches us to distinguish between what is really serious – knowing the truth and leading a good life as individuals and members of our communities – and matters on which great energy may be expended but which are not really serious matters, such as entertainment, sports, fine food and drink, the acquisition of wealth and possessions. Writing is not something to be serious about; just a kind of play for those who already know. One should be serious, instead, about the use of dialectic (*Phaedrus* 276–7).

The use of play is a way to keep ideas open-ended and fluid, to save them from becoming frozen, calcified, in a rigid system. Instead of enclosing the reader in a dogmatic Platonism, it opens up intellectual space in which readers may grow philosophically. Play is, paradoxically, the initiator of serious philosophy.

The philosopher, then, as symbolized and enacted by Socrates, strikes the right note of balance between play and seriousness, unlike the sophist or the politician, who are serious about less important – because less permanent – matters and not serious enough about what really matters. The philosopher is unlike the moralist or the religious fanatic, who are inflexibly wedded to views that might not be correct, unable to entertain opinions divergent from their own. The philosopher is also unlike the ordinary person, who erroneously takes matters of play – entertainment and pleasure – as life’s serious purpose. Play is a form of seriousness as seriousness can be a form of play. Play and seriousness are not opposites and they are not mutually exclusive. The pseudo-Platonic *Epistle* 6 correctly says, ‘Too much seriousness can be tasteless, and seriousness and play are sisters.’

The playfulness of the dialogues, as well as their non-finality and openness to criticism and revision, is, perhaps, best illustrated by dialogues in which Plato playfully illustrates the sort of thing that would come out of his views if they were taken to logical extremes to which he himself was not committed. The *Menexenus*, for example, has Socrates giving a funeral oration that demonstrates Plato’s mastery of the literary form and precisely by its difference from what Socrates does and says elsewhere. Plato seems to say, ‘Look. I could write the greatest rhetorical speeches, if I wanted to. But philosophical dialogue is more valuable, more important.’

In several dialogues, Socrates, although present, is not the leading speaker. Since Socrates is Plato's central character, his hero, and the type of the philosopher, we should infer that ideas presented in these dialogues are, while interesting and worth attention for various reasons, not to be identified as those of his philosopher-hero. The longest part of the *Timaeus* is an uninterrupted lecture or exposition by Timaeus, who is identified as having come from southern Italy, about the creation of the world by a 'demiurge' who imitates eternal Forms in elemental matter. He also describes the four elements as composed of triangles and uses these to construct the body of the universe. This account exerted enormous influence over philosophical speculation for more than the next millennium as Plato's cosmology and science, but is clearly labelled in the dialogue as a 'likely story'. Given the role of Forms in the story, we can imagine that it is the kind of story of the creation that Plato thought one might tell using his core theory, but that by having Socrates play the role of auditor in the dialogue and by having the account given in lecture form rather than as a dialogue, Plato signals that this is *only* to be taken as a story.

Similarly, in the *Sophist* and *Politicus*, Plato places Socrates in the audience while someone from another place leads the discussion. In these cases, the leader is mysteriously not given a name, but only referred to as the Eleatic Stranger (or Visitor or Foreigner).

Apart from the eventual definition of the sophist as a practitioner of opinion-imitation, we can well believe that Plato is serious about the problems of false statements and non-being (236e ff.), which are also discussed in the *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*, about the idea of the greatest kinds (being, motion, rest, identity and difference, 254c ff.), which can be related to the hierarchy of Forms in the *Republic*, and about the definition of the philosopher as the dialectician who knows how to find the many in the one and the one in the many (253a-e). Making the Stranger an Eleatic suggests that he is to be identified with Parmenidean ways of thought, such as monism and deductive rationalism. However, the sustained criticism of Eleaticism put into his mouth (237b ff.) is certainly a playful move on Plato's part. The Eleatic is part Socratic and part sophist. He turns the playful, inventive and open-ended dialectical method of Socrates into something rigid, dogmatic and intellectually closed. These features, along with Socrates' silent presence in the audience, suggest something less than complete philosophic seriousness.

The *Parmenides* is another interesting case. Here Socrates engages in a dialectical exchange with the famous Eleatic philosopher Parmenides. But this conversation only takes up the first quarter of the dialogue. In those pages, he presents the clearest version of a theory of Ideas to be found in the dialogues, but then Parmenides presents five or six problems with that theory that Socrates cannot resolve. Three-quarters of the dialogue consists of Parmenides giving a demonstration, in dialogical form, of the kind of philosophical (intellectual, logical, dialectical?) exercise that, he says, would enable Socrates to deal adequately with the theory he has proposed and its problems. Ancient Platonists derived from this exercise the concept of ‘the One’ which they identified with the Idea of the Good that is found in the *Republic* and made it central to their doctrines. But (1) on the face of it many of the propositions Parmenides demonstrates seem to contradict other propositions he demonstrates; (2) Plato has not put these demonstrations into the hands of Socrates, nor is Socrates the interlocutor who assents to the steps; and (3) the demonstrations are described by Parmenides himself as a ‘playing a laborious game’ (*pragmateiode paidian paizein*, 137b). Consistent with Plato’s overall use of humour and playfulness, all this suggests that Plato means for us to take seriously not only the theory of Ideas, but also the problems he himself has identified with the theory. It also suggests, however, that we should take the exercises seriously as exercises that prepare us better to reason about Ideas rather than as the cryptic expression of a metaphysical doctrine.

These dialogues are uninterruptedly serious and intellectually demanding. Plato is investigating serious and difficult topics in them, such as the metaphysics of unity and the use of a formal dialectical method to define concepts, but the dialogues as dialogues remain plays. Taking them seriously does not entail taking them literally. As you read these dialogues, remember to imagine Socrates as sitting and listening to the Stranger and to Parmenides in his dialectical demonstration with Aristoteles.

To reduce this chapter to a slogan, when you are reading Plato pay serious attention to play and maintain a playful attitude even towards the most serious of things.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Ardley, Gavin, ‘The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato’, *Philosophy* 42 (1967), 226–44.

## PLAY AND SERIOUSNESS

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- Freydberg, Bernard, *The Play of the Platonic Dialogues*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.
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## CHAPTER 9

# PARADOX

### INVERSIONS OF READER EXPECTATION

A problem that has long dogged human communities is separating truth from opinions that may be strongly held or widely shared but false. A feeling of certainty is just a feeling and confers no probability on that about which one feels it. Popularity is even more problematic as a criterion of truth. That we have always believed something to be true or that we all now believe it to be true is not evidence that it is true; but the reasonable principle of majority rule tempts us to think, especially in politics, that whatever the majority favours is *for that reason* the right choice or policy. Besides this, people tend to believe that what they see or hear or touch is true.

The truth, though, is often contrary to what people believe and what appears to be the case. This was true when early modern scientists began using empirical research to dispel widespread earlier beliefs in the earth being at the centre of the universe, as when we learned that a small injection of a disease can protect you from contracting the disease. The paradoxical quality of views like these is relative to the prevailing beliefs at the time. No one now finds the heliocentric view of the solar system paradoxical and many people have come to recognize the health benefits of inoculation as a principle of medicine. The paradoxical quality of other ideas seems less rooted in the beliefs of any particular time or place, related to more universal human attitudes. Zeno's paradoxes denying the existence of time, motion and multiplicity, for example, seem as paradoxical to students today as they did in ancient Greece.

The reader has observed Plato's use of stories along with arguments, irony along with candour, and humour and play along with seriousness. These are examples of an important and perplexing

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general feature of Plato's dialogues: inversions of reader expectation. One way to summarize the last four chapters is to say that paradox is an essential aspect of Plato's dialogues and of his philosophy. 'Paradox' transliterates the Greek word *paradoxa*. Literally it means 'contrary to opinion', 'contrary to what one would ordinarily think or believe'. Besides Plato's paradoxical uses of myth, play and humour, several types of structural inversion are often found in the dialogues and are discussed in this chapter.

### STRUCTURAL INVERSIONS: SURFACE AND DEPTH, FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND

The surface or foreground of a Platonic dialogue is the dialectical encounter about a philosophic issue. Usually this is between Socrates, as the leading speaker, and one or more interlocutors, whose views are elicited, examined and refuted. On the surface, it seems that the point Plato wants us to attend to is what is or is not the right answer to the question raised, and this is as far as many readers go. But the dialogues have other levels as well, other frameworks of meaning constituted by their literary and dramatic elements and the relations between these and the surface discussion. Among the other levels are comparative assessments of different lives and professions and of individuals' professions (e.g. the proud claim to knowledge or skill of an Ion, Protagoras, Euthyphro or Hippias), and of the different methods or activities characteristic of these lives and skills.

At a level below the surface, Plato thus raises issues and presents ideas that may be somewhat different from the surface issue, and pursues goals other than answering the dialogue's surface question. Just as important, Plato's views on these issues are neither stated directly nor argued for explicitly. Instead, he has Socrates and his interlocutors engage in the dialogue we read. The deeper meaning of the dialogue derives from the topic being discussed with precisely *this* interlocutor in precisely *these* circumstances, with the fact that *this* character has the views he does, accepts the premises he does, in conversation and in contrast with Socrates. Discussing excellence is one thing; discussing it with Protagoras is something a little different, because Protagoras claims to teach excellence and, therefore, must know what it is and be able to explain it coherently. So the reader needs to think about the surface discussion in relation to the background features and details.

In the *Euthyphro*, for example, the surface question concerns the

nature of true holiness or religiosity, a question that is again now of interest, although it was not for most of the last hundred years. In the dialogue's foreground, Euthyphro and Socrates are in dialectical conflict with each other about the nature of piety. But in the background Euthyphro is not just any person; he is a self-impressed, credulous, incurious, intellectually lazy zealot who has no doubt about his superior religious knowledge. And Socrates is not just any person, he is a (perhaps ironically) self-effacing, critical, intellectually curious and tenacious, but religious, person who claims no knowledge and is sure only that whatever the gods are like they must be just. In the background, but carefully shared with the audience, Euthyphro is in moral conflict with his family about whether it violates traditional piety to prosecute his own father and Socrates is in legal conflict with those who have indicted him for impiety in not accepting the traditional gods of Athens. There are so many inverse relationships between Socrates and Euthyphro that the audience should see in the background a conflict between two types of character and lives: that of the self-impressed but ignorant religious zealot and that of the humble but intelligent philosopher. And we are to see that piety is enacted in life not by supposing that we already know what it is but by reflecting on it and living reflectively. Thus, the significance of surface and depth, and foreground and background, are inverted. Piety *is* important. Trying to know it *and* do it are important. Failing to agree about its nature is not as important as is continuing to inquire, realizing that whatever piety is, pious acts must all be pious on account of some character they share and that impious acts do not share.

Similarly, Socrates sitting silently during the didactic and expository presentations in *Sophist*, *Statesman* and *Timaeus* is significant, though it can be debated whether it signifies Plato's having gone beyond the limitations of the historical Socrates' purely refutative dialectic or Plato's quietly and ironically critical assessment of the quasi-dogmatic use to which dialectic was being put by some members of the Academy. In the *Protagoras*, the prologue with young Hippocrates (310–14) and the carefully described crowd of the sophists' admirers, many of whom are named (315), suggest that the issue is different and larger than the foreground discussion about whether the excellences are one or many and whether they are teachable or not, though there is a connection. The body of the dialogue is a highly public demonstration of the competitive superiority of philosopher to sophist, of philosophy to sophistry, and of dialectic

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to rhetoric. Socrates is superior to Protagoras on the topic the sophist claims to teach, excellence, and even on a topic, interpretation of poetry, that is a sophistic specialty but that Socrates here, as elsewhere, judges inferior.

Similarly, in the *Apology* the repeated vocal outbursts in the background but carefully pointed out to us by Plato (17c, 20e, 27b) should alert us to the fact that Socrates is deliberately stinging the jurors, as he always does and as he has told them he does. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates' repeated attempts to draw the mathematician Theodorus into the discussion (e.g. 161–2, 165), the somewhat artificial way in which Protagoras is brought in, and the central contrast between philosopher and politician, should suggest to us that the question about the nature of knowledge (*epistêmê*) is part of a larger question about the teaching professions and the knowledge they claim to impart.

Another structural inversion of reader expectation found in the dialogues is the use of what is superficially and explicitly said to be a digression to focus on something important to Plato. Although modern books usually present the theory that knowledge is recollection (*anamnêsis*) as a defining Platonic doctrine, surprisingly it is only presented clearly in a few dialogues and then in what are formally digressions. Surely an important point because it's placed in the middle, it is nevertheless presented as a digression in *Meno* in which Socrates indulges so as to draw Meno back into the inquiry about excellence. Similarly, in the *Phaedo* recollection is presented only, with an explicit pun, to help Simmias 'recollect' a 'frequent' idea of Socrates (72e–73a). Although it is usually overlooked, the central books of the *Republic* are such a 'digression', carried out so that Glaucon and Adeimantus can see justice in the large frame of a city as an aid to seeing it in the small frame of a human soul. Another centrally located digression with an important point is the portraits of lawyer and philosopher in the *Theaetetus* that ends in the necessary existence of evils and the two established paradigms of the happy and miserable lives.

## SEMANTIC INVERSIONS

Another type of inversion of reader expectations has to do with the deployment of technical and philosophic terms in the dialogues. One example, notorious among his readers since antiquity, is that, despite Socrates' insistence that interlocutors be clear about what they mean

when they say things, Plato himself is inconsistent about the use of technical terms, including the terms for Forms (*eidōs* and *idea*) and knowledge (*epistēmē*, *phronēsis*, *gnōsis*, *sophia* and *technē*). Beyond that, however, Plato's dialogues often serve to illuminate for the reader differences between superficial, popular, apparent meanings of terms and deeper, philosophic, true meanings of the same terms. As is also often the case, the dialogues suggest an inversion of ordinary or popular identifications. An example was discussed in Chapter 8: the inversion and redefinition of the terms 'play' and 'seriousness' in the statements and the behaviour of characters in the dialogues. Here are some other examples.

Ordinarily, people think the material world is real; it's 'the real world'. In Plato's dialogues the material world is sometimes identified as appearance, and true reality is found in immaterial ideas that we may encounter in thought alone. Things are not really real; Forms or Ideas are really real. The meaning of the word 'form' itself is actually inverted in Plato's language. Originally both terms, *eidōs* and *idea*, derive from verbs of physiological seeing and therefore mean physical form or shape that is seen with one's eyes. In Plato's dialogues the terms gradually come to refer to the unseen and immaterial Forms that are only metaphorically 'seen' with 'the eyes of the soul'.

In the *Phaedrus* (261–74), Socrates criticizes the speech-writing of Lysias and describes, in contrast, a 'true' rhetoric that is based on dialectical collection and division and is therefore philosophic. So the speech-writers and rhetoricians whom everyone recognizes are not true rhetoricians; that is, they are not really rhetoricians. The true rhetoric is philosophy. The politicians everyone recognizes are not really politicians; Socrates the philosopher is the only man in Athens who practises the true art of politics (*Gorgias* 516d). What people call 'virtue' or 'excellence', 'popular excellence' (*dēmōtikē arētē*, *Phaedo* 82a) is not true excellence. The things that people call beautiful are not really beautiful; real beauty is inner, not outer (*Phaedrus* 279b), and it is an immaterial idea rather than in material things (*Symposium*). Real, lasting pleasure is intellectual (*Philebus*), not the physical activities most people think of as pleasures. The supposed 'knowledge' of politicians and poets is actually ignorance; and the supposed ignorance of the philosopher is true knowledge.

Whole dialogues can be viewed as such inversions of meanings. In the *Meno*, for example, Meno initiates a conversation with Socrates

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by asking in what way virtue or excellence (*arêtê*) is acquired. Socrates shifts the question to the nature of virtue and, as Meno's proposed accounts of virtue are refuted, Plato gradually brings it to the reader's attention that Meno uses the term in a way systematically different from the way Socrates does. Whereas Socrates uses the term *arêtê* for a moral excellence, Meno's accounts reveal that what he means by *arêtê* is political efficacy of the sort exemplified by Pericles, Aristides and Themistocles. The conclusion of the dialogue, therefore, is not that *moral virtue* is a gift of the gods (*theia moira*), but that political efficacy and success are divine gifts and that they are *not* the excellences for which men are praised or blamed; because for praise or blame to make sense, the acts would have to originate with the actors, not with the gods.

From one point of view, this inversion of meanings is a central point of the dialogues. Like the sophists, Plato observed that words meant different things to different people. But he did not think that this proved the terms referred to nothing or that they have no stable meaning, as some sophists did. The reader, then, should be alert to inversions in the meanings of words.

## CRISIS AND REVERSAL (*PERIPETEIA*)

Another and more subtle kind of inversion of the reader's expectations is found in Plato's dialogues. A regular feature of Greek tragedies was *peripeteia*, a crisis or reversal of fortune for the main character that occurs as a result of a chain of events, an observable change in the direction of the hero's life from stability and happiness towards destruction or downfall. Such reversals are part of what turns an ordinary sequence of events into a story worth telling. A classic example is *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus is the successful and beloved king of Thebes. He arrived in the city as a stranger after the death of the former king, Laius, and became king after solving the Sphinx's riddle. He married the queen, Jocasta, and had children with her. As the play begins, we learn that a plague has struck Thebes because of the unjust murder of Laius. Oedipus publicly sets out to catch the murderer and thus save the city. He slowly learns what the audience already knew: that he himself was the murderer of Laius, his own father; that he has married his mother and fathered his own sisters; that the evil-doer he seeks to punish is himself. Jocasta commits suicide; Oedipus blinds himself, and leaves Thebes.

Although the dialogues of Plato are not as dramatic as *Oedipus*, they do contain crises and reversals that can perplex readers. From confidence in their knowledge and apparent leadership of the discussion by giving their views, Socrates' interlocutors often experience a crisis of confidence, a crisis in their views of themselves and the world, after which there is a change in the direction of the discussion to a situation in which the interlocutor is following the lead of Socrates.

The crises are often marked by expressions of exasperation or another strong feeling by the interlocutors. 'But Socrates, I have no way of telling you what I have in mind, for whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it' (*Euthyphro* 11b). 'Socrates even before I met you I used to hear that you are always in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed' (*Meno* 79e–80a). 'But Socrates, you are not conducting the inquiry in the right way', says Critias, who goes on to say, 'I think you are quite consciously doing what you denied doing a moment ago – you are trying to refute me and ignoring the real question at issue' (*Charmides* 165e–66c). Some of them get quite nasty. 'Tell me, Socrates, do you still have a wet nurse? . . . Because she's letting you run around with a snotty nose, and doesn't wipe it when she needs to!' (*Republic* 343a). Others are despondent.

When we heard what they [Simmius and Cebes] said we were all quite depressed, as we told each other afterwards. We had been quite convinced by the previous argument, and they seemed to confuse us again, and to drive us to unbelief not only in what had already been said but also in what was going to be said, lest we be worthless critics or the subject itself admitted of no certainty. (*Phaedo* 88c)

After these crises, Socrates helps the interlocutors return to the conversation in ways that are extremely diverse in length and complexity. Sometimes a bit of playful humour suffices. In the *Meno* the middle third of the dialogue is an extended digression in which the theory of recollection (*anamnêsis*) is demonstrated; but dramatically its function is to bring Meno back to co-operative inquiry. And after the crisis and recovery, Socrates becomes more overtly directive in the discussion, often suggesting conceptual distinctions that enable

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the interlocutor to take another step. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates suggests that piety is part of justice. In the *Crito*, when Crito is unable to say whether escaping from prison would be breaking a just agreement, Socrates imagines a dialectical refutation of himself by the personified 'laws and the city' which carries on nearly to the end of the dialogue. In the *Theaetetus* (149–51), when Theaetetus loses confidence in his ability to give the kind of answer to the question about knowledge that Socrates wants, Socrates tells an elaborate story about his intellectual midwifery that enables Theaetetus to forge ahead. The idea of intellectual midwifery has fascinated readers for two thousand years, but it was only presented once in the dialogues and then as a digression.

The Socratic pretence of merely following the thoughts of the interlocutor often causes the interlocutor to become confused, frustrated, angry and to attempt to end the inquiry. What this crisis and turning point represents in a Socratic inquiry, however, is not the shift from fortune to disaster as in the tragedies; it is the experience of *aporia*, doubt, and of the interlocutor's own lack of knowledge. Socrates takes steps to help the interlocutor recover from the frustration and return to the inquiry. To the extent that he is successful in this, the dialogue will end well for the interlocutor because he will have become aware of ignorance, the first step on the road to knowledge, and because he will have learned that some answers are wrong, that certain premises seem to be worth accepting, and he will have practised the skills needed to eventually attain knowledge. In fact, this rarely or never happens

It is worth noting, though, how this crisis and reversal of self-awareness provides a mirror for the audience. Although the interlocutor does not learn, the reader may be enabled to learn, in part, by recognition of the interlocutor's failure. This is one of the mechanisms by which the dialogues work to educate readers indirectly.

## THE DIALOGUES AS ENACTMENTS OF PHILOSOPHY

To interpret the dialogues properly, the reader needs to proceed in a way contrary to what might be assumed, because Plato's strategy of communication in some ways inverts our expectations. Instead of looking where you expect the main point to be, look where you would ordinarily *not* expect it to be. Look behind what is in the foreground. Instead of looking for Plato's philosophy in the seeming pronouncements of Socrates or other leading speakers, look at the

dialogue as a whole, including what all of its characters say, and also at the connections between these sayings and the characters' deeds both in and beyond the dialogue.

The dialogues are not treatises; they are not statements of philosophic doctrine. More than mimes, exhibitions or replications, they are enactments of philosophy. The word 'enact' has two meanings. It means 'to act or play a part', as in 'Helen Mirren enacted the role of Queen Elizabeth'. But it also means 'to make to be'; we speak of legislation as 'legal enactments'. Having been voted by the legislature, the proposed law *is* law. In this latter sense, the term figures in several ways in recent psychological research.

Contrary to our unreflective assumption, some researchers have argued that cognition is not the internal representation of a world that is what it is by a mind that is what it is apart from the cognitive act. Instead, thought or cognition may be better understood as enactive – that is, as the bringing into being of a world and a mind out of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs. Empirical research shows that individuals recall more of enacted than they do of corresponding non-enacted information. In some forms of psychotherapy, a changed cognitive and emotional self is constituted by behavioural enactments. In religion and society, enactment of sacred tales and foundational myths creates and enhances group identity and cohesion. By generalizing this, it can be claimed that cultural history operates through enactment as well as interpretation.

To call Plato's dialogues enactments means, first, that the dialogues are plays, whether performed, read aloud or read silently. But it also means that, beyond saying things, the dialogues actually make things be. Plays create effects on their spectators. Aristotle was the first to observe (*Poetics* ch. 6; 1449b27) that tragedies cause us to experience certain feelings, and that these feelings in response to the drama, rather than in response to a real-life situation, have an emotionally cleansing effect (*katharsis*) that is beneficial. These effects unite with the play's statements, the story with the speeches. The effects of the play are distinct from the characters' statements, although they are partly produced by those statements.

Plato's dialogues also create effects in readers that are distinguishable from the meanings of statements made in them and may even contradict those statements. The most famous example of this distinction and contradiction is Socrates' frequent statements that he doesn't know, which seem to us and even to other characters in the

dialogues not to be true. Thus his denials of knowledge create in us the experience of puzzlement (*aporia*) and the wish to find out the true answer.

The dialogues create these experiences, wishes and feelings because they operate through the imagination and emotions as well as through intellect. Statements and arguments operate primarily on the mind, on the intellectual or rational level of our experience. The dialogues create effects in and through the imaginations and emotions of the readers as much as, sometimes even more than, through reason or intellect.

This is facilitated by Plato's deliberate and artful erasure of the barrier between 'reality' and 'fiction'. Plato was so successful at this that serious scholars as well as ordinary readers still struggle to decide where the 'historical' Socrates leaves off and the 'Platonic' Socrates begins. Plato exploits the lifelikeness of characters and situations and sometimes constructs elaborate fictions about the 'true' origin of the fictional narrative we are reading (*Theaetetus* 142–3, *Parmenides* 126–7, *Symposium* 172a–73e, and *Phaedo*, 57a–59c). These strategies both conceal Plato as an author and efface the barrier readers of fiction normally employ between 'reality' and 'fiction'. More importantly for philosophical purposes, these strategies erase the barrier between the reader's ordinary or popular view of reality and a very different one that is Plato's.

Here is an example on a large scale. The *Republic* begins as a narrative by Socrates of the conversation about justice in which he participated at the house of Cephalus. Most of that conversation was alternately between himself and Glaucon or himself and Adeimantus. In the narrated conversation, theories are developed about human excellence, knowledge, reality, social organization, education and the rewards of good and bad conduct. But the dialogue ends without returning to the narrative frame; the reader is left *in* the narrated world of these theories.

On a much smaller scale, because theories are put forth in dramas by vivid and masterfully constructed characters with whom we readers are imaginatively and emotionally involved, their words may do more than refer to their referents; they may virtually create their referents in the reader's mind. When I read Diotima's theory about beauty in the *Symposium* (208–12), I must understand the theory in order to follow the story. In so doing, I bring the theory to life in my own mind; *I* think it. If you work through the geometrical argument in the *Meno* (82–5), you will *have* the experience of

‘recollection’ – that is, of learning a truth that is somehow already present in your own mind.

In other words, the effect that is created by Plato’s dialogues is the reality-for-the-audience, the actual experience of the world as he sees it, not only intellectually entertained through our thinking about claims and arguments, but also imaginatively entered into and emotionally charged or felt. In studying the dialogues, readers internalize or introject the world as Plato sees it.

To call the dialogues enactments, therefore, is to say something about the *kind* of documents they are: not primarily treatises. Their *way* of philosophizing is not solely or primarily assertoric. It is not that they are nowhere or never assertoric; rather, such assertions as are made cannot be abstracted from their full context without falsification. The dialogues’ self-referential and self-instantiating character and the reader’s internal reproduction of ideas, orientations and commitments operate in a mutually reinforcing way. Thus the dialogues do things and make things happen as well as say things.

The reader should be alert to this communicative inversion, to how the dialogues tend to substitute enactment of an intellectual world for dogmatic instruction in propositions that might define such a world.

#### PARADOX AND PLATO’S PHILOSOPHY

It is paradoxical that Plato’s dialogues enact their views rather than assert them, as it is paradoxical to use humour seriously and seriousness humorously. It is paradoxical, too, that the dialogues are structured so as to invert the readers’ expectations about the foreground and background placement of major points in the stories. And Socrates famously and repeatedly expresses several views that have become known as the ‘Socratic Paradoxes’. No one willingly does evil. Excellence is knowledge. Wisdom is knowing that you know nothing. These and other paradoxes and inversions make us stop and think, and, as has been said before, this is one of Plato’s intentions with respect to the audience, as it is Socrates’ intention with respect to his interlocutors (*Apology* 29–30) and the function of philosophic education (*Republic* 521–31).

In fact, in many ways paradox is at the heart of Plato’s philosophy. The points to be drawn from the dialogues are often paradoxical. For example, although we normally associate ethical terms such as ‘courage’ and ‘justice’ with actions, they turn out to be types of

knowledge or thought in many dialogues. The paradoxical idea that virtue or excellence is knowledge is the 'Socratic intellectualism' for which Socrates or Plato have sometimes been criticized. The signature Platonic theory of Forms, that immaterial entities which cannot be sensed are more real, more knowable, more truly objects of knowledge than individual material things, is the height of paradox. The list of paradoxes expressed in the dialogues is very long.

Politicians, who are assumed to know important things, are actually ignorant, a point made in *Apology*, *Meno* and *Gorgias*. Poets, who are thought of as communicating a kind of wisdom, also have no knowledge of what they talk about (*Apology*, *Republic*, *Ion*). A life spent not engaging in the kind of dialectical examinations Socrates performs on himself and others 'is not worth living for a human being' (*Apology* 38a).

The true expression of erotic desire is not sexual, but philosophical intercourse (*Symposium*). Philosophy is the true poetry (*Phaedo* 61a) and it is practising for death and dying (*Phaedo* 64a). The weighty, serious and detailed portrait of 'the philosopher' in *Theaetetus* (172–7) is a caricature that is, in every detail, contradicted by the Socrates of the dialogues. The true image of Socrates is given by the drunken Alcibiades in *Symposium* (215), who describes him as being like the busts of Silenus that are ugly on the outside but open up to reveal a beautiful image of a god inside. In other dialogues, the ideal philosopher describes himself as a gadfly (*Apology* 30e) and is described as a sorcerer and a stingray (*Meno* 80a). The Socrates of Plato's dialogues is a living paradox.

Plato does not compose dialogues mechanically; there is no regular pattern either to the occurrence or to the significance of the structural, semantic and communicative inversions discussed in this chapter. So there is no mathematical or geometrical rule for the reader to follow; the reader must use finesse. Think about the foreground discussion *and* the background. By presenting an intellectual or philosophic question such as 'What is true courage?' to our minds on the surface of what is a drama, Plato draws us into a more complicated web of characters, ideas, words and deeds. And while there is usually no official answer to the foreground question, Plato's view of the background issues is often quite clear.

Thinking about all the paradoxical aspects of the dialogues discussed in the last four chapters, however, suggests that Plato's philosophy in essential ways is itself paradoxical. Paradox is a defining feature of Plato's philosophy in his use of language, structure of

dialogues and dominant ideas, and this provides the bridge to the more direct exposition of that philosophy in the next three chapters. The reader should be alert to inversions of expectation and think about what they mean, background states of affairs or topics, digressions, crises and reversals and, in sum, how a serious philosophical point, theory or idea might be more effectively enacted through a dialogue than logically proved by it.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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**PART III**

**PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY: PERMANENCE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Plato is perplexing because while so much on the surface of the dialogues seems to be variable and ever-changing, some things nevertheless seem to be stable. Yet it is difficult to pin down exactly what Plato thinks, because even the ideas and theories most widely associated with his name – the theory of Ideas, the Idea of the Good, the care of the soul, Socratic method, learning as recollection – upon closer inspection, seem to move around, like the untied statues carved by Daedalus (*Meno* 97d–e). In this and the following chapters, we consider some stable features within this changing domain, from which a clearer picture of Plato’s philosophy can be derived. Plato’s philosophy is not, however, a doctrinal system or a set of doctrines that change over time, but something more general and differently focused.

## CHAPTER 10

# PLATONIC ANONYMITY AND THE NATURE OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY

### PLATONIC ANONYMITY

Plato wrote only fictional dialogues, no treatises. He nowhere addresses a reader or an audience directly as an author. Even in dialogues where he names himself as being present, he does not speak. Some dialogues deliberately create multiple layers of authorial masking. The prologue of the *Theaetetus* (142–3) tells an elaborate story of how the dialogue was written by Euclides, with Socrates' corrections, and then edited so as to eliminate the annoying repetitions of 'I said' and 'he said'. Plato not only doesn't speak directly, he has taken great pains to remain anonymous. This is called 'Platonic anonymity' and it is often thought to be a problem.

We want to know Plato's doctrines or beliefs, and his carefully preserved anonymity seems to be a refusal to tell us. The fact is, there are no authentic and non-dialogical Platonic writings. The *Seventh Letter* is not authentic and, even if it were authentic, it asserts that Plato never has written and never will write the things about which he is 'most serious', which means either that he didn't write those things at all or that he didn't write them in treatises. Anonymity is a problem, however, only *on the assumption* that philosophers have doctrines and teach those doctrines in what they write.

But this is evidently not what Plato has set out to do; anonymity is essential to the effectiveness of Plato's project. A philosopher who asserts views and gives arguments for them invites the audience to disagree and give their own reasons. Meanwhile, the philosopher's claims remain intellectually external to the audience. Plato, rather differently, guides us to envision the world as he does rather than trying to prove to us the truth of propositions about the world.

Many readers ignore Platonic anonymity. Perhaps they do not

notice that the dialogues are not expository prose and that Plato does not tell the reader, at least not directly, what he is trying to communicate. Perhaps they notice it, but are untroubled by the fact of Plato's personal absence. This is facilitated by modern editions and translations, which put his name on the cover so as to make a statement to the reader, 'This is a book in which Plato has written his philosophy.' But, as we learned in Chapter 1, Plato did not publish his dialogues, they did not have his name on the cover, and, possibly, other members of the Academy contributed to the texts we have as editors, revisers or even authors.

Other readers notice Platonic anonymity but consider it unimportant, believing that it can be construed as simply a feature of the literary form in which the philosophic content is dressed. Whatever Socrates or any other leading speaker says, they assume, can be directly attributed to Plato. These various main speakers are simply mouthpieces for what Plato wants to say. But this can't be right. Treating dramatic dialogues as if they were treatises is a mistake; the same mistake as interpreting a novel, say *War and Peace*, as if it were history or a political theory. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy presents certain historical events; but he does so in fictional form and without the historian's commitment to present only what happened. Tolstoy also presents political theories in *War and Peace*; but, again, he does so in the context of a work of historical fiction, not with the theorist's aim of just convincing the reader of the correctness of his views about war and government.

More particularly, it is wrong to argue from a statement made by a character such as Socrates to a conclusion about a belief held by Plato unless one can prove that Plato intended the character to have been read as a mouthpiece in this way. But we have no such evidence. Are Don Quixote's statements to be understood as statements of Cervantes? Are Hamlet or Julius Caesar or Lear merely mouthpieces for the views of Shakespeare? Surely not. What they say, no doubt, bears some relation to what their authors believe, but the relationship is complex, indirect, and requires interpretation, rather than being able to be read straight off the words themselves put into the character's mouth. And so it is with Plato.

Other readers, more scholarly, treat Platonic anonymity as a riddle or problem to be solved in a way that results in our being able to locate Plato on the spectrum of philosophic doctrines. Several such attempts have been made. Linking anonymity with the inconclusive ending of most dialogues, and linking both with certain 'unwritten

doctrines' that Plato is alleged to have taught only orally, has led to the 'esoteric' view of Plato. This was discussed in Chapter 1.

Inconclusive endings and anonymity have been connected by other interpreters to support the view that Plato is a sceptic, someone who denies that anything can be known and that any doctrine can be certain. This view of Plato goes back at least to the 'New Academy' that was discussed in Chapter 3. The dichotomy of dogmatists and sceptics is a feature of the sceptics' definition of themselves and their attack on those who teach things, i.e. 'dogmatists'. The sceptic-dogmatist dichotomy assumes that positive teachings or their absence is the defining feature of a philosophy, and thus assumes that philosophy is a matter of settled views.

But Plato's dialogues, as we have seen, owe a great deal to poets and playwrights as well as to philosophers. If we think of Plato in association with ancient dramatic poets, rather than in association with dogmatic (and anti-dogmatic) philosophers, and if we suspend the distinctively modern idea that a philosopher is by definition someone who puts forward a set or system of doctrines, then Plato's anonymity is less problematic. The fact that he does not speak to us directly is a consistent characteristic of the dialogues that can lead us to a first approximation of what philosophy is for him and can serve as a route of access to other consistent aspects of his thought.

It is better, then, to accept Platonic anonymity as guidance, as an indication of the correct way to interpret the dialogues. At face value, anonymity expresses Plato's choice not to *tell* us authoritatively the answer to whatever question his characters discuss. First, this means that he is neither a dogmatist nor a sceptic; he teaches neither doctrines nor the impossibility of them. By remaining anonymous, Plato evades what might be the reader's wish to be told the answer authoritatively, and at the same time provokes the audience to philosophize. Provocation, not demonstration, is the Socratic mission of the dialogues. While Plato is serious about the issues, like his Socrates, he sees value in perplexity.

Instead of forcing the dialogues to fit into a preconceived notion that their philosophy must be either dogmatic or sceptical, we would do better to discover in the dialogues themselves what sort of thing Plato thinks 'philosophy' is by looking at what his hero, Socrates, the philosopher, does.

## PLATO'S CONCEPTION OF 'PHILOSOPHY'

The term 'philosophy' as the name for an identifiable type of intellectual activity is one of the many inheritances of the Western intellectual tradition from the ancient Greeks, of whose word *philosophia* it is merely a transliteration. But nothing called philosophy existed before the time of Socrates. Wisdom (*sophia*) was an old moral value. Protagoras and others were claiming possession of a special skill or expertise in it by calling themselves sophists (*sophistai*). The term *philosophia* – literally 'love of wisdom' – is rarely used before the late fifth century. It was *not* used by those whom we call Presocratic philosophers. The term may have been used in the Socratic circle, to distinguish their enterprise from the sophists' or to indicate that they, unlike the sophists, did not think they already possessed wisdom. The first two writers who used the term regularly were Plato and his slightly older contemporary, Isocrates.

Isocrates (436–338) uses the term *philosophia* for serious study from which a person gains sound beliefs, and learns to assess situations accurately and act prudently. Acting rightly is not the result of knowledge (*epistēmē*), for Isocrates; instead, he considers wisdom to be reaching sound practical opinions (*doxai*). His *philosophia* includes the study of literature and politics, but not mathematical sciences because they do not contribute to effective speech and action. Isocrates' educational programme is practical, not theoretical. He describes his *philosophia* as training in *logos*, by which he means a natural ability to organize one's ideas and present them clearly in words.

Modern readers often take Isocrates' to have been a sophist; but this isn't quite correct. Isocrates criticizes 'sophists', as Plato does, but he sometimes groups Plato with the sophists. For his part, Plato shows some respect for Isocrates in the *Phaedrus*. He is referred to as *kalos*, beautiful or noble, and as Socrates' *hetairos*, companion, good friend or intellectual associate. Plato also has Socrates praise Isocrates near the end of the dialogue (279), in a remark that is playfully ambiguous under the circumstances: 'there is some *philosophia* in the man's thought'.

Plato uses several of the same terms as Isocrates – *philosophia*, *epistēmē*, *doxa* – but his use is quite different. In the dialogues, knowledge (*epistēmē*) appears as one's most important goal, to which opinion (*doxa*) is plainly inferior. Knowledge, for example, is

equated with virtue and wisdom, but opinion, adequate for practical purposes, is definitely inferior. In the world of the Platonic dialogues, the theoretical life is more highly esteemed than the practical life of politics and the law courts. Plato's Socrates rejects speech-making, preferring the give-and-take of dialectic as the means and end of a proper (that is, philosophical) education. He prefers live conversation (*dialegesthai*) and intellectual association or being together (*synousia*) to writing and oratory. He criticizes the study of poetry in several dialogues, but requires the study of five mathematical sciences in the philosophical curriculum of the *Republic*.

What Plato means by *philosophia* has a broader scope and different orientation from contemporary ideas about philosophy. First, *philosophia* is not a set of philosophic doctrines; it is a kind of activity. The verb *philosophhein*, to philosophize, is used at least as often as the noun *philosophia* in the dialogues. And it is not the detached, purely rational and speculative thinking often associated with philosophy. The philosopher, exemplified by Socrates, is always an inquirer, a questioner; he rarely says he knows or is sure of anything. He is extremely well informed about persons, political facts and procedures, and the details of different arts and practices. He is simultaneously morally serious and intellectually seductive; he is a theorist, but a theorist in and of the practical world rather than the abstracted and other-worldly figure of the *Theaetetus* digression (172–7) or the ivory-tower intellectual of the *Republic's* Cave parable (book 7).

Plato's Socrates knows the physical theories of earlier thinkers, but he twice denies being interested in that sort of thing (*Apology* 19, *Phaedo* 96). The philosophy that he practises is driven more powerfully by historical forces at work in Plato's Athens. So, although Pre-socratics are mentioned, only Heraclitus and Parmenides seem deeply interesting to him. Much more attention is given to sophists, who had far-reaching influence in the Athens of the late fifth century. Hippias and Prodicus, as well as Protagoras, participate in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere; Gorgias, Callicles and Polus are prominent in the *Gorgias*; and Meno is a pupil of Gorgias; two dialogues are named for Hippias; and Thrasymachus is Socrates' main interlocutor in *Republic* I. The eristic sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are satirized in the *Euthydemus*, and eristics are attacked more directly in *Republic*, *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus*. The *Sophist* is taken up with defining not a moral virtue such as justice or courage, but this type of person and life that are alternative to that of the philosopher.

Speech-writers (*logographoi*), who wrote speeches for others to

deliver, were distinct from sophists who taught the oratorical skill, and Plato is also concerned with them. Lysias is a silent member of the group in the *Republic*. A speech that paradoxically advises a youth to grant sexual favours to a man who doesn't love him rather than to one who does, allegedly composed by Lysias and read by Phaedrus, is the starting point for the *Phaedrus*. A funeral oration supposedly composed by Aspasia, Pericles' concubine, and delivered by Socrates is the substance of the *Menexenus*.

Another focus of Plato's interest is politics and politicians, which overlaps with his interest in sophists, since many politicians' success depended in part on oratorical skills they learned from the sophists. Alcibiades participates in both the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium*; Critias and Charmides are interlocutors in the *Charmides*; Nicias in the *Laches*; Callicles in the *Gorgias*; Anytus, one of Socrates' accusers, in both the *Apology* and the *Meno*; and Pericles by implication in the *Menexenus*. The explicit project of the *Politicus* is to define a statesman or politician.

Plato is also quite interested in the poets. Homer is mentioned or quoted in every dialogue, Hesiod in about half, and a poem of Simonides is carefully analysed in the *Protagoras*. Socrates or others refer to Pindar, Sappho, Archilochus, Stesichorus, Theognis, Anacreon, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Agathon, the tragic poet, is present at the *Protagoras*, and the *Symposium* is set as a banquet celebrating his victory, in 416. Among the *Symposium*'s speeches on love, the most delightful and profound apart from Diotima's as related by Socrates, is that of Aristophanes, the comic poet.

*Philosophia* is the alternative preferred to all the other intellectual practices; yet Plato borrows materials from Presocratics, logographers, sophists, politicians and poets, which he transforms for his own purposes. Thus, he uses ideas and methods of argument from several Presocratics, but the purpose of what he calls philosophy is not, like theirs, knowledge of the natural world. Like many aspects of Plato's thought, *philosophia* is both traditional and innovative. Like poetry and drama, Plato's *philosophia* aims essentially at education (*paideia*) in the ancient Greek sense. That is, his concern is for the formation of mind, soul and character more than of true propositions and valid arguments. The examination of propositions and arguments is not a philosophic end in itself, but a means of character formation that he considers superior to the study of poetry and the practice of debate. He seeks to inculcate orientations, attitudes and practices, not specific beliefs.

His *philosophia* is also traditional in that it is competitive, as Greek culture was. Plato competes with the traditional educators of the Greeks, the poets and playwrights, by writing literature; and the end of the *Symposium* can be read as a subtle and playful declaration of victory. He competes with the current teachers of the Greeks, the sophists, other Socratics, and Isocrates, by establishing the Academy. In their repeated criticism of politicians and political leaders, the dialogues function as literary philosophic provocations, a metamorphosis of the gadfly Socrates had been (*Apology* 30) but that Plato was not.

It is instructive to collect assertions made about philosophy in the Platonic corpus. Philosophy is the architectonic art and science, and the philosopher the archetypal person. Plato's Socrates surpasses the orators in oratory, the poets in myth-making, and the sophists in their enterprise of educating the young, though he takes no payment and is convicted of corrupting them. He can speak simply or with complexity, plainly or eloquently, gently or with ferocity. Socrates does not seek public office because, he says, a truly just man cannot survive in active politics (*Apology* 31–2); on the other hand, he declares himself the only true *politikos* (see Glossary) in Athens (*Gorgias* 521), and in the ironic utopia he describes in the *Republic* the philosophers rule, but they have to be forced to do so. The philosophy he practises is also the highest art, *mousikê* (see Glossary) (*Phaedo* 61). Though he is condemned for impiety he is more truly pious than the zealot Euthyphro. He is truly courageous (*Symposium* 219–21), temperate (*Charmides* 155), just (*Phaedo* 118) and wise in spite – or because – of knowing nothing.

Plato's *philosophia* not only has a wider scope than modern conceptions of philosophy, but it is also different in orientation. Its central questions are moral, ethical and political, rather than questions of logic, epistemology and metaphysics. Even the dialogues most given to complex ideas and abstract argument serve an essentially ethical and political aim. The *Sophist* and the *Politicus*, for example, may exemplify the logical method of division (*diaeresis*); but the method is employed to examine the two popular ways of life that offer fame, fortune and the opportunity to benefit one's fellow citizens, but to which Plato would have us prefer, or at least compare, the philosophic life.

What is practised in the dialogues is often protreptic, designed to turn readers to philosophy as a practice, rather than didactic. The author of the dialogues, like the founder of the Academy, suggests

ideas and guides thinking, rather than teaching settled truths. His *philosophia* is a way of life – what the Greeks would have called simply ‘a life’, a *bios* – rather than a profession or activity separable from other aspects of one’s life that might be considered as important or essential. That way will be the subject of Chapter 12. Philosophy for Plato is oral rather than written, and provisional rather than final. We turn to its provisional nature next.

#### PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY AS NON-DOGMATIC AND OPEN-ENDED

Plato’s philosophy is neither dogmatic nor sceptical. It is ‘non-dogmatic’ – that is, first and foremost, it is not dogmatic. Plato’s aim in writing the dialogues is not to teach the reader specific beliefs or to propound specific philosophic views, such as the immortality of the soul or the idea that happiness consists in knowledge, as doctrines. The arguments that are sometimes presented for these beliefs – or against their contradictories – are not presented as conclusive, even though readers often assume that Plato considered them conclusive.

Plato’s philosophy is also not sceptical; it does not inculcate or exhibit the view that nothing can be known. The term ‘sceptic’ comes from the Greek verb *skeptesthai*, to inquire. The ancient sceptics were so called, because their view was that one should always continue inquiring and should never cease, in the belief that one has finally found the final answer. Plato’s Socrates also believes that one should always inquire, but he does not believe that one should give up confidence that one day the final answer will be discovered. He rejects Meno’s ‘eristic argument’, what has been called the ‘paradox of inquiry’, that you can’t search for what you don’t know because either you already know it or you won’t recognize it when you find it (*Meno* 80e) not only because the theory of recollection avoids the horns of the dilemma, but also because it is morally better to believe that we can learn from inquiry (86b).

Plato’s philosophy is ‘open-ended’ because questions and the answers given to them always remain open. The death of the argument (*logos*) is more to be mourned, Socrates says (*Phaedo* 89b), than the death of Socrates. Most dialogues don’t come to an official answer. But even if one did, the arguments that seem good today should also seem so tomorrow (*Meno* 89b). So, the views and arguments that are put forward are explicitly open-ended; they are explicitly and repeatedly described as provisional, subject to further consideration, open to objections.

But the open-endedness is more extensive. Socrates and Plato seem to be consistently committed to certain principles. These principles include that the soul is distinct from the body and of greater value, that knowledge is different from and preferable to opinion, as is justice from injustice, and virtue, in general from vice. Even these principles are not presented dogmatically. Although they serve as the premises of arguments throughout the Platonic corpus, premises on which provisional beliefs are based, they remain open to objections and reconsideration. At the end of his life, a few days before his execution, Socrates still considers his lifelong belief that it is never permitted to do wrong open to discussion. He rehearses the old arguments and asks Crito whether new arguments have come to light that are stronger or whether objections to these arguments have come to light that they previously missed. If so, they must consider them; if not – but only if not – then he will continue to believe them and act in accordance with them (*Crito* 46b). Thus not only the beliefs, but also the arguments that are presented for the beliefs and even the premises of those arguments, remain tentative, open to further inquiry, criticism, rejection or revision.

Moreover, Plato's open-ended views put forward indirectly more than directly and are presented for our consideration as much by non-logical as by purely logical means, as we shall see in the next section.

#### PLATO'S INDIRECT WAY OF TEACHING THROUGH DIALOGICAL ENACTMENT

The dialogues do not directly teach us anything. In most dialogues, a clear, definite answer to the basic questions is never reached and Socrates often explicitly states at the end that he and his interlocutor have not yet learned the answer to the question they have been discussing. Although it seems frustrating and perplexing to readers, this outcome is consistent with the character Plato gave to his Socrates as a person who denies knowledge of the very things in which he is most interested: human excellence (*Meno* 71b) and whether it can be taught (*Protagoras* 320), and wisdom (*Apology* 19). He even denies knowing what knowledge is (*Theaetetus* 145–6) while nevertheless consistently claiming that its possession is what defines a philosopher (*Phaedo* 64–8, *Republic* 475–80).

To say that the dialogues teach nothing directly, however, is not to say that they teach nothing at all. They teach an array of attitudes,

orientations, values and practices (discussed in the next two chapters); a way of life but they teach this indirectly. Human production can take several forms. One is the obvious making of things; but saying things and doing things are also forms of production. We are the producers of our statements and actions. Similarly, human judgements or conclusions can take several forms. One is the obvious verbal asserting of one's judgements; saying *that* something is so. But judgements are also communicated through our comportment and our actions. A horrified look communicates a negative judgement about something, as does active avoidance or flight.

The usual mode of philosophy in the Western tradition is assertoric, saying directly what you think is true. Contrary to what is usually expected, Plato's dialogues do little or none of this. Their mode of teaching is indirect, by exhibition and action, for which the term 'enactment' was introduced in Chapter 9. Enactment was described there as meaning that the dialogues show things about their topics and create effects (experiences, wishes, feelings) in the reader apart from statements made about the topic. They create in the audience, by non-rational means, imagination and emotion, the *experience* of the world as Plato envisions it. What is the inner functioning of dialogical enactment?

Consider first that each dialogue is a story. Like all stories, its effect on the audience occurs in part through the audience's imagination. The heart of Plato's story is usually a conversation about an idea or theory. However, he often describes diverse, sometimes quite particular, settings. Dialogues often include actions, gestures, verbal or physical expressions of emotion and complex conversational interactions, such as outbursts, interruptions, digressions, when characters are described as being present, arriving or leaving. In order to follow the story, the reader must imagine these and other features that Plato includes; in doing so, the reader becomes imaginatively engaged with the story. This imaginative engagement is a dimension added to our intellectual engagement with the ideas and theories discussed, enriching them.

Imaginative engagement is distinct from intellectual engagement in its operation. Intellectually we come to consider and accept an idea through the reasons and arguments that are given for it. Imaginatively a story that is coherent is accepted in that sense; not as theoretically or scientifically true, but as fictionally or imaginatively true. When the story that has been accepted as fictionally true revolves around the ideas or theories that a character presents, the

imaginative truth of the story underwrites a sense of the intellectual truth of the theory in the reader's mind. Thus, imaginative engagement reinforces intellectual engagement; it is an additional and powerful means of generating internal experience of a theory and thus a kind of conviction of the theory's truth.

The dialogues also teach indirectly through the emotions. Socrates is an amusing, inspiring, likeable or lovable character. He is noble, principled, idealistic, and he dies for his principles, which inspires admiration and respect. He publicly reveals the ignorance and pretence of the high and mighty, which is thrilling in itself, the fulfilment of a deeply held wish shared by young people of all times and places. He speaks truth to power. He is a person of knowledge and humility who is respectful, tolerant and supportive of the best in each person. Besides, he is playful and tells jokes; he gives great speeches and tells great stories. For all these reasons, the dialogues elicit strong positive emotions towards Socrates. He converses with men who are powerful, prejudiced, dour, credulous, unkind and ignorant. This elicits negative emotions towards them, their ideas, orientations and life practices. Socrates' views and practices, on the other hand, acquire a positive emotional charge from all this. We like those views as we like the character whose views they are, and we *want* them to be true apart from the logical adequacy of the arguments actually given for them in the dialogues. This also motivates our attempting to make better arguments than Socrates and his interlocutor do, which is to say, doing philosophy.

Other aspects of the working of character in the dialogues provide indirect means of teaching. Plato has a fictional character make what seem like claims, but when a reader goes to argue with those claims, Plato has disappeared, leaving the reader to argue with the ideas themselves, rather than with him. A similar tactic is deployed in some of the narrated dialogues by the use of temporal frames. The reader begins in a time external to that of the conversation to be narrated, the reader's own time or the time when the narrative is presented as occurring. The *Charmides* is narrated by Socrates at some unspecified time after the conversation narrated occurred; the *Parmenides* is narrated by a man named Cephalus many years after the conversation between Parmenides and Socrates is supposed to have taken place. The narrative structure then draws the reader into the time of the conversation, but when the dialogue ends, the reader is left in the time frame of the conversation – that is, *in* the world

of the ideas discussed rather than in the reader's own, probably different, world of ideas.

The self-referential or self-instantiating character of many dialogues is another strategy by means of which Plato brings about the reproduction of ideas, orientations and commitments in the reader in a way that transcends rational persuasion. Socrates and his interlocutor and the course of their dialogue show the reader something about the topic. The *Euthyphro* is a dialogue about piety between speakers who are both accused of impiety and one of whom does while the other does not instantiate piety. The dialogue thus indirectly teaches us that the Socratic way, Socratic beliefs and practices, which do not superficially seem pious, are the true piety, while the superficial piety of Euthyphro's religious talk masks false piety. The *Charmides* is a dialogue about temperance between Socrates, who exhibits temperance in several ways, and Critias and Charmides, both of whom exhibit intemperance in the dialogue as they did in their lives. The dialogue indirectly teaches us that the Socratic way is the true temperance, while Charmides' appearance and Critias' philosophic talk mask an intemperance that comes out in their conduct.

Thus Socrates often enacts the virtue under discussion, in its true form, the very thing about which he says he is ignorant. The interlocutor often enacts the absence or opposite of the virtue under discussion – that is, enacts the falsehood of his claim to knowledge. A dialogue as a whole may enact a major claim. Many interpreters have pointed out how the dialectical view of rationality and moral excellence that Socrates espouses is enacted by the whole of dialogues such as the *Charmides*, *Meno* and *Republic*. For the dialogues both describe and exhibit the importance of doubt, the non-dogmatic open-endedness, the commitment to continuing reflection and inquiry, and the goal of more synoptic understanding as the way of life most appropriate for a human being and in which human happiness consists. As Crito says, it is remarkable how, throughout his life and even now in the shadow of death, 'you live happy' (*Crito* 43b).

It is worth noting, too, that the contrast and connection we are now considering between words and deeds, saying and doing, are a multi-layered source of meaning in Plato's dialogues. The action of the dialogue is to be used to comprehend the meaning of words said in the dialogue. The dialogues work through the interplay of words and deeds, of arguments and drama. But more specifically, a person's deeds or actions (*erga*) show us the truth of their words

(*logoi*); Socrates' refutations often involve the contradiction between what an interlocutor says and what he does. The complementary relationship of words and deeds, a theme that goes back as far as the *Iliad*, is often mentioned or implied. 'Whether in word or deed, god is entirely uniform' (*Republic* 382e) states one point about which Socrates is confident. 'The harmony between the speaker and his words' (*Laches* 188d) expresses the ideal for a human being.

These indirect strategies of inculcation other than the logical and rational ones produce in the reader a state of mind that is changed, even when the arguments leave us uncertain. As a result, the dialogues often induce both more and less than rational conviction. That it is more explains the continuing fascination that Plato's dialogues have exercised in the subsequent history of Western thought. That it is less than rational conviction explains the animosity that the dialogues have always evoked in some readers and the perennial disagreements among interpreters about what exactly is going on.

To interpret the dialogues without confusion, then, the reader needs to recognize how Plato has carefully kept himself from making pronouncements, but realize that Platonic anonymity is an indication of Plato's conception of philosophy as non-dogmatic and as teaching indirectly through enactment. What is presented non-dogmatically and indirectly through dialogical enactment is the Platonic vision, to which we turn in Chapter 11.

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## CHAPTER II

### PERSISTENT THEMES AND PLATO'S VISION

One of the main points of this book is that Plato's philosophy is an intellectual vision rather than a system of doctrines. The meaning of 'vision' as distinct from doctrine was introduced in Chapter 5, where a distinction was drawn between vision as (1) the activity of seeing and as (2) that which is seen, each being distinguishable into either (a) physiological or (b) intellectual visions. Now it is time to look in more detail at what vision is and what Plato's vision is.

#### PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE AS VISION

As has been noted, several different Greek words for 'knowledge' (*epistêmê*, *gnôsis* and *phronêsis*, mainly) are used in different contexts without any systematic or consistent distinction. Nevertheless, Plato's Socrates often defines philosophy in relation to 'knowledge', which is consistent with his frequent statements that we need to pursue 'knowledge' of what piety or courage or beauty is, or even of what knowledge is. Modern readers have assumed that the knowledge in question is the kind most modern philosophers are interested in, propositional knowledge, which means knowledge embodied in statements telling us *that* something is true. 'Justice is doing the work for which one is naturally suited' or 'Courage is knowing what things are truly to be feared' or 'Knowledge is justified true belief' tell us, inform us, teach us *that* this is the nature of justice, courage and knowledge. Such statements are taken to be what the philosopher who asserts them is teaching, i.e. the philosopher's doctrines. So, a propositional conception of knowledge is linked to a doctrinal conception of philosophy. One of the advantages of a propositional conception of knowledge is that knowledge of this sort lends itself to formal rigour and logical clarity. Knowledge of this kind may

also be described as ‘discursive’, meaning that it proceeds to a conclusion by reason or argument rather than by immediate intuition. Another advantage of propositional knowledge is its publicity. We can all consider the same proposition, its meaning and truth, and be confident that we are thinking and talking about the same thing.

A different conception of knowledge is found in Plato’s dialogues, however, in the many passages in which Socrates speaks of seeing with the ‘eye of the soul’ and of the mind’s ‘vision’ or ‘contemplation’ of Forms (e.g. *Gorgias* 523d, *Phaedo* 99c, *Republic* 518–19, 529). As is his habit, Plato uses more than one term in writing about this. Sometimes he uses verbs of physiological seeing such as *blepo*, while other times he uses the more intellectual terms *theôrein* (to see or contemplate) and *theôria* (vision or contemplation) and words compounded of them. The soul is said to contemplate the Forms (*Phaedrus* 250b, e, *Symposium* 211d, *Republic* 402d). Reaching the top of the Divided Line is contemplating the highest realities (*Republic* 511c).

The language of *theôria* is also used about the kind of thinking characteristic of the philosopher. The philosophic person is described as having ‘a mind habituated to . . . the contemplation (*theôria*) of all time and all existence’ (*Republic* 486a). Philosophers are those who love contemplating the truth (*philothemonas tes alêthias*, *Republic* 475e). Similar views about the philosopher are found at *Republic* 500b–c and *Theaetetus* 173e and 174e. The language of contemplation is also employed for Er’s vision of the afterlife (*Republic* 614d) and Socrates’ own mythic vision of the true earth (*Phaedo* 110b). All of this suggests that true philosophy, the ultimate goal of the dialectic and education, is not the accounts we give in words, but rather a kind of psychic activity.

The concept of intellectual ‘vision’ borrows at least two important aspects from physiological vision: a pictorial quality and completeness in a moment. An intellectual vision is a whole, like a picture, that includes or consists in many elements grasped in their mutual relationships. That vision is ‘complete in a moment’ means that it is whole and complete all at once; it is intuitive, non-discursive, rather than discursive. Such knowledge is intuitive rather than discursive.

In one sense, then, the objects of philosophic vision are the Forms or Ideas. In an extended sense, however, all or part of one’s philosophy can be thought of as a vision. This derives from the modern English usage of ‘theory’ to mean an organized system of accepted

knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances to explain a specific set of phenomena. This is the sense in which we speak of one's vision of human society or of a particular society, of the human mind, of the geophysics of a planet's surface, or of the natural world. Darwin's theory of evolution is not only a theory in the sense that it is a hypothesis that is confirmed, disconfirmed or refined through empirical research. It is a way of mentally *seeing* the system of environmental changes, individual variations and reproductive consequences spread over long periods of time. The objects of vision in this sense are complexes, meaning that they have many parts; and they are systems, meaning that the parts relate to each other in diverse and specific ways.

Intellectual vision, whether of Forms or of large-scale complexes, is systematic in this way. Contemplation of a Form – say, courage – is a grasp of the systematic connection between individuals characterized by that term, courageous acts and persons. Intellectual vision is also synoptic (or holistic), rather than partial or perspectival. It is seeing what the object as a whole is and how it operates. Such vision is also synthetic, seeing how all the parts relate and function together, rather than analytic. Vision can be of how things really are, of how they might be or ought to be (an ideal), or both.

Equations, charts and graphs are visual expressions of a discursive knowledge and, as such, are an alternative (or aid) to intuitive mental vision. The contemplative conception of knowledge is different from the more widely assumed propositional.

Although physiological seeing is perspectival – we only actually see one or some aspects of sensible objects; never the 'other side' or the inside – mental seeing is not, because the 'objects' are ideas, not things, and they don't have sides. One of the advantages of propositional knowledge is the certainty of conclusions that can be drawn from concatenations of propositions in logical arguments. By contrast, knowledge as vision is bound to seem probabilistic since it consists in an individual's vision which is not public and thus not subject to controls or even to certainty that two individuals' visions of an object are the same.

Thus vision is a kind of knowledge, and, if so, then there *is* knowledge of a sort to be found in the dialogues; but it is *not* the dogmatic, propositional sort of knowledge usually desiderated. It is the sort of thing about which it can truly be said, as Socrates does about the Parable of the Cave, 'God knows whether it is true' (*Republic* 517b). The kind of knowledge to be found in the dialogues is vision or

contemplation, *theôria* rather than *epistêmê*, and Plato's philosophy is a matter of vision rather than of doctrine.

### PLATO'S TWO-LEVEL VISION

Although knowledge is often presented as the defining pursuit and possession of the philosopher, Socrates consistently denies that he has any knowledge and, when knowledge *is* described, Plato often has Socrates use the language of vision, as we have just seen. The core of Plato's philosophy is a vision of reality as having two levels or aspects. The lower level, of individual material things that change, is registered by sensation. It is not truly real but derives a shadow of reality and value from the higher level, of unchanging, immaterial entities (Forms, Ideas) that are more truly valuable, knowable and real. Because we seek to do what is really right, we want real knowledge of real things; so, the ideal or formal aspect is the proper focus of our lives and activities.

The content of Plato's vision can be derived from the themes and intellectual commitments that recur in the dialogues. The basic and defining feature of Plato's view is a vision of reality as consisting of two asymmetrical levels. Distinct from the individual material things with which we occupy ourselves most of the time in our practical lives and which can be thought of all together as the material or sensible level of reality, there is another level of reality that is populated by entities that are not material, not individuals, and not able to be sensed. These Forms or Ideas are the types or kinds that define individuals; they are immaterial, rather than material, and intelligible, rather than sensible. That is, we encounter them through thought, not through sensation.

The relationship between these two levels is asymmetrical in a number of ways. Each form is one, the same as itself, unchanging, eternal, invisible, an object of intellect rather than sensation, divine, truly real, and therefore an object of true knowledge. The soul is of this sort. Individual things are many, different, changing, temporal, visible, objects of the senses, human or worldly, appearances, and therefore objects of opinion and belief. The body is of this sort. Plato's two-level vision can be presented thus:

Form	one	same	invisible	unchanging	divine	soul	intellect	truth	knowledge
Things	many	different	visible	changing	human	body	senses	appearance	belief

## PERSISTENT THEMES AND PLATO'S VISION

Forms are thus superior to and more valuable or important than things. They are also the models, sources or causes of things which are, therefore, their images, copies or imitations and, for this reason, superior to things. Forms are the objects of true thought and true meanings of words, inferior to the thoughts we construct out of our sensory experiences and the meanings conventionally (and changeably) attached to words.

To say that this is a vision rather than a doctrine or a dogma means that it provides a way of seeing things rather than a proposition that is said to be true. When the two-level vision is understood propositionally and dogmatically, it becomes the rigid, and slightly ridiculous, two-worlds metaphysics that is found in many books. Plato does not mean to *say* that reality *is* divided into two 'realms' utterly separated from each other and about which we can make various true statements. Rather, he envisions a world existing simultaneously at two levels. The ideal is there to be seen with the eyes of the soul *through* the real. To grasp that what makes a just act just, is to do so.

## CONSISTENT COMMITMENTS

Plato's vision is expressed in general principles to which Socrates is consistently committed, and premises about human nature and proper life activities for human beings. A human being is a composite of soul and body in which soul is higher and more important than body. The care of the soul is, therefore, each person's most important task. Right action improves the soul, but wrong action harms it. There is a real difference between right and wrong actions. That is, such things as virtue, beauty, justice, friendship, courage and temperance exist. Forms or Ideas, of which these are the prime examples, exist. A person cannot consistently choose right actions and avoid wrong ones without knowing what is right and wrong. Philosophy is the care of the soul because it is the pursuit of this knowledge. Knowledge is different from ignorance, pretence and opinion in that it not only *is* true, but can never *not* be true. Like the Forms, which are its objects, knowledge is unchanging. Virtue or excellence is knowledge. It follows from this that no one does wrong willingly and that it is better to suffer than to do wrong. Nobody – and this includes philosophers – actually *has* knowledge or wisdom. Philosophy is the love of wisdom and the pursuit of knowledge. The way of philosophy is a particular kind of human

being-together or communion (*synousia*) built around ongoing conversation (*dialegesthai*).

The question might arise: What is the difference between these ‘commitments’ and doctrines or elements in a philosophical system that can be attributed to Plato? For one thing, as already said, these views are general. Whatever virtue (or a virtue) is, it is assumed that it will be good in the sense of beneficial. Yet no precise answer is given as to what piety (*Euthyphro*), courage (*Laches*), friendship (*Lysis*) or beauty (*Hippias Major*) actually is. Knowledge is of the highest importance to Socrates, but no final definition of it is given in the *Theaetetus*, though its objects often seem to be the Forms; and no single answer is given to the question of how, exactly, we are to acquire it, although dialectic is often said to be the process that leads to it. A healthy soul is often said to be more valuable than wealth, status or power, but essentially different detailed views of soul – simple and partless as opposed to tripartite – are found in different dialogues. Although Socrates consistently believes that right action improves and that wrong action harms the soul, other than telling stories about judgements, punishments and reincarnations, it is not explained how this can be and the eschatological stories told are inconsistent in their details. There is not even a unified, detailed explanation of what exactly Forms are, though the necessity of their existence often seems to be presupposed.

They are also curiously and paradoxically rather general. While Socrates often states his conviction of them, he equally often denies any knowledge of the specifics. In other words, they are presumptions. They are the intellectual commitments of Socrates, the philosopher, rather than propositions that either Socrates or Plato think have been proved. And Socrates’ confidence about some of them seems to be moral rather than logical; it is morally better to believe them than not. In the *Meno*, for example, he says that he won’t insist on the precise truth of the theory of recollection that he has just presented – and that generations of philosophers have supposed to be a key Platonic doctrine – but he *does* insist on the moral value of inquiry.

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not

know and that we must not look for it. (*Meno* 86b–c; trans. Grube)

In addition, these beliefs are not asserted authoritatively as propositions that have been proved once and for all; they are not presented as settled or beyond question. They are not propounded in the dialogues as the views of Aristotle or Kant are in their treatises. They are presented as the beliefs of the character Socrates, and if they are Plato's own beliefs, they are presented as non-dogmatic beliefs; they remain open to question, discussion and disagreement. In fact, Socrates seems consistently to welcome, to insist on discussion of them, even the day before his death.

These views are often the premises of arguments and propositions to which Socrates insists on getting his interlocutors' agreement on an intuitive basis. When an interlocutor has spoken about piety, courage, justice or temperance, Socrates will first ask whether the interlocutor agrees that the virtue in question is one thing and different from its negation or absence and that there is something – often a Form or Idea – that makes the difference between them (e.g. *Euthyphro* 5c–d). Could an excellence ever be harmful or other than beneficial? (*Laches* 192d, *Charmides* 161a). That is, these views are not proved by any evidence or argument; they are simply put forward for agreement. From then on, they function as principles, as the starting points of thought and discussion. Thus, these beliefs constitute a general framework.

Such beliefs are often identified as Plato's doctrines and leading elements of his philosophy, and Plato may have actually held them. Or perhaps he held them at one time but not another. On the other hand, they may simply be views and arguments that he found interesting. Or perhaps they were thought experiments which Plato took seriously, but expressed playfully in fictional dialogues instead of asserting any as doctrines. Ironically and paradoxically, however, they are premises agreed to dialectically rather than propositions whose truth has been demonstrated, and concepts introduced but never defined finally.

#### PHILOSOPHY AS PART OF PLATO'S VISION

A key aspect of the vision enacted in the dialogues is philosophy itself as a specific kind of practice and the kind of person who does it. The dialogues consistently – directly and indirectly – present

philosophy as the best kind of practice for a human being and as the life that is preferable to the available alternatives, such as the lives of the political actor, the sophist and the poet.

Philosophy is being defined and created in the dialogues both directly, when Socrates describes what philosophers do (*Phaedo*, *Republic*), and indirectly in the many places where the words *philosophēin* (to philosophize), *philosophos* (philosopher) and *philosophia* (philosophy) are used as if their meanings were widely known and conventional, when, in fact, it was a new term, the familiarity and non-controversial definition of which is a feature of the intellectual world of the dialogues themselves. Thus, by supposing ourselves to recognize and understand Socrates' meaning in these contexts, we introject (incorporate attitudes or ideas into our thinking without being aware of doing so) Platonic ideas and values.

Socrates is presented to us as the paradigm of the virtues and of human happiness, as practitioner of the best kind of life, as the Philosopher. Philosophy, however, as it is enacted by Socrates and envisioned by Plato, is not systematic, dogmatic or final; it is circumstantial and iterative, aporetic, controversial, synoptic, synthetic and visionary. Philosophy is a social and conversational practice, the cooperative pursuit of knowledge about the most important truths concerning right action and the well-being of individuals and communities, and by means of philosophy both individuals and communities are improved. Philosophy is non-dogmatic, open-ended, and because it is constituted by the practice of dialectical inquiry, philosophy turns out to be a way of life (see Chapter 12).

#### DIALECTIC

The philosopher is distinguished from the poets and rhapsodes, who cannot explain what they mean, and say true things only through divine inspiration (*Ion* 533–6); from politicians and lawyers, who are driven by the need to control people rather than the desire to improve them (*Theaetetus* 172–7); from antilogists and eristics, who want to win verbal battles rather than to collaborate in learning the truth (*Euthydemus* 304–7); from sophists, who are satisfied with opinion and persuasion rather than knowledge and proof, and with beautiful words rather than true ones. Philosophy is epitomized by the practice of what Socrates calls dialectic. Dialectic may appear similar to a sophistry, eristic or antilogy insofar as it is an elaborate verbal-rational practice that confuses and frustrates

beginners, but dialectic as practised by Socrates is a way of collaborative thinking and problem-solving, and the essence of Platonic rationality.

In a general way, as already seen, 'dialectic' (from *dialegesthai*, to converse) refers to the conversational way of doing philosophy that Socrates follows in the dialogues, as opposed to propounding and proving points monologically in the manner of an orator, debater, sermonizer or professor. Aristotle is probably correct when he says that Parmenides' student Zeno (c. 490–c. 425) invented the dialectical type of thinking in his arguments showing, paradoxically, that motion and a multiplicity of existing things are impossible and that our senses are unreliable. 'Dialectic' in this case means specifically the technique of arguing against a view by showing that it entails unacceptable consequences. Dialectic is distinct from the several methods that are similar to it in some ways. 'Sophistic' means giving persuasive but specious or fallacious speeches. 'Eristic' means polemical disputation, trying to win arguments regardless of the truth. 'Antilogistic' is a rhetorical theory (possibly taught by the sophist Protagoras) and the practice based on it that two contrary arguments may be given about everything.

Socrates' dialectic is philosopher-led reasoning that proceeds in two directions: an analytic direction, which may include the demonstration of the partner's ignorance; and a synthetic (or synoptic) direction. Socrates describes dialectic in terms of these dual processes in the *Phaedrus* (265–7) and *Politicus* (285), and they are frequently described metaphorically as ascending or descending (*Republic* 511, *Symposium* 210–11). Beyond the refutation of a particular interlocutor's view, dialectic as practised in the dialogues is also a way of suggesting resolutions of intellectual or philosophic antinomies (contradictions between two statements that seem equally reasonable) by finding a different, conceptually higher or more inclusive scope in which to understand the problem about which the contradictory statements are made.

An excellent example of this process is described by Samuel Scolnicov in his recent translation and commentary of the *Parmenides*. Scolnicov's example concerns Parmenides' criticism of the theory of Forms, which the young Socrates has stated in the first part of the dialogue (129), for failing to explain how individual things 'share in' or 'participate' (*metechein*, *methexis*) in Forms. For example, individual cold things, such as ice cubes and frigid air, are said to be 'cold' because they have a share of the Form Cold (or

Coldness). From the Eleatic point of view, what 'shares in' something else must either share in the whole of it or in only a part of it; there is no other way to 'share'. But things can share in Forms in neither of these senses, Parmenides argues. For if the thing has a part of the Form, then the Form will be used up by the many individuals that get a share; but if the thing has the whole of the Form, then the Form cannot be shared in by the *other* individual things that have this name.

What makes Parmenides' criticism powerful is an assumption, a hypothesis about the nature of Being or reality: the hypothesis is that there is just one *kind* of being or reality, and that Forms, like material things, can therefore only be shared by dividing them up into parts, whether large or small, in the way material things are divided up or shared out. But, if we do this, eventually the Form will be used up, leaving nothing for future items to have a share in.

But the Platonic vision transcends the problem or antinomy by changing the underlying assumption, by a complete shift in our understanding of the concept of being. In addition to the material kind of being hypothesized by Parmenides, there is another kind of being, the upper level of Plato's two-level vision, which transcends this antinomy. It's not that Parmenides was completely wrong when he supposed that a Form would have to be shared either as a whole or in part; that is the way material things are. Parmenides' error is in recognizing only one kind of being or reality. Forms are a different *kind* of reality.

It is important to note that this and other suggested resolutions may not be expressed or, more often, expressed only implicitly. If they are expressed, they are usually expressed in an aside, a joke or a digression; in other words, in a way that is carefully non-focal for the reader. And if they are not expressed in words, the resolutions may be expressed in characters' actions, situations, mythic, legendary or historical associations, all of which are carefully and deliberately created by Plato. That is, dialectical resolutions of the sort described here are ordinarily only suggested, not stated or asserted. This illustrates again the indirect way in which Plato teaches.

#### EXAMPLES OF DIALECTICAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Here are some further examples of the kind of dialectical problem-solving that can be found in Plato's dialogues. In thinking about moral codes or ethics, we often find two quite different positions

represented. One can be described as traditional, unreflective absolutism. For example, repeating a traditional idea about what's right – for example, justice is telling the truth and paying your debts – without realizing that under some circumstances telling the truth or returning what you owe someone might be the wrong thing to do. Opposed to this is a quite different position that could be described as innovative, reflective relativism, an example of which is the claim that justice is whatever the stronger or more powerful say it is. The position is novel, even iconoclastic; and it is the result of reflecting up to a point on the differences in moral codes between different communities. The positions are in conflict with each other and it seems that one can be right only if the other is wrong. Absolutism excludes relativism as relativism excludes absolutism. The Socrates of the dialogues, however, suggests a position transcending this antinomy, which might be called reflective absolutism. Justice is always and everywhere the same thing: knowing the right thing to do. This example of opposed positions comes from book 1 of the *Republic*.

Another example concerns the ideal life for a person. The majority at all times seems to think that the best life is the one full of possessions and activities that produce feelings of individual pleasure. A smaller group seems always to think that it is better to occupy oneself with the affairs of the community, with politics, in which one acquires a high reputation and fame. There is a double antinomy here, both pleasure versus fame and individual versus social scope. The dialogues, however, regularly suggest an answer that transcends pleasure and politics: philosophy is the true politics, making oneself and one's fellow citizens better morally and intellectually, and productive of the true – that is, intellectual – pleasure.

Another example is from metaphysics. There seems to be an antinomy between the Heraclitean view that nothing exists except sensible material things that are always changing and the Parmenidean view that only a single unchanging, rational entity exists. Transcending these oppositions is the implicit Platonic two-level vision, often mistaken for a doctrine, of a changing, sensible, material reality thoroughly penetrated by an unchanging, immaterial reality that is different, higher and intelligible rather than sensible.

Another example has to do with education and pedagogy. As opposed to the old one-to-one system of observation and imitation, the mentor system, the new, sophistic system of the fifth century offered a formal higher education for pay by a travelling expert. Plato suggests in the dialogues that philosophic *synousia* transcends

the antinomy between these, because it is both a mentoring system and a higher education, and at the same time offers both moral formation and intellectual development.

A final example concerns poetry. Although comedy and tragedy seemed to the Greeks as they do to us to be opposed dramatic forms, Plato's dialogues transcend the opposition. This is shown in the structure of the dialogues themselves, which use real persons as stock characters and a great deal of humour to tell serious stories in which ordinary human problems lead to bad outcomes. It is even suggested indirectly by Plato himself. At the end of the *Symposium* (223d), Socrates is described talking until dawn with the tragic poet Agathon and the comic poet Aristophanes, 'forcing them to agree that same man would know how to write comedy and tragedy'. The poet who does both is Plato and the literary form in which he does it is the Platonic dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than the sort of dogmatic, propositional knowledge propounded by most philosophers in the Western tradition, the core of Plato's philosophy, the knowledge to be acquired from Plato's dialogues, is a vision, a particular way of understanding the world as having a lower or outer level as well as an inner and higher level. Consistent with this vision, the dialogues also teach us – but indirectly, through story and character – general principles and the commitment to philosophy as the best kind of life and to dialectic as the collaborative conversational process by which philosophy is carried out and as a particular way of resolving the kinds of intellectual difficulties that motivate us to begin philosophizing in the first place.

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## CHAPTER 12

### THE PLATONIC PATH TO WISDOM

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi trovai per una  
selva oscura . . .

Midway in the path of our life / I found myself in a dark  
wood . . .

Dante, *Inferno* 1.1–2

Widely influential philosophies have often taken the form not of doctrinal systems but of paths or ways of life in which individuals simultaneously resolve intellectual dilemmas and moral-political problems through a conversion or re-orientation of life into new practices and priorities. The word ‘path’ is, of course, a metaphor, but a very rich one, which may explain its widespread use. The word ‘Tao’ means ‘way’ or ‘path’ and refers both to the way the world is and the way of non-egoistic spiritual awareness in which human happiness consists. The Western monotheisms have each been conceived in this way more profoundly than as dogmatic systems. Each of them has generated a succession of attempts at dogmatic completion and consistency, but none of these have attained universal assent. In Parmenides’ poem, the goddess teaches him the ‘one path’ (*hodos*) to follow. The Hellenistic philosophic schools, the Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans, all looked back in part to Socrates as a founder and each explicitly presented itself as a way of life. A ‘way’ in the sense used here involves life-practices that cross the boundaries between intellectual pursuit of knowledge and practice of right action, between ways of inquiry and of behaviour, between moral, social and scientific values. Neoplatonists took Plato as teaching a way. Medieval Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophers did so too. Conceiving his philosophy as a path is consistent with the emphasis on dialogue, *synousia*, open-endedness, and with Socrates’ commit-

ment to the therapeutic and epistemological value of experiencing doubt.

### PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY AS A PATH

Wisdom (*sophia*) was a traditional Greek value to which the sophists and Socrates and Plato were engaged in giving a new meaning. The dialogues individually and as a group enact a conception of philosophy as a path or way to wisdom rather than as a doctrine or system of beliefs, knowledge of which or belief in which is thought to constitute wisdom. The emphasis is on proceeding in a direction rather than on the destination to be reached. The path is 'psychic' in Greek, meaning that it has to do with the soul; it is at once intellectual and moral, theoretical and practical. The intellectual dimension consists in one's recognizing a lack of knowledge and attempting to attain it; it also consists in enhancing one's skills in thinking, moving towards more and better thinking. The path is theoretical in that one is thinking, theorizing, in order to attain knowledge, which is contemplating the natures of things. The path is moral in that this thinking is, in the first instance, about moral concepts; it is also practical in that it results in moral improvement of the individual through the individual's consequently making different and better choices of life in the broad sense and in individual acts.

The characters in the dialogues seldom seem to have been improved and, in that sense, Socrates' mission seems to have been a failure. But the dialogues were written for their audience, us, not for the characters. Their failures, strangely, provide additional motivation for us not to fail. We are improved – generations of students have been improved – to the extent that our lives are changed by our encounter with Plato's dialogues. The improvement consists in our becoming more thoughtful, critical, rational and moral.

The path that is philosophy is, thus, active and individual in the sense that each individual must travel the path; there are no short cuts, cribs or ways to avoid the individual experience and effort. At the same time it is social in the sense that one's intellectual travel takes place by means of dialogical interactions with others as well as with oneself; and it takes place in the context of a narrower community of the philosophically inclined as well as the wider political community one inhabits. A significant feature of the path is that it calls us to aid others in finding the path. This is a point on which the apparently different political ideals of the *Republic*, *Politicus* and

*Laws* agree. The path is in a direction that can be known ahead of time, but it does not lead to an end that can be known ahead of time, contrary to later interpretations. The only wisdom that is certainly found consists in travelling the path. The journey is the end sought, and this gives meaning to life as an ongoing activity. As Aristotle later pointed out, happiness has to be some kind of activity (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a5–7, 1176b2–4) rather than a passive state or disposition.

Philosophy's path is inner, in the sense that it takes attention to one's own thought, but at the same time outer, in the sense that it involves one's behaviour in speech and action that are brought into agreement with each other and with one's thought. It is essentially intellectual, or spiritual, in a sense of the term that is not widely understood today, rather than physical.

Being at a different stage of the journey constitutes a different set of intellectual or spiritual circumstances. The 'circumstances' are, from one point of view, those of a particular dialogue; but at the same time, from another point of view, they are those of a particular stage in a particular individual's journey along the way. Socrates and his interlocutors are at different stages of the path; so are we readers. Under different circumstances the path involves the use of several methods. The refutative cross-examination of *elenchos* is appropriate for those who have not yet realized their need for knowledge. Reasoning by hypothesis and by collection and division are appropriate for those who have made some progress.

The Platonic path originates in and remains centred on ethical and political issues like justice, courage, friendship, love and pleasure. It extends to epistemological and metaphysical issues, such as the nature of knowledge and reality and the theory of Forms, and passes through analyses and assessments of the ways of sophists, poets, politicians, mathematicians and 'philosophers' of various persuasions. It is worth noting that for Plato the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is both an epistemological and a social-moral enterprise.

The path leads the traveller to (and, for Plato, derives from) the vision – not doctrine – of a two-level model of reality, discussed in Chapter 11, which implies a reconceived traditional *paideia* (education). Thus, for Plato, philosophy turns out to be more than a general guideline but less than a doctrinal system. Let us consider these points a bit further.

THE DRAMATIC STORY

The path can be conceived in the form of a dramatic story, as Plato, in fact, has written the dialogues. The story leads from pre-philosophical life up to a turning point in the individual's psychic life when attention shifts from visible to invisible things, from the realm of sensation to the realm of intellect. The individual turns away from pursuit of material goals to pursuit of spiritual ones. Beyond this turning point, life becomes an ongoing spiritual progress or ascent that constitutes both intellectual and moral improvement.

Why call this 'dramatic'? Because, unlike dispassionate, rational theories or doctrines, the account is intrinsically exciting, involves striking, emotionally charged problems, confrontations, changes, successes and failures of the kind that characterize drama. A dispassionate account of 'changing one's point of view or orientation' from the sensible to the intelligible does not adequately represent the sort of thing actually found in Plato's dialogues, the drama of spiritual imprisonment, liberation, conversion and ascent, or of experiencing yourself publicly unable to explain what you say you know, of contradicting yourself, being found ignorant and wrong, not only intellectually but morally and politically. It is dramatic too because the issue is a person's ultimate welfare or well-being, true happiness, *eudaimonia*.

Why refer to it as a 'story'? Because it is something personal, rather than impersonal; because the elements are connected in a narrative rather than a purely logical structure or sequence from definitions and basic principles to consequences inferred. In a logical argument, if some proposition, *p*, implies some other proposition, *q*, and if *p* is true, then *q* must be true. It is always true. Nothing depends on the particular circumstances or differences between individual *p* s.

But, as the dialogues illustrate in their enormous variety of characters, settings and situations, individuals and circumstances *do* matter; they are essential, as in a play. In other words, the events that constitute Plato's story are structured in the ways that dramas are, with beginnings, middles and ends, with emotionally charged problems confronted, outcomes variable and dependent on circumstances, and the focus on characters and their development.

The story goes like this. Everyone by nature wants to be 'happy' (*eudaimonia*, remember, is not a feeling; it is a state or condition). Individuals are often mistaken about what constitutes happiness or

about what steps will attain it, but no one wishes to be unhappy rather than happy. This is one implication of the ‘Socratic paradox’ that no one ever willingly does wrong. Popular ideas about happiness – that it consists in being rich, powerful, famous, or in the physical pleasures of food, drink, sex or exercise – are false, however. So are popular assumptions that material things are the most real and important and that knowledge comes from sensation. True happiness consists in the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, which can only be by means of a special kind of rational thinking called dialectic. One must give up – in practice, not just in words – the false beliefs that the welfare of the body is more important than that of the soul and that material things are real and important. If thought and speech are to make sense, then, apart from material things, there must be eternal, unchanging, immaterial entities that are truly and permanently what their material copies are only partially and temporarily. These, usually called Platonic Forms or Ideas, we grasp with our intellects, not our senses.

The human soul is by nature able to proceed, to ‘ascend’ from sensation to rational awareness of these Forms, so the story can end happily for all. But there is a problem. Sensation is vivid; it makes powerful and persuasive impressions on the mind. At first, in life, these are all we have; thought only comes later. Sensed things are more vivid than thoughts; so they seem more real. These natural attitudes about reality and value are reinforced from earliest childhood by parents, relatives, friends and the community in which one lives. Most people for reasons of ignorance, not malevolence, continue throughout their lives to believe that sensible things are really real and certainly more real than thoughts. Such attitudes are reflected in popular ideas about happiness.

Philosophy begins with criticism of these popular beliefs and teaches a different view of what is real and what is important for both individuals and communities. Thus the life of philosophy turns out to be at once a private, educational journey to the happiness that is found only in rational pursuits and a heroic, public, religious mission to help and encourage – even to goad and sting – our fellow citizens into pursuit of these loftier pursuits. It is daunting not only because of the difficulty, but also because of the ridicule and condemnation it often elicits from a person or a public that feels itself threatened by contrary opinion.

Concretely, individuals differ in themselves, in their social contexts, in the events that befall them, and the individuals they encounter. As

a result, the paths of individuals are infinitely various and no single Platonic dialogue provides a blueprint that is directly transferable to other cases. In fact, part of the fascination of the dialogues is the wealth and diversity of their characters. But the dialogues are more than fascinating stories external to us. As Socrates says of the prisoners in the cave (*Republic* 515a), ‘Strange prisoners, but they are like ourselves.’ Every interlocutor, and Socrates, too, is a mirror in which the audience may see itself.

So, we see persons (the interlocutors) who have different moral and intellectual characters and are in circumstances different from each other encounter the complex and challenging Socrates over issues that, strangely on closer inspection, define them. Their reactions to these encounters are likewise highly diverse. Some, not surprisingly, become angry with Socrates at the refutation of their ideas. Of these, some, like Thrasymachus, Callicles and Meno, sneer and call Socrates names; others, like Euthyphro, merely run away to avoid accepting their own ignorance; while still others, like Anytus, make threats. Other interlocutors want to carry on with more dialectical encounters. For some, this seems false or grounded in a misunderstanding, as when Charmides and Critias say that the youth will converse with Socrates every day, but are willing to use force to bring this about (*Charmides* 176). Some, like Theodorus, resist dialectical exercise (*Theaetetus* 165a); others, like Laches (*Laches* 188–9), view it as something difficult but rewarding. A few, like Theaetetus, seem genuinely committed and excited to continue (*Theaetetus* 148).

So the Platonic path is a ‘story’ in the sense that there is a character who thinks, speaks, acts and interacts with others, and to whom things happen, who is dealing with tensions, who may exhibit traits of moral and intellectual character; and it is ‘dramatic’ in the sense that these characters encounter problems, existential and philosophic, that they attempt to resolve with consequences that are sometimes comic, sometimes tragic. As should be understood, the *true* tragedy befalls the person who manages to avoid the effects of Socrates’ cross-examination, who remains ignorant, imprisoned in false beliefs, *really* unhappy regardless of what he or others may think.

#### STAGES IN THE DRAMA

The individual’s life is characterized overall as the travelling of a path that begins with an ordinary human acceptance of the data of

sensation, immersion in merely physical and practical life, and belief in commonsense notions. The path has as a goal – that some will attain more fully, others less, and others not at all – preference for thought over sensation, pursuit of theoretical rather than physical or practical activities, and belief in several paradoxical propositions. From this point of view, there are three stages: pre-philosophic ignorance, dialectical cross-examination leading to the spiritual crisis or *aporia*, and the open-ended spiritual ascent that follows conversion from sensation to thought. One of the differences among Plato's dialogues is that some are conversations with the pre-philosophic; others, like *Timaeus*, *Parmenides* and the 'Eleatic Stranger', are conversations involving those who are followers or practitioners of definite philosophies.

The stages are traversed by way of experiences that are recursive in their nature and structure; that is, they happen not just once, but over and over in different situations with different specific endings. Generally they are what might be called philosophic encounters or dialogues. The pedimental structure of Plato's dialogues that was described in Chapter 4 is an image of this recurring aspect of the way. The dialogues – philosophical dialogue of the sort that leads to greater knowledge, better action and greater happiness – begin at a level of ordinary thought and speech, often with a problem that has arisen in the existential situation of one or more of the characters. Through dialectical examination, the dialogue rises first from concrete existence to the level of ideas, then to a higher, more abstract, intellectual or conceptual level, reaching a high point at or near the middle, and then descends or returns to the original level of ordinary thought and existential situation at the end. But the end – that is, how a particular dialogue ends – is not the point. Like all other aspects of Plato's writing, this pedimental structure is deployed in highly various ways. Thus philosophy is and Plato's dialogues are both personal and impersonal.

The five-step 'pedagogical structure' (see Chapter 4) of many dialogues is another useful portrait of the recursive activity of philosophy by which a person traverses the Platonic path. A question, raised by an external examiner (such as Socrates or a teacher) may elicit your view of something, your attempt to explain it consistently and coherently. These answers may be refuted by the sort of dialectical cross-examination that Socrates often executes. Such refutations are always, properly speaking, *ad hominem* and they may sometimes be fallacious in more serious ways. Nevertheless, because the import-

ant point is the individual's intellectual and moral progress, the experience of your own inability to explain what you think you know may lead to a crisis and a turning point. Recognition of your actual ignorance and the experience of doubt may lead to a desire to understand better. Ideally, the discussion returns to the original difficulties which the reader can now see differently, even if the interlocutor cannot.

An individual passes through the general stages – ignorance, crisis or *aporia*, ascent from sensation to thought – by means of a series of recurring dialectical encounters. How many depends on the individual, the source of refutation, and the circumstances in which the refutations occur. Individuals are more or less intellectually able to think at any given life moment, and more or less emotionally and imaginatively able to give up popular, socially sanctioned beliefs. Most people never encounter in their life someone who can do to them what Socrates did to his interlocutors, cross-examine and refute them so as to bring to their attention the claims of thought over sensation. For those who do encounter such a cross-examiner, there are further distinctions between the cross-examiners, who may be generally more or less skilled and successful at it and may or may not have a special skill that suits this individual.

In the *Phaedrus* (261), Socrates criticizes conventional rhetoric as *psychagogia* – ‘psychagogy’ literally means ‘soul-leading’ but is often used in the sense of ‘bewitchment’. Then he goes on to describe an ideal or philosophic rhetoric as the deliberate, skilled, systematic leading of souls based on matching the special abilities of different types of *logos*, argument, with the special susceptibilities of different types of souls – that is, of different individuals. We observe and interlocutors often point out how strangely persuasive Socrates is. Ion speaks for many interlocutors when he says, ‘Somehow your words (*logoi*) touch my soul’ (*Ion* 535a).

Finally, there are differences between the circumstances in which cross-examinations occur. There are obvious differences of public from private settings, of moments of leisure from being under pressure to do something (go to court, go to work), and of relaxing places (like parks and gyms) from the stress of formal gatherings at exhibitions or private parties. Less obviously historical moments and accidents of personal or family life may make a person more or less able to do the work and take the risks associated with the Platonic path at any given moment.

## SOCRATES' PATH

The entire heroic story of Socrates spread over the Platonic corpus reiterates this pattern but from the other point of view, that of the gadfly, the intellectual and moral provocateur, the 'teacher', whose personal struggle to understand involves others in the struggle on their own behalf. The story of Socrates' path begins with his presentation to Parmenides of a version of the theory of ideas that Parmenides faults on several grounds (*Parmenides* 129–35). The story ends in the *Phaedo* with Socrates' execution. In between he encounters many different types of interlocutors and investigates many concepts with them.

He discusses the unity of virtue as knowledge and its teachability with the sophist Protagoras; moderation and self-knowledge with the future tyrants Charmides and Critias; pleasure and the intellectual life with the hedonist Philebus and the sophistic Protarchus. He also discusses courage with the generals Laches and Nicias; friendship with the young friends Lysis and Menexenus, and their older admirers Hippothales and Ctesippus; and beauty or nobility with the sophist Hippias. He discourses about erotic love with an array of poets and other professionals and then of love, rhetoric and philosophic writing with the aspiring orator Phaedrus. He considers inspiration with the 'inspired' rhapsode Ion; engages in verbal sparring with the eristics Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. He debates rhetoric, philosophy and politics with the sophist Gorgias, and the politicians Callicles and Polus; language and etymology with the Heraclitean 'philosopher' Cratylus; the nature of knowledge with the mathematically gifted young Theaetetus and his maths teacher Theodorus. With Euthyphro, who is indicting his own father, he discusses the nature of piety before going into court to answer his own indictment for impiety. Instead of defending himself, he discusses the nature and value of the philosophic life with the jurors at his trial. Instead of escaping, as Crito wishes, he shows that the moral and intellectual principles he and Crito have long accepted imply that we are obligated to obey the commands of our communities, even when they harm us personally. Finally, on the day of his death, he shows to his many followers, and especially the Pythagoreans Simmias and Cebes, how the immortality of the soul is a reason not to fear death.

Along the way he attends a long presentation by a visiting 'philosopher' from southern Italy, Timaeus, about the origin and nature of the physical world, a narrative by Critias of the story of early

## THE PLATONIC PATH TO WISDOM

Athens and Atlantic, and two demonstrations given by an unnamed ‘Eleatic’ of a method resembling Socratic dialectic in working out complex definitions of what it is to be a sophist and what it is to be a statesman or politician.

This is the story of a philosophically interested and provocative inquirer, a perpetual seeker after knowledge and right action; it is not the story of a doctrinaire man or an ideologue who believes himself to have found the final truth. As such, the story of Socrates coheres with – indeed, complements – the story of the individual’s philosophical path described earlier.

In the course of Socrates’ story, while a great deal changes, certain things remain the same. What changes are the surroundings, casts of characters, tones of voice and shades of attitude, particular topics discussed and arguments deployed, myths told or retold, and degree of literary distance between the dialogue and us, the readers. What remains the same is moral and intellectual seriousness, valuation of soul over body, knowledge over opinion, belief that terms and ideas we use (e.g. courage, justice, knowledge, love and friendship) refer to things that are real, stable, knowable and attainable, that the way to such knowledge is through conversation, and that we’re morally and intellectually better off for having attempted this even if, at the end, we remain in doubt.

To repeat the general point already made, all of this adds up to something that is more than a vague, general guideline but less than a doctrinal system.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Miller, Mitchell, *The Philosopher in Plato’s Statesman*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980.

Miller, Mitchell, *Plato’s Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

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**PART IV**

**HELP IN READING AND  
UNDERSTANDING PLATO'S DIALOGUES  
AND PHILOSOPHY**

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## CHAPTER 13

# HOW TO READ A PLATONIC DIALOGUE

### INTRODUCTION

An overall point of this book is that one is likely to be perplexed if one reads the dialogues as treatises and if one reads every argument and point made by Socrates or some other leading speaker as Plato's own claims and arguments. The same outcome is likely if the reader takes them as Socrates' own claims and arguments or just as claims and arguments that Plato intends to teach us as truths apart from the dramas in which the arguments occur. This chapter offers advice intended to help readers avoid these perplexities.

In the sentences above, the word 'read' is used in the minimal ordinary sense, meaning 'look at and say to oneself (or aloud) some written or printed words'. When we read a story or the daily newspaper, we read in this minimal sense. At the same time, though, we also interpret to ourselves and understand what the words mean when taken altogether. We understand the 'story', whether it is news or fiction. In what follows, the word 'reading' will be used in this ordinary but more restricted sense, with emphasis on interpreting the significance all together of the words in the minimal ordinary sense.

The general point of this chapter is to approach each dialogue, and each section of the longer ones, thinking that it will take (at least) three readings to grasp what Plato is communicating. Keep in mind that the dialogues are complex documents with many meanings beneath the surface.

There are three steps to take in reading a Platonic dialogue. They are, briefly: (1) grasp the foreground or surface level dialectical argument; then (2) grasp the background or deeper level of the dialogue's dramatic and literary aspects; finally (3) integrate those readings into a more complete understanding of the dialogue as a

philosophic enactment, by thinking about how those two aspects fit together. The essential questions, representing these three readings, are: (1) What do Socrates and his interlocutors say and what arguments do they make? (2) Under the specific dialogical circumstances, why do they say these things? What is Socrates trying to accomplish by saying this or that? (3) The question often overlooked is: Why does Plato make them say these things? What is *Plato* trying to accomplish by putting on this drama for us, the audience? This asks about what is communicated to or achieved for the audience in reading the entire story of what takes place between *these* participants in *these* circumstances.

Think of the three readings, briefly, as logical, literary and integrative. Each reading is distinct from the others and their sequence is important. It is also reasonable to think about them as three aspects of the dialogues that you can pursue during one and the same reading.

### THREE READINGS: THE 'LOGICAL' READING, THE 'LITERARY AND DRAMATIC' READING, THE 'INTEGRATIVE' READING

#### Reading I: The logical reading

The first reading is 'logical' in the sense that one's focus is on the arguments and one's aim is to find and assess the main lines of argument. From the logical point of view, a Platonic dialogue is an overall argument composed of smaller argument units.

A pattern found in many dialogues has Socrates raising with his interlocutor a question like 'What is piety?' or 'What is courage?'. The interlocutor then attempts to answer the question several times, with three answers often grouped in one part of a dialogue. Each answer is examined, through question-and-answer (dialectic), and each is found to lead to a contradiction. At this point, many interlocutors become frustrated or angry with Socrates and there is a crisis in the dialogue. Following this crisis, there is often a pause or digression on a seemingly different topic followed by a return to the original question, but with Socrates in a more directive role than before and perhaps with the answers considered at a higher level of conceptual clarity or abstraction. Nevertheless, the answers proposed in this second round also lead to contradictions. This pattern is particularly clear in the dialogues *Euthyphro*, *Charmides* and *Meno*.

So, the reader should begin by identifying the central question, the various answers proposed, and the reasons each answer is found to be insufficient. It may help to know that Plato often marks transitions in the logical structure by having Socrates use the words ‘again’ (*palin*) or ‘again from the beginning’ (*palin ex archês*) – for example, *Meno* 79e and *Euthyphro* 11b. It is useful in analysing the arguments to observe the dialogue’s division, if any, into identifiable parts, ‘acts’ and ‘scenes’, because Plato often correlates argument units with dramatic units. Stages in the development of the argument correspond to the sequence of acts and scenes in the play.

Here are some steps to take:

1. Identify the apparent conclusion of an argument. Often the conclusion is the negation of the interlocutor’s proposed account rather than something the lead speaker seems to be arguing for positively. When Socrates has elicited answers from his interlocutor to questions like ‘What is piety?’ or ‘What is courage?’, the conclusions of argument units will usually be that the interlocutor’s response is not or cannot be correct. And there will be as many distinguishable argument units leading to the negative conclusions as there are attempts by the interlocutor to say what beauty, justice, friendship, piety or courage is.
2. Identify the premises or sub-arguments or, generally, the evidence that is used to arrive at the conclusion. It is important to note that premises are established when the interlocutor agrees to a statement put to him in the form of a question by Socrates. Sometimes a premise will be a simple and seemingly obvious statement – ‘The person who recognizes good poetry will also recognize bad poetry’ (*Ion*) or ‘All virtuous acts are alike in some way’ (*Meno*) – or a kind of premise established in several dialogues – ‘Justice is some one thing’ (*Hippias Major*). Other times the premise will be a generalization from many individual cases – for example, to get reliable information about each of several subjects, we must go to the appropriate specialist (physician, mathematician, poet, etc.), so it’s expert knowledge of some sort that is important rather than beautiful speeches. It is also important to remember that the premises might be established long before they come into use and that any statement an interlocutor has agreed to remains an available premise unless the interlocutor explicitly takes it back.
3. Consider whether apparent fallacies or other logical errors occur

in argument. Has the interlocutor agreed to a questionable premise or inference from examples? It often happens that they have. On the one hand, this illustrates the interlocutor's shortcomings and contributes to Socrates' goal of inducing the experience of being at a loss (*aporia*), which he considers intellectually and morally improving. On the other hand, it gives the reader dialectical exercise; it is part of Plato's pedagogical programme for us.

4. Finally, after analysing each of the individual arguments as they occur in sequence in the dialogue, step back and look at the overall structure or pattern of argumentation from the early phase of the dialogue, where a topic is set, to the end. See dialogue summaries in Chapter 14 for guidelines. It is useful at this point to summarize the premises the interlocutor has accepted, because some of them will be found to recur in other dialogues.

The logical reading can be right or wrong depending on whether you correctly identify the arguments, their premises and conclusions. Going through each of these steps, as just suggested, is a useful form of mental gymnastics in its own right, and is at least part of Plato's philosophical programme.

#### Reading 2: The literary and dramatic reading

The second reading focuses on contextual, literary and dramatic elements and details. The reader should try to identify the setting, plot and character aspects, as well as special literary and historical features of the dialogue. Here are the most important dramatic features to look for.

The reader should be aware of the *dramatic date* of a dialogue, if Plato has given indications of one. Specifically, does the dramatic date bear a relation to historical events or to other dialogues (with their topics) that may illuminate the present discussion? Obviously, the fact that Socrates is about to die in the *Phaedo* means that the discussion of the immortality of the soul as a reason not to fear death is of pressing existential as well as coolly intellectual significance.

*Narrative structure.* In a direct drama, the reader hears everything there is to be heard. Any authorial stage direction, commentary or nuance must be written into speeches. Narrated dialogues enable narrators to make comments, describe how people looked or acted, and what they seemed to have felt; but narrators, including Socrates,

are characters whose comments reflect their own beliefs and attitudes as well as what was external to them. So you must ask: *Who is the narrator*, Socrates or someone else? If it is someone else, what information are we given here or in other dialogues about this individual, his memory, and the beliefs or practices he represents? All of this, of course, is under Plato's control, so we are looking at observations that are more or less complicated to interpret depending on particular circumstances.

We should feel greater confidence in details of Socrates' own narrative of a conversation he has just finished having in the *Protagoras* than in Phaedo's account, some years later, of Socrates' final hours. *Narrative depth* refers to layers of reporting of the conversation being narrated and also makes a difference. In the *Parmenides*, Cephalus tells us what he heard from Antiphon, who was present. In the *Symposium*, Apollodorus tells us what was narrated to him by Aristodemus, who was actually present at the banquet, but left some parts out and fell asleep towards the end. *Narrative chronology*, the date of the narration relative to the conversation being narrated and relative to other dialogues, can also be important. Both the *Symposium* and the *Parmenides* are narratives of conversations that, we are told, occurred many years before.

*Characters* are crucial. One should note all the participants, but also any named characters who are silent. What views or lives do they represent in the dialogue in relation to the topic? What character does Plato give them in the dialogue? This is built up for us from numerous details of their own behaviour and words, and from what others, especially Socrates, say about them. Since most characters were historical figures, we should try to determine their historical connections with the positions they represent in the dialogue. Debra Nails' *The People of Plato* is the unparalleled resource on this. Then, too, it is important to observe the relations Plato has indicated between various characters and Socrates. Some, like Theaetetus, are said to resemble him in both ugliness and intellectual brilliance. Others, like Apollodorus, the narrator of the *Symposium*, are extreme but superficial imitators of Socrates. Still others, like Euthyphro, Callicles and Thrasymachus, stand in inverse relations to him.

Similarly, it is important to consider *historical connections* that may exist between the topics, ideas and arguments in a dialogue and their appearance elsewhere in ancient Greek philosophy, literature and history. As already noted (see Chapter 2), the question about the

proper education for young people (*paideia*) that explicitly motivates the *Protagoras* and *Laches* and implicitly motivates many other dialogues was a topic of widespread discussion for a century around the time of Plato. Central ideas of the *Phaedo* were identifiably Pythagorean, as the idea that reality is only one was associated with Parmenides and the statement 'Man is the measure of all things', investigated at length in the *Theaetetus*, belonged to Protagoras.

*Physical Setting.* The reader should note where a dialogue occurs. A gymnasium, a street, the home of a person well known for patronizing sophists, as well as the purpose and size of the gathering – all offer opportunities and limitations. The public refutation of Protagoras' claim to teach excellence (*Protagoras*) is rather different from the private refutation of Crito's proposal to escape from prison (*Crito*). Both of these are quite different from the relaxed informality of Socrates and Phaedrus reclining on the grass by a stream chatting about love and rhetoric (*Phaedrus*) and from the lecture on cosmology given by previous appointment (*Timaeus*).

The reader should also note *references or allusions* made in the dialogue to philosophers, poets, politicians, gods and goddesses, myths and legends. These serve to associate Socrates and other characters with legendary heroes and villains as well as to draw traditional values and ideas into the orbit of philosophical reinterpretation.

The reader should consider the overall *plot as a story*, too, in relation to the main ideas and arguments under discussion and in relation to any stories mentioned or implied in the dialogue. Superficially, many dialogues seem to be just refutations of one after another proposal about the nature of some virtue or excellence; but a dramatic or legendary story alluded to may provide an added or changed meaning. The *Crito* reinterprets the embassy to Achilles from the *Iliad*, casting Socrates in the role of Achilles, but changing all of the Homeric story's values. In Homer's version, the hero resists his friends' urgings to give up anger at the ruler's unfair treatment and return to the fighting; instead he threatens to go home to Phthia in Thessaly. In Plato's version, the hero is a philosopher who resists a friend's urging to run away from the city's unfair treatment and go to Thessaly. The hero's home, the Philosopher's true home, by implication, is not in the physical world.

Plato often uses *prologues, interruptions, digressions* and passages of complaint within dialogues to amplify or focus the logical theme and content of a dialogue, as well as to characterize the actors in the play. The central theory of poetic inspiration in the *Ion* (533–6) is an

interruption of the main storyline, Socrates showing Ion that his success as a rhapsode is not due to an art (*technê*) he possesses. The long prologue of the *Charmides* (153–8) focuses on the relation between mind and body in temperance (*sôphrosynê*). And, as noted earlier, the central theory of recollection in the *Meno* (81–6) is, dramatically, a digression in order to keep Meno from abandoning inquiry.

The *first and last lines* of dialogues may be illuminating. Since Socrates has been accused of teaching atheism and immoral beliefs, it is significant that both his first and last statements in the *Apology* refer to lack of knowledge. Socrates begins his narration of the *Republic* with ‘I went down to the Piraeus’, and ends it with advice to ‘keep to the upward path’. These lines resonate with the images of the Cave, back down into which the freed prisoner must go to help the others, and the Divided Line, the ascent of which leads to knowledge.

*Physical action*, stage business and gestures are also worth noting, not only because they provide characterization but also because they may contain a significant point. After the slapstick bench scene in *Charmides* (155), the outcome is that Charmides sits between Socrates and Critias, reminiscent of Socrates’ unwillingness (*Symposium* 213) to let Alcibiades get between him and Agathon, whose name means ‘Good’.

Readers should take note of *humour and irony*, and cases of emphatic or excessive seriousness, recalling Plato’s habit of mixing and inverting humour and seriousness. This extends to observing *paradoxical views* stated or implied and to other inversions of reader expectations.

This reading is not right or wrong, but there are differences of more and less literary and dramatic detail recognized.

### Reading 3: The integrative reading

The third reading is integrative in that it merges the ideas and arguments discovered in the first reading with the literary and dramatic features identified in the second reading. The premise of this reading is that Plato has constructed the relationship between the arguments and the stories deliberately and carefully. One way to think about the relationship is that the arguments constitute the logical structure of the character–setting–plot nexus, the story. Correlatively, the story is a visible, living instantiation of the concepts. This replicates the

theory of Ideas, as it is sometimes stated: the Form X makes any x what it is, so that if you understand X better, you necessarily understand each individual x better as well.

Look for connections, relationships or resonances between the logical and literary-dramatic aspects. Look for ways in which literary and dramatic features intensify, clarify, counterbalance or invert logical features. Literary and dramatic features can amplify an argument or counterbalance it. There are four functions of literary-dramatic features that can exist alone or together in the same dialogue:

1. intensification of something in the argument;
2. clarification of something in the argument;
3. counterbalance of something in the argument;
4. inversion of something in the argument.

On the integrative reading, too, one should always consider the extent to which the dialogue is a provocation, by Socrates of his interlocutors and by Plato of us. The dialogues are meant to provoke us to think. So, consider what ideas the dialogue provokes us to think *about*. Consider how the story and the argument can be working together to cause a recognition, reflection or refraction of us as not knowing what we think we know, not knowing what we know as well as we think we know it, or not acting in ways consistent with what we say we know. Finally, the reader should consider how the interaction between the arguments and the stories serve to bring Plato's vision into our imaginations and emotions as well as our thoughts.

The spirit of finesse comes in here, because no rules can be applied in a mechanical way. There is no right or wrong answer, but readings can be better or worse, depending on how the logical structure is explained in co-ordination with literary and dramatic features. As Pascal says about *l'esprit de finesse*, it is a matter of judgement or intuition. Like judgement in other matters, though, with experience, practice and criticism one will improve.

### THREE READINGS OF MENO 70A–74B

[70a] MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue (*arête*) is acquired by teaching (*didakton*) or by practice (*askêton*); or if it is neither learned (*mathêton*) nor by practice, then whether it comes to man by nature (*physei*), or in what other way?

## HOW TO READ A PLATONIC DIALOGUE

SOCRATES: O Meno, there was a time when the Thessalians were famous among the other Hellenes only for their riches and their riding; but now, if I am not mistaken, they

[b] are equally famous for their wisdom (*sophia*), especially at Larisa, which is the native city of your friend Aristippus. And this is Gorgias' doing; for when he came there, the flower of the Aleuadae, among them your admirer Aristippus, and the other chiefs of the Thessalians, fell in love with his wisdom. And he has taught you the habit of answering questions in a grand and bold style, which becomes those who know, and is the style in

[c] which he himself answers all comers; and any Hellene who likes may ask him anything. How different is our lot! my dear Meno. Here at Athens there is a dearth of the commodity, and all wisdom seems to have emigrated from us to you. I am certain

[71a] that if you were to ask any Athenian whether virtue was natural or acquired, he would laugh in your face, and say: 'Stranger, you have far too good an opinion of me, if you think that I can answer your question. For I literally do not know what virtue ['virtue' throughout the passage translates *arête*] is, and much less whether it is acquired

[b] by teaching or not.' And I myself, Meno, living as I do in this region of poverty, am as poor as the rest of the world; and I confess with shame that I know literally nothing about virtue; and when I do not know what it is how can I know what quality it has? How, if I knew nothing at all of Meno, could I tell if he was fair, or the opposite of fair; rich and noble, or the reverse of rich and noble? Do you think that I could?

MENO: No, indeed. But are you in earnest, Socrates, in saying that you do not know

[c] what virtue is? And am I to carry back this report of you to Thessaly?

SOCRATES: Not only that, my dear boy, but you may say further that I have never known of any one else who did, in my judgement.

MENO: Then you have never met Gorgias when he was at Athens?

SOCRATES: Yes, I have.

MENO: And did you not think that he knew?

SOCRATES: I have not a good memory, Meno, and therefore I cannot now tell what I thought of him at the time. And I dare say that he did know, and that you know what he

[d] said: please, therefore, to remind me of what he said; or, if you

would rather, tell me your own view; for I suspect that you and he think much alike.

MENO: Very true.

SOCRATES: Then as he is not here, never mind him, and do you tell me: By the gods, Meno, be generous, and tell me what you say that virtue is; for I shall be truly delighted to find that I have been mistaken, and that you and Gorgias do really have this knowledge; although I have been just saying that I have never found anybody who had.

[e] MENO: There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question. Let us take first the virtue of a man – he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband. Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female,

[72a] bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do. And the same may be said of vice, Socrates.

SOCRATES: How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure

[b] of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees, because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as for example beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?

MENO: I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.

[c] SOCRATES: And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike; – would you be able to answer?

MENO: I should.

SOCRATES: And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they all have some one character (*eidōs*) in common which makes them virtues; and on this he who would answer the question, 'What is virtue?' would do well to have his eye fixed:

[d] Do you understand?

MENO: I am beginning to understand; but I do not as yet take hold of the question as I could wish.

SOCRATES: When you say, Meno, that there is one virtue of a man, another of a woman, another of a child, and so on, does this apply only to virtue, or would you say the same of health, and size, and strength? Or is the nature of health always the same,

[e] whether in man or woman?

MENO: I should say that health is the same, both in man and woman.

SOCRATES: And is not this true of size and strength? If a woman is strong, she will be strong by reason of the same form (*eidōs*) and of the same strength subsisting in her which there is in the man. I mean to say that strength, as strength, whether of man or woman, is the same. Is there any difference?

MENO: I think not.

[73a] SOCRATES: And will not virtue, as virtue, be the same, whether in a child or in a grown-up person, in a woman or in a man?

MENO: I cannot help feeling, Socrates, that this case is different from the others.

SOCRATES: But why? Were you not saying that the virtue of a man was to order a state, and the virtue of a woman was to order a house?

MENO: I did say so.

SOCRATES: And can either house or state or anything be well ordered without temperance and without justice?

MENO: Certainly not.

[b] SOCRATES: Then they who order a state or a house temperately or justly order them with temperance and justice?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then both men and women, if they are to be good men and women, must have the same virtues of temperance (*sōphrosynē*) and justice (*dikaïosynē*)?

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: And can either a young man or an elder one be good, if they are intemperate and unjust?

MENO: They cannot.

SOCRATES: They must be temperate and just?

MENO: Yes.

[c] SOCRATES: Then all men are good (*agathoi*) in the same way, and by participation in the same virtues?

MENO: Such is the inference.

SOCRATES: And they surely would not have been good in the same way, unless their virtue had been the same?

MENO: They would not.

SOCRATES: Then now that the sameness of all virtue has been proven, try to recollect (*anamnēsthenai*) and state what you and Gorgias say that virtue is.

MENO: If you want to have some one thing for them all, I know not what to say, but that

[d] virtue is the power of governing mankind.

SOCRATES: That is what I am seeking. But is virtue the same in a child and in a slave, Meno? Can the child govern his father, or the slave his master; and would he who governed be any longer a slave?

MENO: I think not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: No, indeed; there would be small reason in that. Yet once more, fair friend; according to you, virtue is ‘the power of governing’; but do you not add ‘justly and not unjustly’?

MENO: Yes, Socrates; I agree there; for justice (*dikaïosynē*) is virtue.

[e] SOCRATES: Would you say ‘virtue’, Meno, or ‘a virtue’?

MENO: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I mean as I might say about anything; that a round, for example, is ‘a figure’ and not simply ‘figure’, and I should adopt this mode of speaking, because there are other figures.

MENO: Quite right; and that is just what I am saying about virtue – that there are other virtues as well as justice.

[74a] SOCRATES: What are they? Tell me the names of them, as I would tell you the names of the other figures if you asked me.

MENO: Courage (*andreia*) and temperance (*sôphrosynê*) and wisdom (*sophia*) and magnanimity are virtues; and there are many others.

SOCRATES: Yes, Meno; and again we are in the same case: in searching after one virtue we have found many, though not in the same way as before; but we have been unable to find the common virtue which runs through them all.

(Trans. Jowett, slightly revised)

What follows is an exemplary application of the three readings to a small portion of a dialogue. It is limited because the strategy of three readings applies to entire dialogues, not just segments. Unfortunately the space necessary to execute a full exemplary interpretation is not

available here, and some material will need to be brought in from elsewhere in the dialogue as well.

#### Logical reading

On the logical reading, we first identify the question, ‘What do you yourself say that virtue (or excellence, *arêtê*) is?’ (71d). In the selection here, two of Meno’s answers to that question are included. The first, at 71e–72a, is to list the virtue of a man, a woman, a child, an old man, free man, slave, and so on. As Socrates points out, this does not state the ‘one virtue’ or ‘nature’ of virtue, ‘in which they do not differ, but are all alike’ (72a–c), the ‘one character [*eidōs*, Form] in common which makes them virtues’. Meno’s first answer fails, then, because it lists many examples of virtue but does not say what virtue is, the Form virtue.

Meno’s second answer is ‘the power of governing mankind’ (73d). This cannot be correct, though, because the virtue or excellence of a child or a slave is not to ‘govern mankind’. A second flaw with this account (73e) is that ‘power’ by itself fails to indicate whether virtue would consist in governing justly or unjustly. Meno’s reply, that justice is virtue, leads Socrates to draw the distinction between ‘virtue’ in general and ‘a virtue’, between a species and an individual member of that species, between an idea and an instance of it. Thus, Socrates reminds Meno that they are trying to learn the one Form that is common to all the individuals.

So, Meno’s first two accounts of virtue or excellence have been refuted, one for naming instances rather than explaining what is common to them and the other for both including instances (children, slaves) that do not belong in the category (ruling over people) and excluding aspects of the category (justice) that seem to belong in it. As a matter of logic, this is a nice lesson in definition of terms through examples of definitions that fail by being too wide and too narrow. At the same time, it has been accepted that there is a common factor we seek in cases such as virtues, but also bees and shapes, and that this common factor is called Form (*eidōs*).

Several philosophically important ideas appear later in the dialogue. The theory of learning as recollection is presented in the second act (82–6). Following that, a method of hypothetical reasoning is introduced (86e–87c) and later the idea that knowledge differs from right opinion in that it is tied down by ‘an account of the

reason' why the belief is true, which is recollection (98a). A purely logical reading of the *Meno* leads to the following outline:

- 71d Inquiry: What is virtue or excellence? Meno's Answer 1: There are excellences of man, woman, child, etc. Refutation 1: not a single *eidos* (Form).
- 73d Meno's Answer 2: ability to rule over men. Refutation 2: this does not apply to children and slaves and it fails to require that 'rule' be exercised justly.
- 77b Meno's Answer 3: 'to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them.' Refutation 3: again excellence becomes many, not one.
- 82b The slave boy sequence provides demonstration of the theory that learning is recollection.
- 86c Proceeding hypothetically to determine how excellence is acquired – Meno's Answer 4 – excellence seems to be *sophia* (wisdom) or *epistêmê* (knowledge). But – Refutation 4 – if it is knowledge, then there must be teachers.
- 89d Conversing with Anytus, Socrates argues that there are no teachers, so excellence cannot be knowledge and cannot be taught or learned.
- 96d Inquiry: How *do* men become good? Meno's Answer 5: the excellence of successful politicians is right opinion, not knowledge. So – Meno's Answer 6 – excellence is neither innate nor learned, but a divine gift.

#### Dramatic reading

In the second reading, we focus on literary and dramatic features of the dialogue. Features mentioned earlier in this chapter as well as those discussed in earlier chapters will be italicized for emphasis.

As a drama, the dialogue falls naturally into three 'acts' preceded by a 'prologue' (70a–71c) in which Meno asks his question and Socrates responds. In act 1, Socrates elicits three answers to the question, What is virtue or excellence? and refutes each (71d–80e). In act 2, Socrates presents the theory of recollection and illustrates it by examining a slave boy about geometrical shapes (81a–86c). In act 3, Socrates proceeds hypothetically with Meno and Anytus to investigate how excellence is acquired (86c–100b).

The *Meno* is a direct dramatic dialogue, so it has no narrator or *narrative structure* and virtually no *prologue*. No *setting* is described

in the beginning, but later details in the dialogue may suggest that they are somewhere in the streets of Athens, since Meno is accompanied by ‘many’ servants (82b). In the *first line* of the dialogue Meno asks a compound question about how we come to possess excellence (*arêtê*). Both the fact that it is a question and the fact that it concerns excellence is reminiscent of Socrates’ own interests and orientations, so his response is surprising and highly *ironic*. He asserts that wisdom, the legendary trait of Athens, has departed to the Thessalians (this would be like attributing peace and quiet to Baghdad in 2006) and he attributes this to their love of Gorgias the sophist. He denies knowing what excellence is and insists that unless one knows that, one cannot know whether it is the sort of thing that can be acquired in one way or another. The conversational situation has been *inverted* in two ways. The question has been changed from the mode of acquisition of excellence to its nature and Socrates has recovered his usual role as the questioner. Why does Socrates do this?

The answer arises from details about the *characters*, collected from many places in the dialogue. The historical Meno, from Larisa in Thessaly, is described by Xenophon (*Anabasis* 2.6.21–2) as quite a bad character, greedy, ambitious and treacherous. There is thus an immediate dramatic irony in the drama. He also seems to have had the connection with Anytus that Plato attributes to him in this dialogue (90b). Plato’s character is a rich Thessalian aristocrat; young, handsome, vain and spoiled (76b–c). He can be insulting (80a–b). He is very impressed by Gorgias, whose views he shares (71d). He gives many speeches and he is quite self-impressed about them (80b–c). He likes ‘theatrical’ statements and is greedy to learn secrets (76e–77a), but he is gullible and lacks self-control (86d–e).

Although Anytus does not appear in the sample above, he is of some importance for understanding the dialogue dramatically. Plato’s Anytus is the ‘guest friend’ (100b) of Meno (which may suggest an equally bad character). He is ferociously hostile to ‘sophists’ while, irrationally, admitting that he has never met one (91c–92b). The historical Anytus was a successful democratic politician after the restoration of 403, which establishes the *dramatic date* of the *Meno*, since Socrates says that ‘the majority of the Athenians are electing him to the highest offices’ (90b). It also locates the *Meno* in the *dramatic order* of dialogues that leads up to Socrates’ indictment, conviction and execution. The presence of Anytus, his threat against Socrates (94e), and Socrates’ concluding request that Meno benefit the Athenians by convincing Anytus of what he himself has learned

intensify a political aura of the dialogue, especially in light of the fact that Anytus was one of the main accusers of Socrates in the *Apology*.

Socrates is old (76a–b), and Meno knows his reputation of being always perplexed (*aporia*) and of making others so, too (80a). He is morally committed to inquiry (86b) and a practitioner of dialectic as opposed to eristic (75c) and to the sophistic speech-making of which Meno is fond. He is ironic, both here at the outset of his conversation with Meno and later (89e–90a) at the outset of his conversation with Anytus.

Now, Meno's question about how to acquire excellence is, to begin with, a question that was widely debated in the *context* of the late fifth century, and powerful arguments were made for each of the options he offers; it is not simply a philosophic question. The meaning of *arêtê* had changed over the centuries in terms of both the persons to whom and the behaviours or characteristics on account of which it was applied. Originally a label for heroic deeds and a trait of hereditary aristocrats, its meaning was contested in the fifth century. To say that *arêtê* can be acquired by teaching legitimizes the sophistic practice of giving lessons and demanding fees, as against the traditional mode of acculturation by a youth's association with an elder. To say, on the contrary, that it is acquired by practice, which resembles the traditional model of *paideia*, seems to exclude formal teaching. To say that it comes by nature seems to deny both of these answers, perhaps to eliminate the basis of moral praise and blame altogether (how can you be blamed *or* praised for what you have not chosen?), and to revert to the old aristocratic idea that excellence or goodness depends on birth and class. Of course, the question of whether excellence is teachable also implicates Socrates, who denies that he is a teacher but insists that his practice of cross-examining people makes them better.

As the dialogue develops, Socrates slowly elicits from Meno a clearer sense of what he had in mind when he used the term *arêtê*. This begins with his first and second answers, in the passage above: (1) the *arêtê* of a man is to run the state, benefiting his friends and harming his enemies and then (2) it is being able to 'rule' over men. These answers point to political rather than moral considerations, and Socrates has to remind Meno about the need for justice in ruling. Moreover, Meno's idea that one benefits personally from having political power, while it was (and is) a common belief about the use of power, conflicts with the idea Socrates expresses in several other

dialogues, and that we continue to consider an ideal, that public officials are to benefit the community, not themselves. Meno later asserts that *arêtê* is the power to acquire beautiful things (77b), accepts successful politicians as examples of the kind of *arêtê* he seeks, and accepts the description that ‘he desires to attain that kind of wisdom and virtue by which men order the state or the household, and honour their parents, and know how to receive citizens and strangers . . . as a good host should’ (91a). This not *moral* virtue, courage, justice, piety and temperance, but something much more like social and political skill and success. So, Meno is actually *not* asking Socrates a question about something in which Socrates is interested; he is using the same word, but with a different reference, though this is only clarified slowly as the story unfolds.

Moreover, when we consider the initial question in light of Meno’s sophistic training, his delight in fancy phrases and lack of intellectual sophistication, and his having given ‘speeches about *arêtê* to many people a thousand times’ (80b), it seems likely that his opening question was actually a rhetorical challenge. Whichever of the three choices given Socrates accepted, Meno was prepared to give one of his thousand speeches refuting it. In light of this, Socrates’ response looks more comprehensible; and competitive. Instead of taking the bait, he turns the tables on the man who has presented himself as a verbal adversary. The irony of his denial of knowledge escapes Meno’s notice but the *paradoxical quality* of it distracts him from his challenge.

After the two failed attempts to give an account of *arêtê* in our passage and the failure of his third idea, that it is the power to acquire beautiful things, Meno confesses to being perplexed, but blames his failure on Socrates and accuses him of being, physically and intellectually, like a stingray who makes someone numb. Then he tries to end the conversation by saying that we cannot learn anything by inquiry because either we already know it, and so cannot look for it, or else we do not at all know what it is, in which case we will not recognize it if we find it. Socrates calls this an ‘eristic argument’ and says that it is not true. He entices Meno to continue the discussion by presenting the theory that learning is not like finding or acquiring some external object that one has never seen, but like recollecting what the soul, which is eternal, has encountered before but temporarily forgotten (80a–81e).

This *paradoxical* theory of recollection is ‘demonstrated’ through dialectical examination of an uneducated servant of Meno’s (82b–86b). This section has become the model, for better and for

worse, of what is called the ‘Socratic method’ of teaching. Surprisingly, though, it is based on the immortality of the soul, for which no evidence is given here, and Socrates half-disowns it by saying (86c) that the only part he insists on is that we are better off trying to learn by inquiry than by giving up. He also makes it clear that his questioning of the boy is meant to demonstrate acquiring knowledge by recollecting only indirectly (85c): ‘At present these notions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream; but if he were frequently asked the same questions, in different forms, he would know as well as any one at last?’ True knowledge results from being questioned repeatedly ‘in different forms’ on a subject.

Recollection is presented in the middle of the dialogue as a feature of *pedimental structure*, with emphasis added by Socrates’ *actions* of making geometrical drawings in the sand and the rhythmic alternation of questions to the boy about geometry and then questions to Meno about recollection and the epistemological value of perplexity and doubt. Because the theory is presented dramatically as a strategy to bring Meno back to co-operative inquiry, this middle section is also a *digression* from their agreed topic, the nature and acquisition of excellence.

The boy eventually seems to ‘recollect’ that the sides of a right-angled triangle are incommensurable with the hypotenuse. At each step of the argument, however, Socrates elicits Meno’s agreement that being refuted was beneficial rather than harmful because one only seeks to learn when aware of not knowing. After multiple repetitions of such examinations, the boy might possess genuine knowledge, but the really important point, Socrates insists, is that it is morally better to inquire than to accept Meno’s eristic argument and not try.

The third act of the story has several parts and elaborates several *paradoxical views*, that knowledge is as good as right opinion, that successful politicians are like soothsayers, prophets and poets in that they have no knowledge of what they do, but rather succeed through ‘right opinion’ or ‘correct belief’. Their success and the right opinions they have turn out to be a divine gift or dispensation, rather than something for which they themselves deserve praise (99c–100a).

Thus, the drama pits the philosopher, Socrates, who proceeds by dialectical conversation and pursues formal or conceptual adequacy, against the sophistical Meno, the speech-loving protégé of Gorgias who pursues wealth, power and political success. The story opposes philosophy to sophistry and politics, dialectic to rhetoric, the theoretical to the practical life, doubt to certainty, rational cognition to

material acquisition, and learning from without to learning from within.

Numerous other literary and dramatic details support this. The repeated references to Gorgias (70b, 76c, 96d) as Meno's true inspiration and of Prodicus (75e, 96d) ironically as Socrates' teacher emphasizes sophistry as a theme. References to several men who held political power in Athens – Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles and Thucydides (94) – serve multiple purposes. They are the examples of 'good' men, men who possess what Meno (and Anytus) consider 'excellence', in contrast with excellences such as justice, temperance and courage, which are Socrates' touchstones. Thus they clarify for us that Meno has all along been interested in political power rather than moral virtue and that he has not really changed this aspect of his view since the beginning of the dialogue, despite having been refuted several times. They also provide a contrast between the politicians' practical lives and the contemplative life Socrates represents; and they may remind us of something that Socrates said in the Apology (32a), 'A man who really fights for justice, if he is going to survive even a short time, must be a private citizen not a public man.' It is even supported by the ominous last line of the *Meno*, where Socrates asks Meno to convince Anytus of what he himself has just learned, that political success is a gift of the gods. 'If you persuade him of this you will benefit the Athenians' (100b). Thus the story as a whole is an implicit refutation of sophistic practice and intelligence and of political life.

The official conclusions of the dialogue are puzzling: (1) knowledge is as good as right opinion for practical purposes; but (2) knowledge is different and more valuable than right opinion; (3) politicians succeed by right opinion, not knowledge; (4) politicians are ignorant; (5) in this they are like poets, prophets and soothsayers; (6) this 'excellence' is a gift of the gods, but (7) implicitly, it is not true excellence.

### Integrative reading

The second reading asked, 'Why does Socrates proceed as he does?' The third reading asks, 'Why does Plato make Socrates and the other characters do and say everything that constitutes the dialogue as a whole? What is the result of seeing the theories, arguments and ideas identified in the logical reading in the context of the story analysed in the second reading?' Not 'What is Socrates trying to accomplish

by saying this or that?’ but ‘What is *Plato* trying to accomplish by *making* Socrates say this, by putting on this drama for us, the audience?’

What the dialogue achieves is to bring to life in us a vision, a complex of orientations, values and ideas. It enacts generally the faultiness of the competitive lives Meno and Anytus stand for: sophistry on the one hand, and politics on the other. It enacts the desirability, instead, of collaborative inquiry, of philosophy. More specifically, the dialogue enacts – rather than asserts – the sophistic and political misidentification of excellence with practical success and the acquisition of new external possessions along with the idea that real excellence is philosophical, theoretical. True excellence comes through dialectical inquiry; it consists in the pursuit of knowledge and the recovery of something already present internally in one’s mind or soul. The dialogue thus instantiates what it is about. Socrates exhibits the excellence that is under discussion in contrast with his interlocutors’ failure to do so and their mistaken ideas about where and how to seek it.

The *Meno* provides general support for several ideas that are often taken as Platonic doctrines: that knowing the nature of something, such as excellence, is logically prior to knowing what qualities it has; that knowledge consists in or is demonstrated by giving an account (*logos*); that there *is* a nature, something common and stable, and contrary to the sophistic view that it is all a matter of opinion; that when you know the nature of something, you know an *eidos*, Form, which may seem to imply a ‘theory of Forms’ more generally; that naming examples is not giving an account (recognizing examples does not demonstrate knowing that of which they are examples); and that accounts can fail by being too wide or too narrow (the logic of definitions).

The theory of recollection is presented, too, but in an example rather than an argument and in what is dramatically a digression from the main conversation about the nature and acquisition of excellence. Thus, it is like the other ideas just listed in an important way. They are not directly taught as doctrines by Plato or Socrates. Yet they are learned by us in a way as we read the dialogue, because as Socrates asks each question of Meno, we silently, mentally answer. We acquire these views as attitudes and orientations rendered plausible in part by their association with Socrates and in part by our own sense of their intrinsic reasonableness as answers to the questions Socrates asks.

This state of affairs is worth noting: something is not taught, but it is learned. It contradicts a commonsense belief that Meno accepts (89d) about teaching and learning as correlatives. But it exemplifies what the theory of recollection implies about teaching and learning: that learning of the most important sort happens not by an external teacher communicating to a pupil some information or knowledge the pupil did not previously possess. Rightly understood, a 'teacher' is one who occasions or facilitates the student's recognition of truths discoverable by the student's own thought.

The theory of recollection is not grounded in any rational explanation; Socrates only gives a vague and poetic story about the immortality of the soul and its having seen everything. The theory is also not proved in the dialogue, as Socrates states explicitly. The section with the slave boy illustrates only the kind of questioning that, if repeated many times in many ways, will eventually lead to knowledge. Many readers feel that Socrates has put the answers into the boy's mouth by virtue of the way he asks his questions, yet there is a lingering sense that, at least with geometrical and generally mathematical things, knowledge *may* be attainable by a purely rational process of question-and-answer. If the theory were true, it would provide a way to understand not only why Socrates believes in a theory of Forms but also why he believes that dialectical conversation alone can lead to the sort of knowledge he seeks. Forms would be, like mathematical theorems and formulas, eternal, unchangeable, immaterial and discoverable by reason alone.

Integratively, too, note the double meaning of the central second act of the drama. On the one hand, there is the theory of recollection. On the other, this section stresses the moral and epistemological value of perplexity. If the central section contains the subjects about which Plato was most serious, then there are two in the *Meno*, recollection and doubt, and we ought to wonder about their connection. Socrates says he is not certain about all the details of the theory of recollection, but he *is* certain that it is better to believe that we can learn by inquiry than it is to give up, as Meno had tried to do.

The theory is stated and illustrated here, and it is mentioned in the *Phaedo* as something Socrates often talks about. Like the other ideas just mentioned, it is not taught as a doctrine. Yet we come to know it, to some extent, to associate it with our hero, Socrates, and to appreciate its intellectual interest and power. Even if our silent, mental answer to Socrates' questions is negative, we have been moved by

the dialogue to think about the issue and about the approach to it suggested by Socrates.

Thus the dialogue is about both its logical topics, the nature and acquisition of excellence and learning as recollection, and it is about the conflict between philosophy and politics. It causes us to entertain a variety of views without teaching them to us positively or dogmatically. What it teaches more positively is rather the attitudes of intellectual seriousness and persistence, logical rigour and clarity, and that, whatever else is true, it is better to go on inquiring than to give up, and that there is a difference between knowledge and opinion both in ordinary usage and in strictly philosophical thinking.

Finally, and in summary, note that the *Meno* in all of the ways just enumerated works as a provocation. Plato evades what might be the reader's wish to be told the answer authoritatively, but at the same and by evading this wish for intellectual dependence, he provokes the reader to philosophize. Provocation, not demonstration, is the Socratic mission of the dialogues. The *Meno* provokes us to think about the ideas presented. It may provoke us to further and more careful study, thought and conversation with others or within our own minds. To do so is, simply, to engage in philosophy. The dialogues differ in literary and dramatic richness and in the difficulty of arguments presented. It is easy to imagine that this reflects differences in their intended audiences and uses. The more dramatic and less argumentatively complex dialogues may be intended for beginners and more as protreptics, to turn readers to philosophy. The more argumentatively complex and less dramatically rich dialogues may be intended as exercises for the serious or advanced students. In either case, the reading of the dialogues achieves what Socrates says the curriculum of the philosopher-rulers should achieve. It 'turns the soul around', focuses our attention away from sensation and the realm of material things and their acquisition and instead onto thought and the realm of ideas which are truly real and in whose pursuit true happiness consists.

#### NOTES ON THE THREE READINGS

Each reading is iterative and the process as a whole is iterative. As with any book, the reader understands it better and learns more from it on the second and subsequent readings. With Plato's dialogues, more specifically, there is more to grasp about the arguments, about the literary and dramatic details, and about the ways

these aspects interact than one can realize on the first or second reading.

Although each dialogue requires these three kinds of reading, the differences among characteristics of the dialogues imply that the readings must be applied differently to different dialogues. A simple example of this, already mentioned, is that, while it is practicable for one to read the *Euthyphro* or *Crito* three times, it is quite impracticable for most of us to reread the *Republic* in that way, because it is so much longer. Some dialogues, like *Phaedrus* or *Symposium*, are far richer in dramatic detail than others, like *Parmenides*, *Sophist* or *Statesman*. Some dialogues – *Parmenides*, *Philebus* or *Statesman* – contain more sustained, complex and seemingly constructive (or didactic) argumentation. So, the balance of work the reader will need to expend on each reading will vary.

To what extent is it possible to execute the three ‘readings’ simultaneously? The answer is that it varies with the reader’s level of familiarity with terms and ideas, analytical skill, and intellectual ability to have several ideas developing through the collection of new data simultaneously. For a reader who knows a good deal about philosophy in general, or ancient philosophy in particular, it will be easier to read in different ways simultaneously.

Are all three readings necessary? Why not just study the arguments? It is not simply wrong to devote oneself to the arguments alone, as some readers do. This is undoubtedly one aspect of what Plato intends. We should consider the ideas put forward in the dialogues and the arguments given for them. More, we should consider the correct answer apart from the dialogue, make and assess arguments, investigate the consistency of our beliefs about one topic with our other beliefs as well as the consistency of our beliefs with our actions. But to study only the arguments and to study them apart from the characters, settings and story in which they are made is not a complete reading of the complete dialogue that Plato wrote.

The abundance of logical, literary and dramatic details, along with the fact that interpreters in different circumstances will weigh the details differently, goes far to explain the unending conversation about Plato that has been part of the Western intellectual tradition for 2,500 years.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Arieti, James A., 'How to read a platonic dialogue', pp. 119–32 in Gonzalez, ed., *The Third Way*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995.
- Gonzalez, Francisco 'How to Read a Platonic Prologue: *Lysis* 203A–207D', pp. 15–44 in Ann N. Michelini, ed., *Plato as Author*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Miller, Mitchell *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980. See the Introduction.
- Sayre, Kenneth *Plato's Literary Garden: How to Read a Platonic Dialogue*. Notre Dame, IL: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- Szlezák, Thomas A. *Reading Plato*. Trans. Graham Zanker. New York: Routledge, 1999.

## CHAPTER 14

### SUMMARIES OF THE DIALOGUES

The dialogues briefly summarized here are the ones most often studied in college and university courses. They are arranged in their approximate dramatic order, tracing the philosophic life of Socrates from his first presentation of a theory of Forms to his execution.

#### Parmenides

As a young man of about 20 (c. 450) Socrates converses with Zeno and the aged Parmenides at the home of Pythadorus, a student of the Eleatics. The dialogue falls naturally into two, quite unequal, parts. In the first, Socrates criticizes Zeno's argument and proposes a theory of Forms that would explain how things can have seemingly contrary qualities at the same time. Then Parmenides presents a number of criticisms of Socrates' theory. The second and much longer part is Parmenides' demonstration of the kind of logical exercises by which Socrates might acquire the skill to defend his theory better. Taking his own monist hypothesis of one being, and with the compliant Aristoteles as an interlocutor, Parmenides goes through a lengthy series of seemingly self-contradictory deductions that may outline a non-Eleatic metaphysics of permanence but which some have thought is an elaborate joke. The deductions show, first, negative consequences for the One if the One is one and then positive consequences for the One if it is one. Next Parmenides demonstrates positive consequences for other things if the One is and then negative consequences for the others if the One is. After this, he shows positive consequences for the One if it is not and negative consequences for the One if it is not. Finally, he demonstrates positive consequences for the others if the One is not and negative consequences for the others if the One is not.

Protagoras

In 433 or shortly before, Socrates visits the house of Callias with young Hippocrates, who wants to be introduced to the famous sophist Protagoras, as a prospective pupil. After this prologue, the dialogue falls into two main acts, divided by a crisis and comic interlude. Protagoras describes himself as teaching the political art including such virtues (*arêtai*) as courage, justice, wisdom, piety and self-control. Socrates professes to believe that they are not teachable and that they are one and engages him in a discussion about the unity and teachability of the virtues. Socrates forces Protagoras to agree that justice and piety are one, that wisdom and self-control are one, and that self-control and justice are one. At this point, Protagoras tries to withdraw from the discussion but is shamed back into participation. After a brilliant comic interlude in which Socrates interprets a poem of Simonides, he forces Protagoras to agree to the unity of courage and wisdom. Considering the dialogue as a whole, then, although Protagoras claimed that the virtues are different, Socrates forced him to agree that they are one. Thus it is demonstrated for young Hippocrates as well as for us that Protagoras cannot give a consistent account of the very thing that he claims to teach: virtue.

Charmides

In about 432, just at the outset of the Peloponnesian War, Socrates discusses the nature of temperance or moderation (*sôphrosynê*) with the young and very beautiful Charmides and the older sophist and politician Callias. In later life both, who were Plato's relatives, were among the most violent of the leaders in the period of the Thirty Tyrants that followed the end of the war. After a prologue in which Charmides is induced to converse with Socrates about temperance, *sôphrosynê*, the dialogue falls into two acts. First, Charmides proposes that moderation is quietness and then that it is modesty. When Socrates shows these are unacceptable, he offers an idea he heard from someone else – Critias, it turns out – that temperance is minding one's own business, the same phrase used by Socrates himself to define justice in the *Republic*. When Socrates suggests that this account is an enigma or riddle, Critias takes over as interlocutor in the second act. He is not able to defend that account, nor his subsequent proposals that it is 'doing good things' or self-knowledge. Finally, he proposes that moderation is knowledge of knowledge, the

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refutation of which occupies the complex latter half of the dialogue. Socrates suggests that knowledge of knowledge may not even be possible, but that, if it is, it must be beneficial. However, there seems to be no moral benefit to knowing either *that* you know what you know or to knowing *what* you know, though the idea implies a utopia of technical expertise that seems to have been attractive to Critias.

### Laches

Some time between 424 and 418, Socrates encounters two generals, Nicias and Laches, at a fighting exhibition to which they have come in order to advise the fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias, about the education of their sons. After this prologue, the dialogue, about the nature of courage (*andreia*), naturally falls into two parts. Laches' proposals – remaining at one's post, defending oneself against an enemy, and endurance – are found to be inadequate. In the second part, Nicias proposes that courage is wisdom (*sophia*) or knowledge (*epistêmê*) of what is to be feared and hoped for in every situation. But, as Socrates points out, how can someone have knowledge of what is in the future? And if this account of courage is altered to read 'knowledge of good and evil', then it will define the whole of goodness, not courage in particular. Since we adults have been unable to define courage, Socrates concludes, we should go to school, like the boys.

### Hippias Major

Sometime between 421 and 416, Socrates meets the sophist Hippias somewhere in the streets of Athens. Their discussion naturally falls into two parts. Asked what the noble or beautiful (*kalon*) itself is, Hippias offers of himself a series of unacceptable answers: a beautiful girl; gold; to be rich and famous; and that which is fitting. At about the middle of the dialogue, Hippias finds it strange (*atopon*) that his answers do not seem to work. In the second part, under Socrates' guidance, he offers further answers that turn out to be unacceptable: the useful; the beneficial; and the pleasant in sight and hearing. However, he comes to recognize a distinction between the appearance and the reality of beauty and other ways in which things could have the same attribute, in this case beauty. Finally, Hippias becomes impatient with arguments and asserts that the beautiful is

the power to save your life, property and friends through persuasive speech.

#### Symposium

In 416, Socrates attends a dinner party celebrating the victory of the tragic poet Agathon in the dramatic competition. Instead of hard drinking, the dinner guests agree to give speeches in praise of Love (*eros*). Speeches, each one claiming to improve on its predecessor, are given by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, the comic poet Aristophanes, and Agathon. In a brief dialectical exchange, Socrates forces Agathon to agree that each of the main points he has just made is false. Then Socrates speaks; but instead of a speech in praise of Love, he recounts the dialectical instruction in matters of Love (*erotika*) that he received from a certain Mantineaean priestess named Diotima. She teaches that there is a 'Ladder of Loves' beginning with the love for a single beautiful body, but culminating in the intellectual contemplation of Beauty itself, a Form. After this, Alcibiades breaks into the party quite drunk and gives the seventh speech on Love, this one in praise of Socrates, whose philosophical and decidedly non-sexual seduction of him has been repeated with many other wealthy, intelligent and handsome young men. As the symposiasts leave or fall asleep, Socrates sits up drinking with Aristophanes and Agathon, proving to them that the true poet would, like Plato himself, be a master of both comedy and tragedy.

#### Ion

Some time before 412, Socrates encounters the rhapsode Ion, from Ephesus. They discuss whether rhapsodes have a *technê* (see Glossary) or know anything about the meaning of the poetry they recite and conclude that they do not. Instead, rhapsodes give their performances as poets compose, under divine 'inspiration' (*enthousiasmos*).

#### Republic

In 411 or 410 Socrates reports a conversation that took place when he went down to the Piraeus, to the home of Cephalus, with Plato's brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus. A discussion of the nature of justice (*dikaiosynê*) is beginning, when the sophist Thrasymachus harshly and somewhat violently asserts that justice is not some one

thing, but whatever the stronger think it is. Although Socrates refutes Thrasymachus dialectically (and rather dubiously), Glaucon and Adeimantus request at the beginning of book 2 that he give a serious defence of justice, showing that it is really, not just apparently (in *physis* not just in *nomos*), better than injustice. Thus commences the longest and most celebrated of the dialogues Plato is sure to have written.

Socrates proposes that they will be better able to see justice in the soul of a person if they see it first in the larger format of a society. Alternating between Glaucon and Adeimantus as his interlocutors, Socrates first describes a simple but just state. When it is objected that this is a city fit for pigs, not human beings, Socrates constructs in words a more elaborate state, built on the assumption that all things will be done better if each person does only the work for which they are by nature suited. The state is divided into three classes – rulers, soldiers and artisans – as the soul is divided into three parts – reason, appetite and a somewhat mysterious part that can be thought of as energy, tenacity, spirit or drive. Justice in the state turns out to exist when each class ‘minds its own business’; that is, the philosopher-rulers rule, the soldiers or guardians enforce the rules and protect the city, and the craftspeople ply their trades without trying to interfere and do the work that belongs to the other groups. Similarly, justice in the soul is when reason rules over the passions with the support of the spirited part.

Philosopher-rulers are then the focus of the central Books 5–7 including the three famous and influential images of the sun, the Divided Line and the Cave. The reason the philosophers should be the rulers of a perfectly just community is that they alone truly know what justice is and therefore they alone can implement it. This leads to an extended treatment of knowledge. There are two realms (*topoi*, literally ‘spaces’ or ‘places’): the visible realm of individual objects we sense and the intelligible realm of Forms, which are real, unchanging, eternal, and the true objects of knowledge in contemplation. The ultimate object of knowledge is the Form of the Good (book 6). The simile of the Sun indicates that as the sun is to living things, the source of their life and knowledge of them, so the Form of the Good is the course of the reality and knowability of all other Forms.

The Divided Line shows the four steps leading from opinion to knowledge. Imagining (*eikasia*) is accepting the appearance of things at face value. Belief (*pistis*) is accepting the commonsense view of

how things in the world are and how one ought to behave without having sound reasons for those beliefs. Thought (*dianoia*) is reasoning from premises to conclusions epitomized by mathematical reasoning. Intelligence (*noêsis*) or knowledge (*epistêmê*) is rational intuition of the Forms.

At the beginning of book 7 the Parable of the Cave tells the story of prisoners chained in a dark cave looking at shadows on the wall in front of them which they take for realities. Strange as it seems, Socrates says that they are 'like us'. Education is liberation from imprisonment in the epistemic darkness of sensation and opinion, and its necessary first step, the allegory shows, is 'turning the soul around' from its prior dependence on sensation to thought. An elaborate educational programme is laid out for the philosopher-rulers: arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, music, and culminating in dialectic. They are to have military training from age 18 to 20 and then study mathematics from 20 to 30, which provides the foundation for studying dialectic from 30 to 45.

But even if the ideal state were to exist, it would tend to be transformed by a series of steps into the worst of states. The morphology of the state and soul (Book 8) explains the decline from aristocracy, under which justice reigns, to timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally tyranny. The dialogues concludes with a renewed criticism of poets and the story of a man named Er, who died but returned from the dead to tell what he had seen: the judgement of the dead, the rewards of the good and punishments of the bad, and how, before reincarnation, souls have the opportunity to choose their next life.

#### Timaeus

In 411, in an indeterminable location, but perhaps the day after the conversation between Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus reported in the *Republic*, Socrates gathers with Hermocrates and Critias, to listen to Timaeus (probably a fictional character, who is said to come from southern Italy) give a long speech on the creation of the world uninterrupted by any dialectical passages. Unlike the divine creation explained by post-Nicene theologians, Timaeus' demiurge does not create out of nothing, but rather orders the cosmos out of chaotic elemental matter, imitating the eternal Forms. Timaeus takes the four elements, fire, air, water and earth (which are said to be composed of combinations of triangles), making various compounds of these into what he calls the Body of the Universe. Of all of Plato's

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works, the *Timaeus* provides the most detailed conjectures in the areas we now regard as the natural sciences: physics, astronomy, chemistry and biology. It was a main focus of attention by later Platonists from antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages.

### Phaedrus

In about 408, Socrates and Phaedrus walk out of the city and lie down beside a river. The remainder of the dialogue falls naturally into two main parts separated by a brief interlude. The first consists of speeches. After hearing Phaedrus' recitation of a speech paradoxically arguing that a young man should grant sexual favours to an elder who doesn't love him rather than to one who does, Socrates then gives two extemporaneous speeches on love; the second supports a conclusion opposite of the first and includes the account of love as a form of divine madness (*mania*), the image of the soul as a chariot drawn by two horses driven by a charioteer, and an account of the soul's vision as it rises above material things to knowledge of the Forms. After the interlude, Socrates distinguishes bad rhetoric and writing from good by its pursuit of truth rather than persuasion, and gives an account of dialectic as an art of collection and division. He concludes with a critique of writing as destructive of memory and an inappropriate medium for the pursuit of philosophic truth.

### Gorgias

Like the *Meno*, *Gorgias* (405) falls naturally into three acts, framed by a brief prologue and a long epilogue. Socrates converses at some length with the famous sophist Gorgias about the nature and domain of rhetoric. Then Gorgias' student Polus takes over and discusses with Socrates the idea that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it. Finally Socrates converses with Callicles, an Athenian aristocrat with political ambitions who, like Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, is contemptuous of conventional morality. Callicles' view that might makes right is refuted, and Socrates observes that rhetoric, unlike dialectic, is nothing but a knack, the heroes of Athenian political history are nothing but flatterers of the populace, unlike philosophers who are the true educators. The knowledge that would enable someone to live the good life is, therefore, not rhetoric, as Gorgias, his students and followers believe.

## Meno

Sometime between 403 and 401, Socrates encounters Meno, a young, handsome Thessalian aristocrat and hereditary friend of the rising democratic politician Anytus. Although Meno asks Socrates how excellence or virtue (*arêtê*) is acquired, they first discuss what *arêtê* is (its nature or 'form'). Meno makes a few proposals – that it is many virtues; ruling over others; and the desire and ability to acquire beautiful things – each of which is refuted. At this point, Meno tries to escape from further inquiry by posing the dilemma that you cannot learn by inquiry because either you already know what you're looking for or you won't recognize it when you find it. The dialogue's second act is Socrates' demonstration of the theory of recollection (demonstrated by a slave boy's learning some geometry), the purpose of which is to convince Meno that he should inquire further. In the final section, using the method of hypothesis, it is first agreed that virtue is knowledge, but then no one has *arêtê* by nature. Then Socrates argues against the (otherwise Socratic) notion that *arêtê* is knowledge on the grounds that there are neither teachers nor learners of it. Finally, Socrates concludes that *arêtê* comes to those who have it as a divine gift, and that successful politicians, like poets and prophets, succeed by a kind of divine inspiration or madness rather than through any actual knowledge.

## Theaetetus

In 400 or 399, Socrates discusses the nature of knowledge (*epistêmê*) itself with the unhandsome but smart young Theaetetus and his teacher, the mathematician Theodorus. Theaetetus first lists various kinds of knowledge. When that fails, he loses heart. Socrates draws him back into inquiry with the idea that he is an intellectual midwife. Theaetetus then proposes that *epistêmê* is sensation or perception (*aisthêsis*). Socrates first associates this idea with Protagoras' view that 'man is the measure of all things' and then both of those views with the extreme Heraclitean view that nothing is unchanging, not even the meanings of words. In the middle of the dialogue, Socrates gets Theodorus to participate in the defence and critique of Protagoras and then in a long 'interlude' contrasting the unfree life of political activity and the leisured life of philosophy. After this, Socrates elicits from Theaetetus the idea that *epistêmê* is true opinion or belief (*doxa*). The refutation includes images of the mind as a block of wax

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and as a bird cage. Theaetetus' final account is that *epistêmê* is right opinion grounded by an explanatory account (*logos*). At the end, Socrates makes an appointment to continue the conversation on the following day and then leaves to go to the courthouse to answer the indictment that has been brought against him.

### Euthyphro

As he is arriving at the courthouse to answer the indictment, Socrates encounters Euthyphro, a person who makes religious prophecies and who is there to indict his own father for murder, despite the fact that his family considers it impious of him to do so. Like the *Phaedrus*, the dialogue falls into two acts separated by a brief interlude. First, they discuss the true nature of piety or holiness (*hosion, hosiotês*), the character that makes all pious acts pious. Euthyphro proposes that piety is doing what he is doing, what the gods love, and what all the gods love. When these accounts are shown to be inadequate, there is an interlude in which Euthyphro expresses frustration and tries to break off the conversation by blaming Socrates for his failure and calling him a sorcerer. In the second part, he is drawn back into inquiry by Socrates, who elicits from him several further proposals about piety: that it is the part of justice having to do with our relations to the gods – either care of the gods, or some form of service to them, such as prayer and sacrifice. Socrates suggests that this turns piety into a sort of trading skill and that Euthyphro has once again defined it as what is pleasing to the gods. Rather than begin the inquiry again, as Socrates suggests, Euthyphro rushes off.

### Sophist

Apparently the day after the conversations of the *Theaetetus* and *Euthyphro*, Socrates keeps his appointment with Theodorus, Theaetetus and Young Socrates. They have brought along a stranger from Elea, a student of Parmenides and Zeno, whose name is mysteriously never given. The question raised is whether sophist, statesman and philosopher – three types of life that a person might select – are three names for the same thing or are different types of person. The Eleatic Stranger replies that they are three and undertakes to prove it by defining each term using the method of division (*diairesis*) that recurs in the *Statesman* and is reminiscent of the account of dialectic as a process of 'collection and division' in the *Phaedrus*. Most of the

*Sophist* is the Stranger's execution of this plan in a conversation in which young Theaetetus serves as his compliant interlocutor while Socrates remains a silent observer. The dialogue also includes a sustained criticism of Eleaticism (237–49). The sophist is defined as a practitioner of opinion-imitation (*doxomimêtikê*) who counterfeits the wise man, more than half-knowing himself to be a fraud, practising his pretence with an individual using brief discourses. Along the way, the Eleatic discusses the possibility of negative statements. He says that the weaving together of Forms is what makes it possible for us to say anything. He defines the philosopher as the dialectician who knows how to find the many in the one and the one in the many, ultimately dealing with the 'highest kinds': being, motion, rest, identity and difference.

#### Politicus

This text continues the conversation of the *Sophist*, with Socrates prevailing on the Stranger to continue and define the political man (*politikos/politicus*; see p. 228). The Stranger continues his practice of division and this time uses a character called Young Socrates as the compliant interlocutor. By a process of division and subdivision we discover the true human herdsman or king of men, who is distinguished by division from the divine herdsman or shepherd through a myth of cosmic cycles. An example is the art of weaving as distinguished from similar arts. The king is now divided from his subordinates or competitors. A digression occurs at the mid-point of the dialogue about the importance of measure in the arts and sciences, including the art of discourse, the purpose of which is improvement of oneself and others. In the second part of the dialogue, the king or statesman is distinguished from pretenders and the various forms of government. The essential characteristic of the king is possession of the art or science (*technê*) that is superior to written laws. Written laws are a second-best form of rule when people cannot find a true king – that is, one who has the true *technê*. The *technai* most like the king's are those of the general, the judge and the orator, who are subordinate to the true king. The right principles or beliefs are to be implanted in the citizens by education, and the king or statesman completes the political web by the weaving together of apparently dissimilar natures, the courageous and the temperate, the bold and the gentle, who are the warp and the weft of a community.

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### Apology

Having been indicted for religious heterodoxy and corrupting young people, Socrates gives three speeches and the dialogue naturally falls into three acts of unequal length. The first and longest is Socrates' defence of his practice as a philosopher. He tells the story of Chaerophon's asking the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi if anyone was wiser than Socrates, to which the oracle said no. Socrates then presents his lifelong cross-examination of people as a mission in service to the god Apollo, because his only wisdom beyond that of others was his knowing that he knew nothing important. On account of this mission, he describes himself as a gadfly and as the 'god's gift' to Athens. He has not lived like others, because it is not possible to remain a just man in public life. In defence of the life of a philosopher he describes the pursuit of knowledge and the care of his soul and those of his fellow citizens by insisting that they pursue the best. Then, having been convicted by a narrow margin, in his second speech Socrates proposes as an alternative penalty to death that he be given free meals for life at public expense. Finally, having been sentenced to death by a larger majority, in his third speech he prophesies to those who voted against him that the Athenians will be condemned because he will be considered wise, and he discusses with those who voted for him whether death might not be such a bad thing after all.

### Crito

A few days before his execution, Crito comes to Socrates' prison cell to persuade him that he should escape and go into exile. After this prologue, the dialogue falls into two acts. First, Socrates catechizes Crito about their long-held belief that it is never permitted to do wrong, not even to those who have wronged you. Then he imagines the city and the laws as arguing dialectically with him that he has entered into a just agreement to obey them and that it would be wrong of him to fail to keep this agreement.

### Phaedo

On the day of his execution, in conversation primarily with the Pythagoreans Simmias and Cebes, but surrounded by a crowd of philosophical associates, Socrates gives a series of arguments for the immortality of the soul in order to persuade them to be, like him,

optimistic in facing death. He first argues that since souls are reincarnated and opposites come from opposites, the living must come from the dead. Next he argues that the pre-existence of the soul is necessitated by the idea that knowledge is recollection. Then he claims that immortality follows from the soul's simplicity; into that which has no parts and is living, death cannot enter. The last argument is that the immortality of the soul follows from the existence of eternal, immaterial Forms. After the arguments, Socrates relates a long eschatological myth which supports the same ideas about the immortality of the soul and the future rewards for the present pursuit of knowledge. Then he drinks the hemlock and slowly dies.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Several books contain fairly brief summaries of all the dialogues:

Arieti, James A., *Interpreting Plato*. Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991.

Shorey, Paul, *What Plato Said*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1933.

Taylor, A. E., *Plato, the Man and His Work*. London: Methuen, 1926.

Tejera, Victorino, *Plato's Dialogues One by One*. New York: Irvington, 1984.

A more sustained analysis of individual dialogues will be found in:

Friedländer, Paul, *Plato 2: The Dialogues, first period* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964) and *Plato 3: The Dialogues, second and third periods*. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1969).

Guthrie, W. K. C., *History of Greek Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 3, 1975, and vol. 4, 1978.

*The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. In various, but not all, editions Jowett's introduction and analysis of each dialogue precedes the translation. Both are worth reading, but the analysis offers an excellent page-by-page summary.

## GLOSSARY OF GREEK TERMS

*agathon*: a good thing in different senses for different kinds of thing; of persons and their actions, morally good; the good in general, the highest moral good for humans. Good is a notion used in most dialogues, but in the *Republic*, the Form or Idea of the Good is presented as the highest of the Forms or Ideas, as what causes all other things to be and to be knowable, and as ‘beyond being’ (505–8). Other than the *Republic*, this special Idea is rarely mentioned and never discussed at length. It is said to be self-sufficient in the *Lysis* (215) and *Philebus* (60), associated with the Beautiful in the *Symposium* (201), and the end of action in the *Gorgias* (499). The phrase ‘Idea of the Good’ is used only once other than in the *Republic*, at *Philebus* 64.

*aisthêsis*: sensation or perception; Greek did not have distinct terms. An inferior power of the soul that interacts with that of changing objects. Thought of stable objects is the soul’s superior power. The longest section of the *Theaetetus* (151–87) investigates the proposal that knowledge (*epistêmê*) is *aisthêsis*. Its origin is discussed in *Timaeus* (41).

*anamnêsis*: recollection, memory. The theory that knowledge is recollection is a metaphor presented in *Meno* (81–6) and slightly differently as a familiar Socratic idea in *Phaedo* (72–6). The theory is also implicated in Socrates’ second and longer speech in the *Phaedrus* (250). In non-metaphorical terms, it suggests that our knowledge comes from thought or reason in itself and apart from sensation.

*andreia*: manliness, courage. One of the *arêtai*; one of the four ‘cardinal virtues’ (*Republic*) along with justice (*dikaïosynê*), wisdom (*sophia*) and temperance (*sôphrosynê*). The main theme of the

- Laches* is discovering what *andreia* is. Also discussed and defined in the *Republic*, *Protagoras* and *Politicus*.
- aporia*: difficulty, problem, having no way out. A main theme in *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Apology*, it is related to *elenchos*, one purpose of which is to induce *aporia* in the interlocutor, and to *dialektikê* as the process through which *aporia* is induced but then resolved.
- arêtê*: excellence, virtue. Pl. *arêtai*. The ‘cardinal virtues’ in *Republic* 442b–d are courage, justice, wisdom and temperance. In several dialogues the basic question investigated is the nature of a virtue or of virtue itself, and in the *Meno* Socrates asks about the Form (*eidos*) of virtue. The main argument in the *Protagoras* concerns whether the *arêtai* are one or many and whether they are teachable. One problem is that there seem to be no teachers (*Meno* 86, *Protagoras* 324). Whether any excellence can be taught is also debated in *Euthydemus* (274).
- dialektikê*: dialectic. The art or skilled practice of philosophic conversation, usually associated with the attainment of knowledge and the activity of the philosopher. In *Sophist* (253d) it is dividing things into kinds. At *Philebus* 17 it is distinguished from eristic. In *Republic* (532–9) it is the highest knowledge of the philosopher. At *Phaedrus* 265–70 it proceeds by collection and division, and at *Parmenides* 135 it is attributed to Zeno and then demonstrated at length by Parmenides as a kind of hypothetical argumentation.
- dialogos*; *dialegesthai*: a conversation or dialogue; to converse or talk something through. The verb is used frequently in Plato’s dialogues describing what Socrates wants to do with his interlocutors, in contrast to the oratorical performances of sophists, the competitive debates of eristics, or legal wrangling in law courts.
- dikaïosynê*: justice, righteousness. Abstract noun from *dikaion* (adj.), ‘just’, or, with a definite article, ‘the just’. One of the *arêtai*; one of the four ‘cardinal virtues’ as listed in and the overall topic of the *Republic*. Discussed in *Euthydemus* (279), *Symposium* (196), *Cratylus* (413), *Protagoras* (330–31), *Meno* (73), *Hippias Minor* (375). In *Alcibiades* 1 (113–16), as in *Republic* (443), it is said to be ‘doing what is one’s own’ or ‘minding one’s own business’.
- dokein*: to think, seem. Frequently used impersonally: *dokei moi*, ‘it seems to me’. If, by this usage, you ‘think’ something or something ‘seems to you’ to be true, it is your ‘opinion’ in a sense that has important consequences in Socratic dialectic.
- doxa*: (from *dokein*) opinion, judgement, reputation. Regularly distinguished from and opposed to knowledge (*epistêmê*) by Socrates,

it corresponds to what seems to be true in the sense of what one thinks. Opinions change whereas knowledge (by definition) remains the same. Opinions arise from sensation whereas knowledge arises from thought. The Divided Line of *Republic* (509–13) shows two realms, of opinion and knowledge. In *Meno* (97–8), right opinion is a satisfactory guide for action but cannot be the nature of excellence; in other words, excellence is not a matter of opinion. In *Theaetetus* knowledge as right opinion with an explanatory account is refuted. Also discussed in *Protagoras* (353), *Crito* (47), *Laches* (184), *Politicus* (278), *Phaedrus* (247–8) and *Philebus* (38).

*eidos*: character, form, type, species, the nature that makes something the kind of thing it is. One of the two main terms used, but not always, for the eternal, unchanging, immaterial entities that are said to exist in the intelligible realm separate from the material and sensible and are the true objects of knowledge, the true meanings of words, and true causes of things in the sensible realm being what they are. Their existence is never proved, and it is said that knowledge of them can be arrived at in various ways – for example, by ‘recollection’, intellectual ascent, ‘dialectic’, and ‘collection and division’; in other words the soul naturally or innately has access to them. Important discussions in the *Republic* (475–80), *Meno* (81), *Phaedo* (74–6, 100–3), *Timaeus* (30) and *Parmenides* (129–35).

*eirōneia*: dissimulation, irony. The historical Socrates was notorious for his irony. Plato’s Socrates is sometimes accused of a kind of intellectual dishonesty or lack of fair play because he elicits others’ opinions but never states his own. His frequent professions of ignorance were widely considered to have been ironic. See Chapter 7 for a discussion of irony.

*elenchos*: cross-examination, refutation, examination. Although the words are used relatively seldom in the dialogues, Plato’s Socrates often ‘cross-examines’ and ‘refutes’ his interlocutors, pursues arguments that exhibit the interlocutor to himself and especially to the reader as holding contradictory views or as having views that are in contradiction with his actions.

*enthousiasmos*: enthusiasm, inspiration. Refers to the presence of a god or divine being within a person. A main theme in the *Ion* (534–42), where Socrates gets Ion, a professional performer of epic poetry, to agree that both poets and the performers of poetry are ignorant of the matters they speak about, but speak the truth

on account of a kind of divine madness or possession. Also attributed to politicians (*Meno* 99, *Apology* 22), and to poets prophets and members of mystery cults (*Phaedrus* 243–5).

*epistasthai*; *epistêmê*: to know; knowledge. Knowledge as opposed to ignorance and opinion (*Republic* 476–84), a body of knowledge or ‘science’. The object of knowledge in this sense is a Form. This kind of knowledge is often said to be what distinguishes experts, such as trainers and physicians, from others who may have their own opinions about the matter. Conventional politicians, poets and orators incorrectly suppose themselves and are supposed by others to have it. Because he pursues knowledge, Socrates is the only one who practises the true art of politics (*Gorgias*) and can describe the true art of rhetoric (*Phaedrus*). Important discussions: *Phaedo* 66–75; *Meno* 81–98; *Charmides* 164–76; *Phaedrus* 229–47, *Parmenides* 134–6. The nature of *epistêmê* is the main topic of the *Theaetetus*. (See also *gnôsis*, *mathêsis* and *phronêsis*.)

*eros*: sexual desire, erotic love, as distinct from the friendly feeling of friendship, *philia*. A main theme in the *Phaedrus* (231–57), where it is one of the four types of divine madness, and throughout the *Symposium*, where it is elevated to a cosmic force and the motivation of all human endeavour. Sexual desire for another is the lowest instantiation of this force, which in its higher manifestations is attraction to more abstract objects, such as the virtues, arts and sciences, and, ultimately, to the knowledge of Forms. The true erotic relationship is a joint pursuit of knowledge through *dialektikê* rather than a joint pursuit of physical pleasure through sexual intercourse.

*eudaimonia*: happiness. Unlike the connotations of the modern word ‘happiness’, *eudaimonia* does not refer to a feeling or emotion; it is a condition or state that one is or is not in. Also unlike the modern word, an individual is not the best or sole judge of his or her possessing *eudaimonia*; others are often better judges. In the dialogues, being in this state is often connected with possession of knowledge (*Charmides* 173, *Euthydemus* 281).

*gignôskein*; *gnôsis*: to recognize; recognition or knowledge. Recognizing individuals or that an individual is of a particular sort. Often, knowledge of an ethical or religious sort, as distinct from the more scientific and technical knowledge indicated by *epistêmê*. (See also *epistêmê*, *mathêsis* and *phronêsis*.)

*hamartia*: missing the mark, error.

*hêdonê*: pleasure. Physical pleasure construed as Happiness or the

Good leads to hedonism. Socrates' rather intellectual idea that the Good is related to knowledge conflicts with this and leads to critiques of pleasure-seeking in several dialogues. Intellectual pleasures are also recognized as superior. Important discussions of pleasure occur in the *Republic* (Books 8 and 9), *Protagoras* (352–7, where Socrates appears to say that pleasure is the highest good), and *Gorgias* (495–501). The entire *Philebus* concerns pleasure, and distinctions are drawn between true and false, mixed and unmixed, and psychic and somatic pleasures. The pure hedonist position of the *Protagoras* is rejected, as in *Gorgias*.

*hen*: one, the One. Subject of a set of hypotheses presented in the *Parmenides* by Parmenides as an intellectual exercise of the sort that must be mastered by Socrates in order to defend adequately the primitive theory of Forms or Ideas that he has presented. Despite the later Platonic tradition, and like the Idea of the Good, it is philosophically important virtually nowhere other than the *Parmenides*. At *Sophist* 244 it is mentioned, but in the context of a criticism of Eleatic ontology.

*hosiotês*; *hosion*: piety, religiosity; pious, religious. The main theme of the *Euthyphro* is the nature of piety, and piety is mentioned as one of the excellences in several other dialogues.

*idea*: besides *eidos*, another term for 'Form'. Originally referring to the visible form or 'look' of something, in Plato the term comes to mean the intelligible 'look' or character possessed by all individual things of a given quality or natural kind.

*kakon*: bad, evil. Doing evil is involuntary (*Protagoras* 345, *Meno* 77) and no one really desires it or does it willingly (*Meno* 78). Evil persons cannot have or be friends (*Lysis* 214) and do not love wisdom (or are not philosophers, *Lysis* 218). Evil can only be removed by wisdom (*Phaedo* 107) and it is worse to suffer than to do it (*Gorgias* 475). However, evils can never be destroyed (*Theaetetus* 176).

*kalos/kalon*; *kallion*: beautiful; beauty. The central question of the *Hippias Major* is, What is beauty? In the *Symposium* beauty is the object of *eros*, desire or love, and a series of ascending steps leads from love of a single desired human body to the intellectual love of the Idea of Beauty. In the *Republic* it is a means of education (401) and the beautiful and the good are one (452). Other discussions at *Phaedrus* 250, *Gorgias* 474 and *Philebus* 51, 65–6.

*katechein*; *katechomenos*: to possess; possession. In the *Ion*, rhapsodes and poets are said to succeed only when 'possessed' and 'by

- divine dispensation' (*theia moira*, q.v.). See also *Phaedrus* 245a, *Timaeus* 71–2.
- legein*: to speak or say. Root of *dialegesthai*.
- logos*: word, speech, account, definition, reason, proportion, rational faculty. Sometimes *logos*, 'true account', is opposed to *mythos*, 'story' (*Timaeus* 28–9). *Logos* is an aspect of true *epistêmê* (*Phaedo* 76b, *Theaetetus* 201c–d), what is given in *dialektikê* (*Republic* 534b, *Sophist*), and a statement of the characteristic that distinguishes a thing (*Theaetetus* 208c).
- mania*: madness. A main theme in the *Phaedrus*, where four types of divine madness are distinguished: poetry, prophecy, initiatory, and love (265). Also attributed to poets and rhapsodes in the *Ion*.
- mathein*; *mathêsis*: to learn; learning. (See also *epistêmê*, *gnôsis* and *phronêsis*.) The famous theory of recollection is a theory about the nature of *mathêsis* (*Meno* 81, *Phaedo* 91–2).
- metaxu*: intermediary, intermediate. Although Plato is often thought to have been a 'two worlds dualist' (realm of sense, realm of thought; particulars, Forms), Socrates sometimes speaks of the intermediates between Forms and things, or between gods and mortals (*Symposium*, *Sophist*) as being crucial.
- metechein*; *methexis*: to have a share of, to participate in; participation. Term used for the relationship between Forms or Ideas and the sensible particulars (*Phaedo*, *Parmenides*). Particulars participate in Forms; but the way in which they do so is never explained in the dialogues, and Parmenides' most powerful objections to Socrates' youthful theory of Ideas in the *Parmenides* concern the details of how *methêsis* might occur.
- mimêsis*: imitation, mimicry, imitative art. An alternative to *methexis*, *mimêsis* describes the relation between Forms and things (*Parmenides*, *Timaeus*) and is explicit in the epistemology of the Divided Line (*Republic*), where knowledge is of realities, Forms, while opinion (*doxa*) is knowledge of imitations. Things imitate or are imitations of Forms. *Mimêsis* is also regularly said to be involved in the productive arts of the poet, painter, sculptor, and even actor (*Sophist*). Mimetic art is severely, if somewhat ironically, criticized in the *Republic*.
- moira*: see *theia moira*.
- mousikê*: lit., art or music in the sense of 'having to do with the Muses'; fig., culture. The domain of the Muses included poetry, epic, lyric, tragic, erotic and bucolic, along with song, dance, history and astronomy. *Mousikê* sometimes refers to poetry in

general (*Ion* 530a). Socrates says that philosophy is the highest *mousikê* (*Phaedo* 61a). Philosophy is also associated with the Muses at *Phaedrus* 259.

*mythos*: myth, story. Important myths delivered by Socrates and others are found in *Phaedo*, *Protagoras*, *Phaedrus*, *Charmides*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Politicus*. The entire cosmological narrative of *Timaeus* is explicitly said to be a myth. See Chapter 6 for discussion.

*nomos*: custom, convention, law. In the dialogues, both Protagoras (*Protagoras* 152) and Thrasymachus (*Republic* book 1) say that excellence is a matter of *nomos*, in contrast with which Platonic Forms are a revised version of the traditional view that excellence is by nature, *physis*.

*paideuein*; *paideia*: to educate; education. The meaning of the Greek term is broader than English, including social and moral formation and acculturation. At the centre of Plato's philosophy is a vision of the soul's education, in this sense. Philosophy, as Plato sees it, is essentially a form of education. *Republic* Books 2, 3 and 7 are about education. The central discussion of *Protagoras*, *Laches*, *Charmides* and *Phaedrus* explicitly concerns the proper education to pursue and with whom to pursue it.

*paidia*: game or play, as opposed to *spondaios*, morally serious. See Chapter 8 for discussion. Games are mentioned in *Lysis* (206e), *Alcibiades* (110b), *Gorgias* (456d), *Republic* (487, 604c), *Phaedrus* (274d), *Symposium* (190d), *Euthydemus* (277b) and *Theaetetus* (146a, 181a, 184d).

*philosophia*: love of wisdom, philosophy. A rare word prior to Plato, whose prominent use of it therefore creates the word's original meaning. Philosophy is a principal theme discussed in the *Republic* (485–540), *Euthydemus* (304–7), *Gorgias* (481–7) and *Phaedo* (60–9, 80–3). The entire *Apology* is a defence of Socrates' philosophical life, though the term doesn't figure in it. In the *Theaetetus* (155), Socrates tells the youth, 'Philosophy begins in wonder.' *Philosophia* is contrasted at length and ironically with rhetoric in *Theaetetus* 172–7.

*philosophos*: adj., wisdom-loving; n., lover of wisdom, philosopher. It is often not clear whether Plato intends the adjectival or the nominal use in particular cases, or perhaps both. Heraclitean philosophers are mentioned (*Cratylus* 411). Socrates' notion of philosophers is developed at length and in detail (*Republic* 473–503). Socrates says that philosophy is practice for death, but suicide is

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- forbidden nevertheless (*Phaedo* 61–4). Philosophers are followers of Zeus (*Phaedrus* 248–50) and divine (*Sophist* 216).
- phronêsis*: prudence, practical wisdom, wisdom. Some dialogues seem to equate it with excellence, *arêtê* (*Gorgias* 460b, *Meno* 88a–89a), but in others it is one among many excellences (*Phaedo* 69a–b). (See also *gnôsis*, *mathêsis* and *phronêsis*.)
- physis*: nature, lit. growing. The natural way of things as contrasted with *nomos*, convention, is a theme in several dialogues (e.g. *Gorgias* 483–5). A theory of natural as opposed to conventional names is discussed in *Cratylus* 383–423. Socrates disavows interest in philosophy about nature like that of the Presocratics (*Apology* 19 and *Phaedo* 96).
- pistis*: faith, belief. In the Divided Line (*Republic* 509e–511e), it is the kind of ‘opinion’ (*doxa*) that derives from sensations as opposed to images of sensible things.
- polis*; *politês*: city-state; citizen. The division, organization and governance of the *polis* are main topics in the *Republic*, but the city provides the context in which or around which the discussions revolve in every dialogue. Protagoras is made to say that the existence of the *polis* depends on virtue or excellence (*Protagoras* 322–7), a view with which Socrates would agree. In the *Apology*, Socrates is convicted of corrupting young people and not believing in the gods in which the *polis* believes and he bases his defence on his divine mission to encourage the citizens to be better. Euthyphro says that the accusation against Socrates injures the *polis* (3a). In the *Crito*, ‘the laws and the *polis*’ cross-examine Socrates about Crito’s proposal to escape from prison (50a–54d).
- politeia*: citizenship, civic life, the citizen body, government, constitution, republic, A main theme in the *Republic*, of which it is the Greek title. There the term is taken to refer to the particular form of constitution that Socrates describes, which is a commonwealth governed by an aristocracy based on knowledge, not a democracy. Similarly, the ‘ancestral *politeia*’ of Athens is aristocratic at *Menexenus* 238 and Socrates often seems to consider the less democratic ‘constitutions’ of Crete and Sparta superior to democracy.
- politikos*: adj., relating to or befitting citizens or the doing of the city’s business, political; n., politically active person, politician, statesman. One of the main types of life practised by various characters in the dialogues (e.g. Meno and Anytus in the *Meno*, Callicles in the *Gorgias*), aspired to by others (e.g. Hippocrates in

the *Protagoras*) and often unfavourably compared with philosophy for its lack of freedom (e.g. *Theaetetus* 272–7), dependence on right opinion rather than true knowledge (*Meno* 99), and failure to make citizens better (*Gorgias* 503). At the beginning of the *Sophist* (217a), following Socrates' suggestion, the Eleatic Visitor undertakes to define the *sophistês*, the *politikos* and the *philosophos*, conventionally translated as 'sophist', 'statesman' and 'philosopher'. The Visitor's definition culminates (311b–c) in the idea that the art of the *politikos* consists in weaving together the different dispositions of the citizens so that concord exists among them.

*psychê*: soul. Everywhere in Plato's dialogues, the nature, condition, history and care of the soul are among the most important topics. Human beings are always taken to have distinguishable bodies and souls, perhaps in symmetrical relation (*Timaeus* 88) but asymmetrical in value (*Crito* 47). Immortality of soul is the main theme in *Phaedo*, as is its divine association and journey towards knowledge of reality in *Phaedrus* (252–6). The soul has a natural desire for knowledge (*Timaeus* 90) The overall argument of the *Republic* depends on the idea that soul is imaged in state, so that five forms of state and soul can be distinguished. The soul is said to be like a book at *Philebus* 38–9. The higher and lower souls of *Timaeus* 70 were turned into a foundational doctrine in Neoplatonism.

*rhetorikê*: rhetoric, the art of the *rhetor*, the orator or speaker. A main theme in *Phaedrus*, *Gorgias*, and, by example, the *Menexenus*.

*spoudaios*: morally serious as opposed to *paidia*. See Chapter 8 for discussion.

*sophistês*: sophist, literally a specialist in wisdom. The *Protagoras* deals with the moral danger of learning from a sophist and exhibits the intellectual incompetence and foolish egotism of several sophists. Similar exhibitions are found in *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, *Euthydemus*, *Charmides* and *Republic* Book 1. The *Sophist*, of which it is the Greek title, is a protracted definition by division (see *dialektikê*) of what the sophist is.

*sophos*; *sophia*: wise; wisdom. *Sophia* is the more theoretical, abstract wisdom as distinguished from *phronêsis*, which is more practical and concrete. The 'wisdom' attributed to those who give sound practical advice at *Meno* 88, for example, is *phronêsis*.

*sôphron*; *sôphrosynê*: temperate; temperance. A part of excellence (*Meno* 73), it should be taught in the city (*Republic* 389, 430), and is said to be a kind of order (*Gorgias* 507–8, *Charmides* 159–60) or

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health of the soul (*Gorgias* 504, *Charmides* 157). It is the main theme in the *Charmides*.

*technê*: craft, skill, art or applied science. In Socrates' dialectical investigations of the excellences, he often uses analogies with crafts, *technai*, which led modern scholars to debate a Socratic or Platonic 'technical' conception of virtue. The term is often used in its ordinary sense to refer to professional skill as distinguished from natural ability (e.g. *Republic* 381c, *Protagoras* 317c), but the elaborate divisions of *Sophist* (219–31) and *Politicus* (258–66) articulate a system of the 'arts' that may or may not have been Plato's. But Socrates denies that the following groups possess a *technê*: poets and rhapsodes (*Ion*); politicians, prophets and soothsayers (*Meno*); sophists and rhetoricians (*Gorgias*); and speech-writers (*Phaedrus*).

*theia moira*: divine portion, gift or dispensation. At *Ion* 542a, poets and their interpreters are said to succeed by the divine gift of inspiration rather than through any *technê* or *epistêmê* they possess. At *Meno* 99, politicians, like soothsayers, prophets and poets, are also said to succeed through divine dispensation rather than through any *epistêmê*.

*theôria*: viewing, speculation, contemplation. In *Theaetetus* (173–5), *theôria* is what distinguishes the philosophic life from the life of practical activity. Contemplation of the Good is said to be the highest human activity (*Republic* 540a–c) as is contemplation of the Beautiful (*Symposium* 210b–212a).

*theologia*: account of the gods. Indicates cosmologies by poets (*Republic* 379a).

*theos*; *theion*: god; divine. The dialogues frequently refer to god, the gods and the divine. More extended discussions in the *Cratylus* 397–408, *Phaedrus* 247–53, and as a central topic of the *Euthyphro*.

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